



## RISE UP! AN AMERICAN CURRICULUM INSPIRED BY HAMILTON: AN AMERICAN MUSICAL



# HEAVY IS THE HYPHEN: THE LETTERS

## DEAR GOD, DEAR STARS, DEAR TREES

By Michelle Lee

**THEME**  
Lineage

**LENGTH**  
Three 50 min sessions

**GRADE LEVEL**  
9-12

**SUBJECT**  
English Language Arts  
US History

**Lessons in this module support learners to better understand the complexities of themselves and others to have a fuller engagement with their voice in the world.**

“The Letter” is an invitation to witness and speak aloud the story of “The Hyphen.” It’s a moment—in lesson form—to affirm every voice that has been made to feel less than, “othered,” silenced, in between” already know and believe to be true/untrue about American History, and then challenge them (and ourselves) to seek out life between the lines.

The Letter is set of recursive processes that when facilitated with critical care and humility, has the potential to spark deep shifts in teacher practice, and learners’ perceptions of self and purpose. Using a three-tier model, each lesson builds upon the previous workshop, Heavy Is the Hyphen: The Listener, which exclusively focus on techniques for oral storytelling.

# LESSON OBJECTIVES

## CREATIVE INQUIRIES

**How can we more deeply engage students in telling authentic, personal counter narratives using creative writing and spoken word strategies?**

**How can we create moments of critical reflection and analysis of American culture and society, in which students can articulate individual narratives as part of a larger American Story?**

## FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Students will know...

- Epistolary form
- How to pen a personal vision for America using metaphor and epistolary writing

## PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE

Students will be able to...

- Draw connections between their individual narratives and the broader American Story
- Build-off a series of personal writings to construct a poetic critique of American culture and society

## CONCEPTUAL INQUIRY

Students will understand...

- Purpose and power in personal narrative and letter-writing
- Ways contemporary artists and diasporic poets of color have used letter-writing to explore the Hyphen (cultural "Othering")
- Reciprocal nature of speaking and listening, writing and reading

## PERFORMANCES OF UNDERSTANDING

- Epistolary Poems
- Accordion Journals

## OUTLINE

Session #1: Session one: Dear God, Dear Stars, Dear Trees  
 Session #2: Dear Name  
 Session #3: Dear Founding Fathers

## HAMILTON HOOKS

How to build anticipation for learning

*"And when my prayers to God were met with indifference, I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance." -Alexander Hamilton*

## LESSON PREREQUISITE

Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz  
 Pre-Lesson Reading 1  
 Pre-Lesson Reading 2  
 Pre-Lesson Reading 3

**EXTENSIONS**

Use Liz Lerman's critical response process to guide ongoing peer feedback

- Host an in-class open-mic or poetry showcase
- Take students to experience a live debate, poetry slam or emcee battle
- Organize poet-leaders on campus to read their poetry at an upcoming school board or city council meeting, or school wide assembly
- Collaborate with photography and/or art teacher to create a chapbook of student writings, photographs and other visual art

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCE LINKS

Article - 'Hamilton' "Burn" Lyrics and the Secret Meaning Behind One of the Musical's Big Ballads [Link](#)

Photo-Essay: Curanderismo: A Picture of Mexican-American Folk Healing, Robert T. Tritter, II, Ph.D. (Center for Traditional Medicine website): [Link](#)

Hamilton Cast Address to VP Mike Pence: Independent (video and transcript of address): [Link](#)

Arts and Culture Blog Entry – Remembering Mine: Exploring the Poetry of Women of Color - ForHarriet.com [Link](#)

Article - "The History and Lost Art of Letter-Writing", Newsweek [Link](#)

Anthology - Life Notes: Personal Writings By Contemporary Women, Patricia Bell-Scott

"That Thing" by Lauryn Hill [Link](#)

"Love of My Life (Ode to Hip Hop) by Erykah Badu ft. Common [Link](#)

Interview with Sapphire (Ramona Lofton) author of PUSH [Link](#)

## SESSION 1 OF 3

# HEAVY IS THE HYPHEN: THE LETTERS

## DEAR GOD, DEAR STARS, DEAR TREES

The Letters Session 1 engages learners in creative writing strategies and discussion protocols designed to expand entry into difficult conversations about personal identity and American history. Learners explore the purpose and potential of storytelling through an examination of Hamilton lyrics, Lin-Manuel Miranda's biography, and through close readings of works by contemporary poets of color Lucille Clifton, Ariana Brown and Mush.

### SESSION OVERVIEW

**LENGTH**  
60-80 min

**GRADE LEVEL**  
9-12

**SUBJECT**  
English Language  
Arts  
US History

### CREATIVE INQUIRIES

- How can we more deeply engage students in telling authentic, personal counter narratives using creative writing and spoken word strategies?
- How can we create moments of critical reflection and analysis of American culture and society, in which students can articulate individual narratives as part of a larger American Story?
- How can students understand and articulate the significance of belonging and cultural "otherness" through personal letter-writing?

### OBJECTIVES/ STANDARDS

- How can we support students to build on the techniques from Module 1 in order to make richer, more honest connections between their own personal narratives and the broader American Story?

### EQUIPMENT

- Projector / laptop
- Speakers

### MATERIALS

- Copies of Mush's poem "We Are the Whole Story"
- Copies of Lucille Clifton's poem "why some people be mad at me sometimes"
- Link to Ariana Brown's spoken word performance of "Curandismo"

### OUTLINE

Activity #1: Do Now: Pair Share Discussion 10-15MIN

Activity #2: Close Read of Cultural Texts 20MIN

Activity #3: Critical Discussion 20-25MIN

Activity #4: Personal Letter-Writing 10-15MIN

Activity #5: Closing 5-10MIN

## 1 DEAR GOD, DEAR STARS, DEAR TREES: DO NOW: PAIR SHARE

10-15 MIN

### SET-UP

Ask students to remember a moment when they felt seen or invisible.

### PROMPT

Project Lucille Clifton's poem "why everybody be mad at me sometimes."

**PROJECT**  
Project Lucille Clifton's  
poem



**TASK**

Invite students to reflect on how Clifton’s poem makes them *feel*.

**Teacher Note:** This is an intentional moment designed specifically for learners to reflect and articulate an emotional response to, and not necessarily an interpretation of, Clifton’s poem. Affirm there are no wrong responses.

Discuss as a group.

**2 CLOSE READ CULTURAL TEXTS**

20 MIN

**PLAY**

Play Ariana Brown’s  
“Cuanderismo.”

**SET-UP** 5 MIN

Play Ariana Brown’s “Cuanderismo.”

Students underline, highlight or circle 3-5 words, phrases or whole lines that resonate and 1 new idea/concept they heard in Brown and Mush’s poems (i.e. cuanderisma, single story vs. multiple stories)

**HAND OUT**

Hand out Mush’s “Dear  
Founding Fathers”



Hand out copies of Mush’s “Dear Founding Fathers” and read aloud. Student can take turns reading stanzas in table groups or teacher can read aloud to the class as the group follows along.

**TASK** 5 MIN

**Pair Share.** Students share with their neighbor the words, lines or phrases from the poem that stood out to them. Briefly share out.

**3 CRITICAL DISCUSSION**

20-25 MIN

**SET-UP** 5 MIN

**Explain the purpose of storytelling.** Share that all storytelling is a blurring of fact and fiction—truth and lies. And all of it counts. As two artists of color, Lin Manuel Miranda, the son of Puerto Rican parents, and Mush, the daughter of South Korea parents, know what it means to exist as a cultural “Other” in America and in their respective motherlands. As such, both writers have learned to weave together strands of the known and unknown to create new American narratives that declare they are the whole story. Lin Manuel Miranda brings to life an original retelling of America’s founding fathers, based largely on the biography written by Ron Chernow, as well and his own imagination.

While Miranda has stated his process of writing drew largely on primary sources (i.e. documented letters written by actual historical figures), he also admits to myth-making in order to fill the historical “gaps” in Hamilton’s story.

**Connect** Miranda and Mush’s stories. Like Miranda, Mush, too, weaves together myth and fact to tell her own story. “Dear Found Fathers” leans on the voices of fellow women of color who have arrived at her same conclusion: Heavy is the

hyphen that bridges all that be human and heaven, self and other. Intrinsicly, Mush understands the necessity of becoming the architect of her own success story, and future. Particularly, for child of immigrants, refugees, descendents of slaves, and other historical marginalized communities—those who've created homes in places other than the home of their ancestors—living in purpose and pride often means imagining moments, faces of ancestors, and histories of joy one may not have experienced or learned of but imagines to be true.

**Unpack** the quotes in “Dear Founding Fathers.”

*“All of these stories make me who I am. But...[the] single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”*

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*

*DEAR GOD. DEAR STARS, DEAR TREES, DEAR SKY, DEAR PEOPLES. DEAR EVERYTHING.*

- Celie, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

In Alice Walker’s epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, readers journey with the story’s protagonist over a period of 40 years, starting with Celie’s life as a young girl in rural Georgia in the early 1900s. Through a series of intimate diary entries and personal letters, we learn about the tumult and joy of being young, broken and made whole, again.

Mush references African American poet Lucille Clifton and Afro-Latinx poet Ariana Brown to help write her own story.

### **TASK**

**Use Brown and Mush’s poems to facilitate a group discussion about belonging and “otherness.”** Choose 2-3 of the following discussion questions to structure the conversation:

*How you ever discovered (heard) parts of your own life story in someone else’s (song, movie, poem, novel)?*

*How does listening to Cuanderismo and “Dear Founding Fathers” make you feel? Why?*

*Who do you think are Ariana and Mush writing to (their audience)? Do you think it’s the same community they’re writing for? Explain.*

*Were they words or ideas you heard/read that were new or unfamiliar to you? Which?*

*Without reading the full poem, what might the two quotes at the very start of “Dear Founding Fathers” tell us about her purpose for writing and storytelling?*

*Mush closes her poem with a metaphor of a young tree bei to grow? What does it*

*make you think of? What lesson might she be trying to teach her young son?*

*love, seeds don't always choose their homes, they are sown.  
& the loveliest thing i've ever seen was your father  
pruning a permission tree  
he turned around & said,  
  
we have to teach it how to grow.*

#### 4 LETTER WRITING EXERCISE

10-15 MIN

##### SET-UP

**Introduce the next activity** as a letter-writing poem. The exercise requires students write a letter, answering machine message, poetic conversation, or prayer to they've been made to feel invisible by.

**Connect to Hamilton.** Lin Manuel Miranda consistently showcases in Hamilton's characters that the function of writing can be an influential, if not life changing, vehicle. Alexander Hamilton was literally able to write himself into a new world, to New York from the Caribbean, to a life of abandonment to acceptance: *"And when my prayers to God were met with indifference, I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance."* -Hamilton, Hurricane

##### PROMPTS

"Dear" (the name of someone you feel does not see you),

"If there's one thing you must know" (something that needs to be said)...

(Optional): "Dear" (the name of nickname of someone you know who closely watches and learns from you),

"If there's one thing you must know" (something you want them to know)...

##### TASK

Write a letter, answering machine message, poetic conversation, or prayer to a person/community who has made you feel invisible or someone who feels *seen* by you.

#### 4 THE CLOSING

5-10 MIN

##### TASK

Thank the group for writing. Invite students to hold up their writing and invite the class to witness the work of their peers.

Invite student to share all of parts of their writing, in their seats.



## SESSION 2 OF 3

# HEAVY IS THE HYPHEN: THE LETTERS

## DEAR FOUNDING FATHERS

Session 2 begins with an introduction to Somali-British and London Poet Laureate, Warsan Shire. Hamilton's narrative affords us the opportunity to investigate a man experiencing radical shifts in his own life while his country initiates the process of revolutionizing itself. Our students might similarly take a moment to address life-altering moments of their own.

### SESSION OVERVIEW

#### LENGTH

50 min

#### GRADE LEVEL

9-12

#### SUBJECT

English Language  
Arts  
US History

### CREATIVE INQUIRIES

How can students articulate a subjective, personal understanding of cultural "otherness" through myth, metaphor and personal letter-writing?

### EQUIPMENT

- Projector, laptop, wi-fi
- Speakers

### MATERIALS

- Dear Name Poem Template
- Excerpt of Warsan Shire's poem "the birth name"
- Discussion Questions

### OUTLINE

Activity #1: Opening Activity / Discussion 20 MIN

Activity #2: "Dear Name" Writing Exercise 20 MIN

Activity #3: Affirm and Close 10 MIN

## 1 OPENING ACTIVITY/ DISCUSSION

15 MIN

### SET-UP 5 MIN

Take the first 20 minutes to have students to research and identify a cultural icon or historical figure they associate with the words ANCESTOR – SPIRIT – TRUTH – AMERICA.

### PROMPT 5 MIN

Share brief biographical information and quote from their cultural icon or historical figure with the class.

Prepare to share 1 quote or favorite saying (written or spoken) by the historical figure they've chosen. Note: The quote will be used in their Lesson 3 "Dear Founding Fathers" poem.

### TASK 5 MIN

Students take turns sharing the name, brief 1-line biography and quote from their historical or cultural icon.

## 2 DEAR NAME WRITING EXERCISE

20 MIN

### READ

“the birth name”  
by warsan shire



### SET-UP 2 MIN

Read **warsan shire’s poem** aloud and ask students to follow along. Poem may also be projected.

*“give your daughters difficult names. give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. my name makes you want to tell me the truth. my name doesn’t allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right.”* - warsan shire

### PROMPT 5 MIN

In a written reflection or discussion in pairs, invites students to share initial thoughts to the questions below:

*What is the power of names?*

*What are the meaning(s) of your name(s), given and chosen?*

*How would you feel if every person was required to share the same name?*

### TASK 13 MIN

Invite students to now pen a story of their name.

### TEMPLATE

Dear Name Poem  
Template



Each prompt in **Dear Name Poem Template** invites students to mythologize and imagine the symbolic potential of their name.

## 3 AFFIRM AND CLOSE

5 MIN

### TASK 5 MIN

Thank the group for writing. Invite students to hold up their writing and invite the class to witness the work of their peers.

Invite student to share all of parts of their writing, seated or in front of the group.

## SESSION 3 OF 3

# HEAVY IS THE HYPHEN: THE LETTERS

## DEAR FOUNDING FATHERS

Using the “Dear Founding Fathers” Poem Template, writers are invited to pen a poetic letter or address to America’s founding fathers that is declarative and a subjective retelling of the American story as experienced through their lives. The template requires student weave together strands of previous writing and new writing.

### SESSION OVERVIEW

**LENGTH**  
60-70 min

**GRADE LEVEL**  
9-12

**SUBJECT**  
English Language  
Arts  
US History

### CREATIVE INQUIRIES

- How can examining ideas of forgiveness invite students to further imagine what is possibility?
- How can we students draw upon previous writing to make connections between their own individual narratives and the broader American Story?

### EQUIPMENT

- Projector, laptop, wi-fi
- Speakers

### MATERIALS

- Dear Founding Fathers” Template
- Copy of “How Do We Forgive Our Fathers?” by Dick Lourie and Sherman Alexie
- Video link to last scene of Smoke Signals (“How Do we Forgive Our Fathers?”)
- Any 1-2 epistolary spoken word videos below:
  - “Dear FLOTUS” by Jasmine Mans
  - “Footnotes for Kanye” by Jasmine Mans
  - “Grandmother,” by Mayda de Valle
  - “For Peter Liang” by Franny Choi
  - “Dear White America” by Danez Smith

### OUTLINE

Activity #1: Reading & Discussion 15 MIN

Activity #2: “Dear Founding Fathers” Writing Exercise 40 MIN

Activity #3: Share and Close 5 MIN

## 1 DEAR FOUNDING FATHERS

15 MIN

### PLAY

Watch Sherman Alexie’s  
How Do We Forgive Our  
Fathers



### SET-UP 5 MIN

Watch 1-2 of epistolary spoken word videos from Mans, de Valle, Choi or Smith.  
Watch Sherman Alexie’s How Do We Forgive Our Fathers.

### PROMPT 5 MIN

*Think about a time where you had an unsatisfactory interaction with someone close to you. Could be a family member. Could be a friend.  
What is something they said?  
What is something you wished they had said?  
What would it take to forgive that person? Or conversely, what would it take to receive forgiveness?  
What might happen if we allowed ourselves to let go (and forgive)? And what*

*would happen if we allowed ourselves to be forgiven?*

**TASK** 13 MIN

*Create a poem on forgiveness using the highlighted words below. The last word in each line in Lourie and Alexie's poem should be the first word of each line in your poem. For example:*

*Line 1 of Your Poem on Forgiveness - Fathers....*

*Line 2 of Your Poem on Forgiveness - Dream...*

*Line 3 of Your Poem on Forgiveness - Forever...*

Remind students their writing will only be shared or read aloud if they choose.

## 2 DEAR FOUNDING FATHERS

30 MIN

**TEMPLATE**  
“Dear Founding  
Fathers” Poetry Template



**SET-UP** 5 MIN

**Hand back packets of student writing from previous lessons in The Letter Module:**

Poem from “Dear God, Dear Stars, Dear Trees”

Poem from “Dear Name” poems

Quote from historical figure or cultural icon (from “Dear Name” lesson)

**TASK** 5 MIN

**Invite students to pen a subjective, personal retelling of the American story as experienced through their own lives using the “Dear Founding Fathers” Poetry Template.** Writing from previous lessons will be woven to create a final letter-poem.

### PEDAGOGICAL MOMENT

It is recommended that each teacher and facilitator experience this introductory lesson before leading the workshop with students. If you don't already consider yourself a poet or writer-writer, step into the shoes of a letter-writer.

Take a moment to reflect on the impact the exercise had on you. What are questions you're left with? What areas might you want to tweak or adjust for your learners?

**Teacher / Facilitator Prompt:**

*Think about a time when you witnessed a student do something s/he/they didn't believe they could. Write a letter to that student. Or you might want to write to a colleague, friend, family member, someone you have coached, advised, counseled or supported in some way.*

## 3 AFFIRM AND CLOSING REFLECTION

5 MIN

**TASK** 5 MIN

**The closing practice ends with students reading their work out loud.** Students may offer words of affirmation and love after each speaker but consider holding off on having students offer peer feedback until the next class or session together, after the group has had a chance to share and listen as much (as or little) as they feel is right.