

Maybe You Could Help? Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1934-1942

NCSS Thematic Strand: Time, Continuity, and Change

Grade Level: 7-12

Tim Outline: 1-50 minute period

Purpose, Background and Context

By carefully reading the letters to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, students will find specific instances of social, economic, and political consequences of the 1930s Great Depression. In the previous lesson, students studied the famous photographs of Dorothea Lange, who documented the extreme poverty of migrants who moved west to California in search of work. In this lesson students will learn about the personal ravages of the Great Depression by analyzing and interpreting another kind of primary source: letters written to Eleanor Roosevelt appealing for help.

The letters selected for this lesson enable students to understand how young adults suffered at this time. Besides deepening understanding of how poor people struggled in the 1930s, students learn from the letters that individuals of formerly middle class background could not obtain loans, dental work, or schooling. Together with the previous lesson on Dorothea Lange, students will learn how the 1929 crash had severe consequences for thousands of Americans. In subsequent lessons they examine how New Deal programs sought to deal with poverty and unemployment.

Objectives & Student Outcomes:

- ❖ Students will analyze the past, particularly the personal consequences of the Great Depression using letters of Eleanor Roosevelt as a historical resource (NCSS Standards, p. 32).
- ❖ Students will interpret the consequences of the severe economic downturn that befell the United States from 1929 until World War II (NCSS Standards, p. 31).
- ❖ By means of an exam question (at the end of the unit on the Great Depression) students will demonstrate analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of insights derived from a letter written to Eleanor Roosevelt.
- ❖ By means of an exam question students will demonstrate understanding of the uniqueness of a letter writer's experience with the Depression, as well as knowledge of the experiences he or she shared with others, such as unemployment, lack of access to education, and inability to obtain healthcare.

- ❖ Students will present supported interpretations in oral form about a primary document, and make and interpret the letter writer's central concern(s) (NCSS Standards, p. 33).

Materials:

- ❖ Letters from young adults across the United States written to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt between 1934 and 1940. Provide a copy of one letter to each of the 5 groups.

Procedures:

Procedure 1:

Summarize the previous day's lesson. Conduct the summary by showing Dorethea Lange's photos which we analyzed and interpreted.

Have students count out "8's" and have them group by number. Give each group one letter written from a US citizen to Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression.

Have students read their letter carefully, writing down: 1. when it was written 2. who wrote it, 3. where the author was sending it from, and 4. the general content

Tell students to pay special attention to the personal, social, economic, and political consequences of the Great Depression for the person writing the letter.

Announce that groups will share their analytical work with the entire class.

Procedure 2:

In large group discussion, first ask the class:

What surprised you about the letter?

What stood out to you?

Do you think there is a young adult today with those same concerns?

What do we most need to remember?

Continue until each group has presented.

Next, ask individual students:

Who wrote the letter?

When?

Where were they writing from?

What did the writer request from the First Lady?

What did the request show you, the historian, about what was happening to this person during the Depression?

After writing students' responses on the board, ask them:

What were common requests in the letters?

How might the letters have influenced Mrs. Roosevelt and even government policy?

Are those requests for help still asked by some individuals today?

Assessments of Outcomes:

Students will:

- ❖ Teach one another about the primary source; including the author, location, date, and the personal, social, economic, and political consequences of the Great Depression.
- ❖ Discuss in small and large group the uniqueness and universality of each letter. Students will engage in an open discussion about whether or not the requests of young adults should have been considered by offices in the legislative and executive branches of the United States government
- ❖ On a source-based exam question at the end of the unit on the Great Depression (1929-1941), students will demonstrate they can successfully analyze and interpret a letter selected by the teacher (a letter from an individual, to Eleanor Roosevelt). In addition to indicating who wrote the letter, where the letter was from and what the individual requested from the First Lady, the students will place the letter within the economic conditions a work during the Great Depression.

Extensions and Adaptations:

Have students write their own letters to the current First Lady, concerning their needs and interests.

Show students the **public correspondence** section from The National First Ladies' Library, which details Mrs. Roosevelt's Ladies Home Companion column, beginning in August of 1933, where she encouraged the citizenry to write her directly.

<http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=33>

Assign students to write a journal reflection on the activity. Prompt students with these questions:

What did you learn that you didn't know before today?

Why did young adults write the first lady?

What was most troubling about what you read in the letters?

Resources:

Mary Mason Royal "'Maybe you could help?' Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1934-1942".

Social Education. FindArticles.com. 02 Feb, 2012.

National First Ladies' Library <http://www.firstladies.org/>

Handout 1

Stillmore, Georgia October 14, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Probably you are wondering who is writing you. I am Welthie S--. I was born in Louisiana and lived there until the year 1933 when we moved to Georgia. I am in the eleventh grade. The reason I am writing you is because I wish to ask you to loan me one hundred dollars (\$100). Please if you can lend it to me because I really need it. I will pay you back.... The reason for my asking you to lend it to me are these. First, I wish to have my teeth attended to. I'm having a terrible time with two of my teeth. One I keep filled with a piece of cotton with camphor on it, the other I can't because it won't stay in and under my jaw on that side there is a hard ball in the inside caused whenever my tooth gets sore and it hurts all the time. All my teeth are decayed except for my front teeth and they are starting to decay. I can't have them fixed because my daddy hasn't the money to fix them....

The second reason is I want to buy me some clothes. I haven't bought any this year. All I have except two were given me by my sisters, they are married. Papa won't buy me any. It's always wait, take your time. Anyway I can't get along with them and its not my fault. Papa hates me and every time he gets angry, he takes it out on me. Anything that gets lost he blames on me and he says that I hid it. I'm not that kind of a person and I don't. Mama and me are always quarreling and its her, she's always picking at me and I can't help but answer her back when she talks to me. She sure believes in whipping. We've been in fusses lately here lately and she told me he wasn't going to have anything to do with me, papa said so also. Papa is always threatening to whip me and tells me that he is going to use his shoe on me....

The third reason is that I want to have money enough to buy my clothes when I graduate. I will have to buy invitations and my diploma also.

The fourth reason is that when I graduate I'm going to go into training to be a nurse. To enter I will need about \$15.00. Mama and papa do not intend for me to work,. They expect me to stay home the rest of my life unless I get married. Mama says a decent girl cannot get a job....

My family is not a low class, they are among the nicest people of the town, but nobody knows what is under the surface of a family. So please do not ever mention this to any one. I trusted that you wouldn't ever tell this, so please destroy this letter. I have told mama I'm going to leave, she doesn't know where I'm going, she said I was crazy and doesn't believe I'll leave....

I'm a good student in school, my marks are A's and B's, mostly A's. I'm leaving home next week so won't you lend me this money? ... Please answer the next day after you receive this letter and send me that money. I am enclosing a picture of me so that you'll know about what I look like. I wish to thank you very much if you will lend it to me.

Yours truly,

(Miss) Welthie S.

Handout 2

Washington C. H., Ohio April 30, 1936

Dearest Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt,

I sincerely hope you read this letter and give it just a small ounce of thought as I know you must receive so many you just discard them without perusing them.

By the way, I'm twenty-one and old enough to vote this year. Even if I didn't like President Roosevelt, which isn't true, my father said I had to vote for him. Even so, no one should have to be told to cast their ballot for him. They should know he cannot be beaten.

This isn't a plea, sob story, etc. I'm merely presenting my case which, no doubt, won't seem nearly so pathetic to you as it does to me.

Nevertheless, my boyfriend & I have been going together six years, and cannot possibly get married. Why? No job, no money, & no place to get either one. You'll probably say to yourself, well, he could get a job if he tried hard enough, but he has been all over our town, all over adjacent towns, in fact every nook & cranny he can find to go to. We live in what you might term a village, went to a small town high school, and, of course, when you cannot afford to go on to college, you have to trade, whatsoever. Where does that put you? Simply in that lower class who yell "strawberries," or "Lady, do you want your trash hauled today?", etc. Mrs. Roosevelt, we are both from very decent and respectable families but are just of the middle class of people; can make a living comfortably but can give no help. We have tried to get small loans to get married and go to housekeeping on, but they say we are only young kids and can't take the responsibility of paying a loan. Then too, they charge such a high rate of interest and make the payments so high, you just couldn't possibly do it Well, last week my boyfriend got a job which varies from ten to twenty dollars a week, according to the weather. And again we tried, but was turned down as we had to have fifty or seventy-five dollars, down payment on furniture.

I'm asking you, would you loan us two hundred dollars, make your own terms and interest, and you'll get every cent of it back? We would sign a note, or an I.O.U. or whatever you like. Please, please think this over. We counted, added, & did everything last night and found we could furnish a house very nicely for two hundred seventy eight dollars and fifty three cents. I have listened to practically all of your talks, and also, the Presidents. I'm sure I could love you both if I had the chance.

My father is an architect and contractor and you know what chances they had, during the depression. Absolutely none. Well, since President Roosevelt has been in that work has picked up from year to year and is now good enough to make my parents a comfortable living. Daddy is sixty-three and Mother is fifty-six. They are the dearest, sweetest dad and mother in the world.

Well, I've probably bored you to death with troubles that don't mean a thing to you ... If you loan us the two hundred dollars, you'll get every cent in return and more, according to your rate of interest. Please let me hear from you.

Sincerely yours, Miss Willa D--

Handout 3

Brunswick, Georgia Aug. 4, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Having the very highest respect for you as "First Lady of the Land" and feeling that you have much interest in and deepest sympathy for suffering humanity, I am appealing to you on the behalf of the aged people of my race and community who are in need of care and attention. I am a colored girl of nineteen (19) years of age and a high school graduate. My main source of pleasure lies in caring for helpless people and especially the aged.

There are unfortunately in my community many people who are old and unable to care for themselves properly, and it is for these people I am seeking aid.

I am quite sure those in charge of this work are doing their duties yet the physical conditions of these people will not allow them to care for themselves properly.

My one hope is to have an institution established for the purpose of caring for the aged, one in which they might be able to enjoy real comfort, well-prepared meals which are so essential to health, happiness and peace, as well as comfortable surroundings.

I feel as though they deserve consideration along this line in as much as their lives have been for the most part, lives of hard work and sacrifice; and perhaps most of them have never actually known real pleasure, and being deeply indebted to them for their many sacrifices, I feel it my duty to appeal for aid on their behalf.

I am totally unable financially to carry out the plans I have in mind, as are other interested members of my race, however I shall be very happy to contribute my time and self in whatever way I might be of assistance. I am not asking for you for a personal donation, but am humbly begging that you consider my plans and aid me in securing funds for carrying them out.

Believing in you as I do, I am sure you won't refuse me your aid and though I shall never be able to repay you and they can never hope to do so, I know that you will find supreme joy in the knowledge that you have aided a deserving and needy group, moreover our Heavenly Father will reward you for this kindness even as he has blessed you with the honor of being the nation's First Lady.

Please help me, I beg of you in my effort to aid these unfortunates. And may I, please expect a reply?

Sincerely Yours,

H. E. G."

Handout 4

Birmingham, Alabama January 31, 1940

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am a negro boy who sang for you when you visited our school a few years ago in Birmingham.

I have attended College one year and one month. Due to the lack of money, I had to quit school and try to find work so that I could continue my education. I have looked everywhere, but Cannot find anything to do. I am very eager to finish schooling, but I cannot find work at all. Some days I walks over twenty miles trying to find work, but all in vain. All of my efforts have been a complete failure. So Mrs. Roosevelt I appeal to you for help.

The course that I was taking requires two years of college training then one is eligible to teach for a limited time of six years. I need only six more months of training then I will be able to help myself. Please Mrs. Roosevelt, send me a donation so as to help me in this dilemma. I do not have relatives that is in a position to give me any financial support, so you see Mrs. Roosevelt, my future is very dark and discouraging. You are the only one that I know to come to for relief, please look at my condition, and consider this matter noteworthy because I am striving to be somebody, and I am trying in my young days.

Please let me hear from you. I can get the other six months of College training for, \$160. It wouldn't be that much but when I left, I wasn't able to pay my back loan and before I re enter I must pay it before I can get my credits.

Please don't think hard of me, Mrs. Roosevelt, but I didn't have any one else to call on but you.

Yours Truly, A.L.

Tulsa, Okla. Aug 16, 1934

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

If this letter ever reaches your hand please, please read it.

I am a negro girl, 17 years old, just finished the Washington High School and am trying to go to college. Mrs. Roosevelt I have [heard] of how you are helping the white women and girls; and the president has opened C.C.C. Camps for both colored and white but we negro girls don't get a break.

I have a mother dependent on me and I am working for S.E.A.'s of this address at \$6.00 per week. I am trying to save out of this to go to college in mid-term. My letter perhaps has no significance to you; but I am asking you for assistance. Would you please Mrs. Roosevelt give me \$25.00 before January 1st. By Dec. 25th I will have saved \$50.00 with \$25.00 more I would be able to pay room, board, tuition and books. Would have about, \$15.00 left over for the second term.

Respectfully yours, B.L.

Handout 5

Salt Lake City, Utah November 9, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt;

I read in the Current Events column about you being awarded a medal and \$1,000. I also read what you decided to use it for. You see I had a stroke of Infantile Paralysis four years ago last July the eleventh. I stayed in the state Hospital, at Oklahoma city, four months they just put braces on me. I've worn one for the last four years, they have told me they have done all they could. Aside from keeping braces on me, I might possibly out-grow it. I am only fourteen years old. And I think if I had money enough to go to Warm Springs I might be well.... If you haven't already decided to give the money to some other child I would never be able to express my appreciation, if you would give it to me. I think it was awfully kind of you to use the money that if it doesn't help me it will do me good to know it helped some other child suffering from infantile paralysis. Won't you write to me and tell me whether or not you'll give me the money? Yours truly,

R.W.

Cleveland, Ohio November 10, 1940

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am a boy of 17, I quit school 2 years ago in order to find a job. Since my dad died 3 years ago we haven't been able to do so good. We stretched his insurance money so far as it would go, but now we have to face it.

We are 2 months behind in our rent and the 3d falling due this Wednesday, the 13th. We pay \$15 a month for 4 rooms. There are 5 of us, mother, 3 boys and myself. I really wouldn't be writing this, but I can't see ourselves evicted from our house. We've got till Wednesday to get either all or at least a half of our rent paid up. It would be all right if it was only me because I could take care of myself one way or another. My mother can't get work because she just recovered from tuberculosis and must rest. I am afraid that if nothing comes up I will turn to crime as a means of getting financial help....

You might say, why don't we go on relief, well you just can't convince my mother on that. She said she would rather starve than get relief.

I am working as a grocery store clerk at \$8.00 a week. We could get along on this in summer but not in winter on account of the coal problem....

Will you please be so kind as to answer this letter in some way. And will you please congratulate your husband for us for winning the election....

Thanks Ever So Much

V. B. F.