



Adventures in letter writing and the great outdoors

Dear Reader,

When was the last time you received a handwritten letter from someone? If you work in an Outdoor Residential Centre, especially with Primary School children, hopefully it wasn't that long ago. Equally, when was the last time you wrote one? In fairness you may be wondering what this has to do with outdoor education but if you are interested in empowering and connecting people bear with me.

Two things which have always been prominent in my life are outdoor education and writing letters, but it was only when I set up The Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society back in October 2017 that I realised just how powerful both are and perhaps even more so when combined. It also feels to me that they are both about being in the moment, making proper connections, and experiencing a kind of intimacy we don't have so much of these days. I set up the Society for all those reasons, not to try and do away with our digital world, I love that too, but just to help us connect more on a personal level, to reclaim writing for ourselves, to put the fun and meaning back into it, to give people that feeling that their writing is totally theirs, and a sense of freedom in their learning.

I could see by working with children at Outdoor Centres, that the experiences they had were the perfect stimulus needed to write freely and from the heart, by not only committing them to paper in their own fair hand, but then posting them to one other person of their choice, to read. I completely value and understand the need in other areas of school life to mark and correct, and that legible writing makes sense both in style and meaning, but the surprise and delight of writing and sending your very own letter, let alone receiving one, is an empowering way to find out something about ourselves.

Through working at Leeson House Field Studies Centre, I trialled a Letter Writing Day with a Year 5 and 6 class using outdoor activities to give pupils something to write about. They didn't have to use the activities as inspiration, but I was certain then that we all had something to put in our letters if needed. We kept our word and let the letters be completely private, and although it took near Jedi mind control not to read what they had written over their shoulders, we didn't.

Ideally, I hoped they would receive replies, but as that was out of our hands, I wanted to give them the experience of sending a letter, which may seem surprising, but is just as rewarding. After a brief introduction to the day and a little bit of history about letters we did pond-dipping and orienteering, had lunch, and then went to the beautiful lounges to write our letters. We even walked down to the post box at the end of the drive to send our letters on their way to get the whole experience. A few days after the Letter Writing Day one pupil wrote to say they'd really enjoyed it and "it was lovely how our letters weren't marked", a realisation that self-discovery isn't always about someone else's approval or grade.

It was also a lovely realisation that outdoor centres seem to be the last stronghold for handwritten letters. The exciting A4 Manilla envelope jam-packed with beautiful handwriting and heartfelt messages about times spent together outdoors, and sweet funny little drawings that you suddenly recognise are of yourself leading a walk out in the countryside or along the beach. It got me thinking how many other places around the country still receive letters like that and why does the experience at an outdoor centre still warrant a personal thank you in this information superhighway age? I suppose for all the reasons we know and love: that there's something wholesome and real about them both.

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Letter writing can be a wonderful reflection activity and once people realise letters are completely theirs, and they can write what they like to who they like, they hopefully can see the value in them. Add the experiences of being in the great outdoors to a letter and there is definitely the potential for a great read. If letters seem a bit daunting to start with, try sending postcards. They can still go in an envelope to keep the contents private but there's not the anxiety of a big blank page, and the picture, especially if it's of the centre they are staying in, is also a great visual stimulus for something to write about. I remember the centres I went to as a child having them on sale in the tuckshop. Do many places sell them anymore? Also encourage people just to "Go for it!" Of course, with practice letter writing does become easier but it's really just about keeping it real, writing about the things on your trip that wowed you, scared you, even annoyed you. The best letters, and the ones we remember, are definitely those from the heart and there's always more humour in the things that didn't quite go according to plan. Relaying adventures in the form of letter of a night-walk or kayaking down a river or what beasty-bugs were found in the pond, especially to a sympathetic listener, is a fantastic way to develop storytelling skills. A recent study by the National Literacy Trust, commissioned by Blue Peter as part of their 60th Birthday celebrations, found that "letter writers are better writers". I think the findings make perfect sense. A personal one-to-one correspondence allows you to explore thoughts and feelings and ideas that hopefully result in a meaningful reply and a reason to keep writing.

It's OK as well to show vulnerability to a friend or loved one in a letter; however, the only rule the Society has is to urge people not to share personal letters online without the writer's permission, otherwise it defeats the object of developing skills in intimacy. Those with permission are a wonderful insight but just check first.

It would be brilliant to put handwritten letters back on the map for everyone, and not just as part of a tick-list, but as a genuine "I've written this. This is from me!" Much like some people have never climbed a mountain or seen a cow, there will be whole generations who never sent or received a handwritten letter or know the magic of them. It feels like a perfect complementary activity to consolidate outdoor learning experiences. Almost a solo adventure in a group setting, or as Lord Byron put it, "Letter writing is the only device combining solitude with good company".

I should say as well that the idea of letter writing applies to all of us. How many of your friends or family have got a handwritten letter from you? I treasure the letters that I've received over the years. They are like a portal to another time and especially to the person who wrote it. It can feel like an intrusion, even when the person is long gone, but it's well worth reading Mallory's letters or those by any of the great explorers. They are enlightening: these people we know and admire captured in a letter to their friend or loved one written halfway up Everest or down in Antarctica. I don't know about other people, but I feel more connected to them in that moment when they sat down to write a letter, through seeing some of their handwriting on a page, than all the research done on them over the years.

So, if one person feels inspired to put pen to paper to someone they know, let alone encourages a whole class of children to write letters, I will see that as a triumph. You could even send me a postcard from your Centre if you wanted – and you still have them of course.

With very best wishes,

Dinah Johnson



Get inspired to put pen to paper



For the Letter Writing Day we did a short introduction in the classroom talking about our experiences of handwritten letters and what we thought about them. Having a few examples of letters to show people really helps bring home the physicality of real letters to keep and treasure. We gave an outline of the day, together with a brief history of letter writing over the years and explained we would be writing letters after the activities. Pupils had already decided who they would like to write to and brought the name and address of someone with them. Activities could be any from the Centre, but we chose pond-dipping and orienteering.

AUTHOR:

Dinah Johnson completed a BEd (Hons) in Outdoor and Science Education at Liverpool John Moores University in 1997 before working at The Townsend Centre in Swanage for two years. In 1999 she moved to Leeson House Field Studies Centre for five years before leaving to raise a family. Dinah continued to volunteer there, setting up a gardening project with local children which ran for five years. She now works as one of their Freelance Tutors with Primary schools. Dinah set up The Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society in October 2017. Illustrative photos from the author



Outdoor activities are a fantastic stimulus for writing a letter or a postcard. We reminded students to gather some interesting memories during the day, thinking about what they would like to tell the person they would be writing to about their adventures. Get them to think about what parts of their day would make for an interesting read and to remember the best letters are honest and real and definitely from the heart. No-one would be marking them.

After lunch we went to the lounges with clipboards, paper and pens to write our letters. Before we started we gave a brief recap and helped explain the general layout of a letter. We also gave a few examples of what you could write about to get them started, however people could write about what they liked. A demonstration of addressing an envelope and where to stick a stamp really helped. There's no rigid structure as to when to write letters. It would make a lovely after dinner or quiet time activity or just whenever it fits in during the residential programme.

“ After the trip, I have realised that letters are still a lot more interesting to receive and send than just texting and you can draw and send pictures with a letter.”
Ben, Year 6



Schedule around half an hour for writing letters, and of course be on hand if needed for spelling and help. We had some additional activities for those had finished, such as a word search, or if in the classroom, a chance to try out quills and ink.

It might not always be practical, but we were lucky enough to be able to walk down the drive at Leeson House to post our letters. It was a lovely way to round off the experience. If you can't do that, a class post box is just as fun and inexpensive. ■



For inspiration and ideas visit
<http://thehandwrittenletterappreciationsociety.org/>
and <http://bit.ly/LiteracyTrustLetterWriting>

“ I was clicking my pen lid wondering how to start when I remembered you reading the letter you wrote to Michael Morpurgo and you started in quite a random way (hope you don't mind me saying that) so, so did I (look above!).”
Sophie, Year 6