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Letters About Literature

Scoring Rubrics and Sample Passages

All passages are from actual letters submitted for levels 1 and 2.

Note: The letter excerpts are typed exactly as they were received without proofing or edits.

Prepared by Catherine Gourley

Assessment – First Two Rounds of Judging

Each quadrant is 1 point.

Format and Audience

Round 1

- .5 = Letter format with salutation, paragraphs, complimentary close
- .5 = Talking to rather than about or at the author, keeping in mind the author wrote the work

Purpose: Reflection

- .5 = Reveals thoughtful observation, insightful interpretation, or recounts an incident relative to the book's plot or characters
- .5 = Concrete, personal details relevant to author's work support statements

Writer's Voice/ Use of Language

Round 2

- .5 = Writing strategy and/or figurative language enhance reflection
- .5 = Expression reveals originality, creativity and evidence of careful word choice

Grammatical Conventions

- .5 = Sentence structure, paragraphing, vocabulary, spelling, etc. are correct with few errors
- .5 = Organization is tight, focused without irrelevant details or repetition

Scoring Summary

Criteria, Rounds 1 & 2	Weak (0)	Average (.5)	Above Average (1)
Format & Audience <i>Value = 1</i>	<i>Not in letter format. Writes about rather than to the author, recalling details or reviewing the book</i>	<i>Letter format used. Acknowledges the author through references to characters and conflicts and/or writing style</i>	<i>Letter format used. Engages the author with interesting, personal details that relate to the author's work.</i>
Purpose— Reflection <i>Value = 1</i>	<i>Uses only simple, obvious statements; generalizes rather than personalizes. No supportive details</i>	<i>Expresses an insightful reflection (observation, interpretation, or anecdote), supported by concrete details</i>	<i>Implicitly reveals feelings and thoughts through presentation of the experience; reflection is fully developed with vivid</i>
Writer's Voice & Use of Language <i>Value = 1</i>	<i>Writing is flat, factual without voice; does not attempt to elaborate ideas or elaborates only</i>	<i>Personality evident through word choice and phrasing; specific, concrete details make the reflection clear to</i>	<i>Distinct, creative voice; writing strategy enhances reflection; uses sensory details as well as figurative language to describe</i>
Grammatical Conventions <i>Value = 1</i>	<i>Multiple errors resulting in muddled meaning</i>	<i>Minor errors but meaning is still clear</i>	<i>No significant errors; message is clearly expressed</i>

Example—Understanding and Acknowledging Audience

Dear Malala,

I have a little sister. Her name is Emily. She drives me crazy! But I love her to death. She is stubborn but brave. She can be fearless and kind at the same time. I hope my sister will become like you one day: a fighter. It would make me so angry if someone told my sister that she couldn't go to school or play outside because she was a girl. I'm glad there are people like you in this world that have the courage to stand up to injustice and provide a voice for those who are afraid to speak.

I know my struggles are small compared to the ones that you faced, but I would still like to talk with you. You see, I have a very hard time speaking and making friends. Just making eye contact with someone is very hard for me and makes me very nervous. I love watching movies and drawing super heroes and I want to share all these things with my friends but I get nervous because I don't think they like these things as much as me.

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LAL Assessment: The reader shares personal information about himself, specifically how he views his sister. Clearly, the reader admires Malala, as implied through his wish that his sister may one day be like the author. More importantly, the reader links both his views of his sister and his own personal fears with the conflicts the character faces in the book. (.5 audience)

Example—Understanding and Acknowledging Audience

Hazel Grace Lancaster is a protagonist challenged by no other. Her boldness and strength of heart has no equal. However, throughout the book Hazel tends to feel the negative effects of her cancerous body (as she should though!). Hazel lets her cancer drag her down and nobody can blame her for that. She is thoughtful and bold, but not energetic. I believe that is because her cancer restricts her from the happiness required to be energetic.

Then Hazel meets Augustus Waters. He becomes this light, this *energy*, that Hazel's life previously lacked. Of course, as any person would, Hazel wants to cling to that light. Still, Hazel allows the cancer to affect her negatively (again, very understandable!!!) and no matter how much she wants to attach to this beacon of light, she tries to push that light away regardless. This light however, is too powerful for Hazel Grace, and remains with her anyway. Together, Hazel and Augustus are able to compliment each other perfectly.

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LAL Assessment: This reads more like a book report/review and not a personal letter to the author. Ask: Why would the author be interested in learning this from you? What does this “perfect” match of character personalities mean to you, the reader? Unless you share your response, you are only telling the audience what he already knows. (0 point for audience)

Example—Understanding and Acknowledging Audience

When you lie, trust shatters like throwing a rock against glass, even if they don't find out. When you lie, guilt is like that same sharp rock you threw coming back, and you shatter just like the glass. When you lie, guilt will come for you, it may not be today, it may not be tomorrow, but it will always come to you.

You will always know in your heart that you did wrong. You may not be forced by the sound of a pounding heart circling around your fragile ears, but you still get that feeling. Do you know what I am talking about? The feeling that you just lied to a loved one, that feeling that you just lied to someone who is only trying to find the truth. You have done wrong. The lies don't help, they create a gap. Your book, The Tell Tale Heart taught me that when the guilt pounds against the narrator's head, the narrator knew he could get away with murder, but he couldn't live with himself.

Before I read The Tell Tale Heart, I never really realized how much white lies could affect you. However now that I have, I realized that “those little lies” don't help at all.

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LAL Assessment: The reader shares his thoughts with the author, referring to the character in the story and stating how it changed him. (.5 for audience)

Example—Understanding and Acknowledging Audience

Dear Martin Luther King, Jr.,

Most of the things that have influence me in m life were speeches, acts of kindness, and plays. The speech that has influenced everyone in the 1960s and even me today was I Have A Dream by Martin Luther King Jr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a very powerfl man and has cured the Untied State of America. The speech has given me the power to think about the world around me and to see the good in everyone. If Martin Luther King had not given that speech there would still be chaos and racism. Sadly Martin Luther King was assassinated but his theory still lives on forever and will never fad away.

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LAL Assessment: The reader doesn't have a sense of his audience. He is writing about the author and not conversing with the author. *(0 for audience)*

Example—Purpose: Reflection

So many dogs are mistreated. I've seen so many dogs left out in storms and in the cold. I've also seen dogs as skinny as a toothpick because the owner doesn't feed them enough. I don't know why some dog owners treat their dogs so poorly and I'm pretty sure the owners don't know why either. It's sad that people would even think about doing such things.

When I read your book *Ghost Dog Secrets*, I found out that other people care about dogs, too. My favorite part of the book was when Rusty was feeding the injured and neglected German shepherd and then the ghost dog appears. The saddest part in the book for me was when the owner of the German shepherd kept threatening Rust and his friend, Andrew, if they kept coming onto his property and feeding his dogs. This was one of the best books I've ever read, and I want to thank you for writing this book.

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LAL Assessment: The letter has a strong opening with specific details. The second paragraph, however, does not build upon the first. It provides simple statements without supportive details or explanation. Ask : Why was this the saddest part to you? What did it make you feel or think? How did the book change your perspective of why owners do these things to their dogs? How did your favorite and sad parts inspire you to change? (.5 only for reflection)

Example—Purpose: Reflection

As I read each page, I saw Cece slowly growing. Breaking out of her “loneliness bubble,” meeting new people and making new friends. It made her more confident, which made me think more confidently, too. Every morning, I look at myself in the mirror and just stare, always thinking that I’m the odd one out or the person in the hallway that everyone stares at. It always seemed like a label was on my forehead for people to look at and to judge me by. But you showed me that being different was how you were defined, who you really were. But I could only feel like this if I embraced it. So that next morning, I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled. As I walked downstairs for breakfast, I felt my shoulders more relaxed and my back straighter. For one moment, a feeling ran down my spine, a feeling of diversity and confidence. I’ve like that ever since you show me how.

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LAL Assessment: The writer shares her interpretation of the story and supports her statements with specific details before reading the book — the awkwardness she felt prior to reading the book (label on her forehead) and after reading the book -- smiling at herself smiling in the mirror and walking straighter. *(1 point for reflection)*

Example—Purpose: Reflection

Memories are quite beautiful things. They may be happy, sad, embarrassing, or terrifying. But no matter what, memories are a part of us. Losing those memories would like losing a piece of your soul. Unfortunately, as we both know, a disease called Alzheimer's causes just that. Alzheimer's has affect my life in the worst way possible: someone I love doesn't remember who I am. *Still Alice* helped me channel my emotions. I don't need to look at my grandfather to realize how awful it is to say something and then forget about it in less than sixty minutes.

When we found out about my grandfather's diagnosis, everyone had their own way of grieving, much like Lydia, Tom and Anna when they heard the news about their mother. My dad was the one who recommended me to read your book, just so I could really understand what Alzheimer's was like. After reading our book, I was deeply affected by its contents. I feel I can relate most to Anna. She was obviously upset by her mother's diagnosis but she tried not to let others realize so she could appear strong. Even when she also genetically got the disease, she ut on a brave face so that Alice wouldn't worry too much. That's when I realized the real theme of your book: sacrifice. Anna sacrificed her own happiness for her mother's.

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LAL Assessment:

In paragraph one, the reader reveals a thoughtful observation about memories, sharing it with the author and relating both her observation and her personal experience to the author's work.

(.5 point audience)

Example—Purpose: Reflection

When we found out about my grandfather's diagnosis, everyone had their own way of grieving, much like Lydia, Tom and Anna when they heard the news about their mother. My dad was the one who recommended me to read your book, just so I could really understand what Alzheimer's was like. After reading our book, I was deeply affected by its contents. I feel I can relate most to Anna. She was obviously upset by her mother's diagnosis but she tried not to let others realize so she could appear strong. Even when she also genetically got the disease, she put on a brave face so that Alice wouldn't worry too much. That's when I realized the real theme of your book: sacrifice. Anna sacrificed her own happiness for her mother's.

LAL Assessment: The second paragraph builds upon the first, providing specific details about the reader's personal experience as well as referring to specific characters in the book. Here again, the reader is reflecting upon the book, this time by providing an insightful interpretation.

(1 point for reflection)

Example—Purpose: Reflection

A reflection is a thought, a feeling, an anecdote. You must speak from your own experience using specific details to support your opinion.

The book, *Love Aubrey*, did truly open my eyes. We live in a generation where people take every little precious thing for granted. There was so much emotion woven into the story that I remember crying when I read it. More people need to understand others have it way worse. Thank you for opening my eyes to the bigger essence of the world.

Problem! GENERALIZATING, NOT PERSONALIZING

Either speak for yourself, as in “I take every little precious thing for granted” (and then provide an example)

OR . . .

Provide an example or two to support the statement that today’s “generation” takes “every little precious thing for granted.” What things exactly? And how do you know this?



Example—Purpose: Reflection

Speak from your own experience using specific details to support your opinion.

In all honesty, your book opened my eyes so much. All around the world kids are complaining about not having the latest iPhone or name-brand clothes, when in reality, most of our population only has a mom, or a dad, or none at all. Some don't even have a home. Most kids think they have life so bad because they can't go shopping. Then there are kids that would give up the only money they had, just to have a home and have their parents love them.

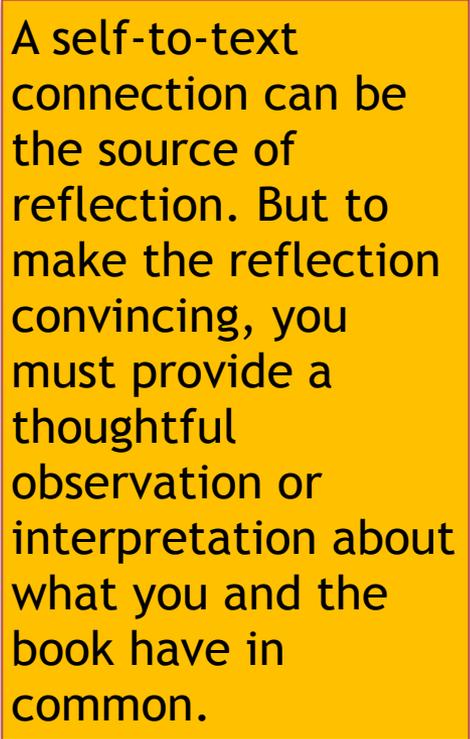
Problem! UNDEVELOPED

The lack of supportive details relative to the author's work results in unconvincing statements.

Ask: Was the book about iPhones? If not, how did you make this leap? What do you mean by "life so bad"? Can you provide an example? How do you know that "most kids" think they have "life so bad"?

Example—Purpose: Reflection

I had a cousin, he was 23 years old and a young man in the army. I was born the same year that he was killed in Afghanistan. He was killed, dead, and lifeless, at the age of 23 with only a fraction of his life over. He died for a greater cause than himself and I think this was a connection that I had with your book. Primrose Everdeen (Prim) dies during the fight between the Capital and the rebels, even though she hasn't done anything wrong. She was killed in combat and had a bright future ahead of her. I had someone related to me die in a fight. So did Katniss. You can't make them come back, but you can honor their sacrifice to help the world become a better place.



A self-to-text connection can be the source of reflection. But to make the reflection convincing, you must provide a thoughtful observation or interpretation about what you and the book have in common.

Example—Writer's Voice & Use of Language

When faced with danger, there are two well-known types of reactions: fight and flights. But there is another type of reaction to fear: freeze. Think of the creature who plays dead or keeps still and quiet, hoping its camouflage is enough to get by on.

That's me.

I am the stereotypical introverted kid who eats lunch in the corner of the cafeteria, who has a quiet voice and wears glasses. I'm the one who is picked last for sports, but first for group worksheets, and therefore has to explain why all three sheets have the same answers and only my handwriting. I'm the one with a Salvation Army wardrobe (by choice) who is always called smart in a pitying tone, who survives day-to-day on a mixture of sarcasm and doodling on every available margin of my homework.

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LAL Assessment: Intriguing opening that is personal not general. The second paragraph of just two words shows emphasis. Voice is reflected through not only the choice of words but also the choice of descriptive examples of “self.” While many young people reading this letter could relate to the feelings described, the voice in this letter makes it unique.
(1 point for voice and use of language)

Example—Writer's Voice & Use of Language

Your book brought me up to the stars where I looked over the world sitting on a cloud of vivid words and an irresistible plot. A year ago I thought the whole universe revolved around me. I thought I was the unluckiest person on Earth. My problems seemed bigger than Jupiter. Then a teacher read me Out of my Mind.

From the start your book captivated my imagination like a bright shooting star. I couldn't stop reading. Even when my teacher stopped reading I'd read ahead, treasuring each bright, shining word like each firefly I'd catch in a jar. When Melody missed the plane flight for her I cried like a storm cloud raging in the sky. She was smart and great on their team. They did it on purpose! Poor Melody, she couldn't even show her anger like I am now. She would have to put up with people assuming things about her all her life and not looking on the inside. The truth is Melody's head is like a starry night, filled with beauty and a million thoughts.

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LAL Assessment: Figurative language is a tool to create meaning, but when overdone, it becomes less powerful and gets in the way of clear expression. In this passage, the reader overuses a number of similar phrases: universe, shooting star, firefly in a jar, storm cloud, starry night. Ask: Which of these similes do you like best? More is not always better!
(0 for writer’s voice)

Example—Grammatical Conventions

To Kill a Mockingbird influenced me, and changed me to a person who can't judge a person or criticize about the people around me in my life. Your book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, changed me in three ways: First, you have to crawl into a person's skin and walk around in it before you say anything, second, You treat people fairly even if they're a different race, and finally, our book taught me how to believe even if there is no hope left.

In this paragraph I'm going to talk about how crawling into people's skin before you judge them. Well before I read this book I judged every one and thought there was something wrong with them, but now I have to think about what is going on in their life instead of just thinking about your life and not thinking of their life.

Second reason this book changed me in a good way, You have to believe even though there is no hope left. Well if you're thinking why I put this reason here because it's one of the things that effected me the most. If you're wondering about where I got this reason it was Atticus saying that you do it anyway even if you have no chance.

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LAL Assessment: Incoherent sentences due to incomplete thoughts and to unnecessary words that muddle the meaning. (0 for grammatical conventions)