



# THE CIVIL WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS

## LESSON

Grade Level: 7-12

Subject: History and English

Estimated Time of  
Required:

To complete all activities  
would take 8 class periods,  
but teachers can choose to  
implement some but not all  
activities in the lesson.

## THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

# CIVIL WAR LETTERS

## OVERVIEW

The lesson begins with an analysis of what historians can learn from ordinary Americans whose Civil War letters were preserved. It begins with the moving and memorable “Sullivan Ballou” letter (since made famous by The Civil War series), and then asks students to analyze a variety of primary source letters online.

Next, students are put into pairs of letter-writing correspondents living in 1863. Partners represent a variety of American voices, North and South, and the lesson emphasizes the important roles women played during the war. As the memorable events of 1863 unfold — the Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, the New York City draft riots — students respond to events and recount how their lives were affected. Suggestions are made at the end of the lesson for implementing the letter writing paradigm using a different sequence of Civil War events.

## OBJECTIVES

- *To learn about events that were critical to the outcome of the Civil War and its meaning in American history.*
- *To learn about the roles ordinary citizens played in making history, both men and women.*
- *To learn to analyze what historians can learn from primary source material generated by average citizens.*
- *To learn as writers how to incorporate factual material into fictional accounts.*

## MATERIALS

The web addresses listed within the body of the lesson.

Materials for writing old-fashioned letters (paper, ink pens, etc).

Episodes 1 and 5 of *The Civil War*, highly recommended but not required.

## RELEVANT STANDARDS

This lesson correlates to the standards of the National Center for History in the Schools (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/>).

Era 5, Standard 2

- *Identify the turning points of the war.*
- *Evaluate provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation.*
- *Analyze the purpose, meaning, and significance of the Gettysburg Address.*
- *Compare the motives for fighting and the daily life experiences of Confederate with those of white and African American Union soldiers.*
- *Analyze the reason for the northern draft riots.*

This lesson correlates to standards for the Language Arts of the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (<http://www.mcrel.org/>).

- *Writes fictional and observational narrative... Provides a specific setting for scenes and incidents; provides supporting descriptive detail; uses literary devices to enhance style and tone.*
- *Uses a variety of print and electronic sources to gather information, including primary source material.*

## PROCEDURE

### *Activity 1: Off to War*

Ask students when they last wrote a hand written letter. What prompted them to write their letters? Now ask them when they last sent an email, and what occasioned their writing it. Did any of these communications contain important news? If students had something highly important to convey, what means of communication would they use? Why?

Now ask students how important they think letter writing may have been in 19th century America. With telegraphs, but no telephones, and relatively slow means of transportation, people were often separated from one another without any other way to communicate except by letter.

Ask students to imagine they are living during the Civil War. They themselves, or one of their family members, has just enlisted and gone off to fight. How important would it be to receive a letter in this situation? What would those left at home hope to hear about? What would those gone off to fight yearn to know?

Now show a segment from the first video of the PBS series *The Civil War*. Begin with “Traitors and Patriots” at 53:18 and stop at the end of “Gun Men” at 113:05. This portion of the video describes the signing on of volunteers for the Union and Confederate armies during the opening months of the war. Ask students as they watch it to pay special attention to any quotations from letter (or diary) writers.

After viewing the segment hold a discussion of the following:

- *Did the men who signed on envision a long or short war?*
- *What important choices did men have to make in these early days of the war? Why do you think men from each side enlisted? (If you have not covered events leading up to the Civil War, you can show the first 50 minutes of the video.) For example why might Sam Watkins from Tennessee (who owned no slaves) have enlisted to fight for the Confederacy?*
- *Why did Lee reject the offer to be general of the Union forces, and instead choose the Confederacy? What did this decision portend for the future of the Civil War?*
- *Were African Americans at first allowed to fight? What happened to fugitive slaves who fled to the North?*
- *The program describes what Grant, Lee, Sherman (and other soon-to-be important players in the Civil War) did in these early days. But the program also quotes men like Elisha Hunt Rhodes from Rhode Island, and Sam Watkins from Tennessee, men whose names were never destined to be remembered in textbooks. What of importance can we learn about the war based on what these men may have written?*
- *If you were a man living during 1861, would you have enlisted? If you were a woman, would you have wanted your brothers, husbands and fathers to sign up?*

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### *Activity 2: Reading Letters from the Civil War*

Now show the very last segment of the video, “Honorable Manhood” from 132:05 to 132:23. This is a beautiful reading of the “Sullivan Ballou” letter, since made famous by the program itself. The letter is also worth downloading and distributing to students for discussion.

\***Sullivan Ballou Letter** (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/23.htm>)

- *At first just ask students how this letter made them feel. Then proceed with the following questions:*
- *Why do you think Sullivan Ballou wrote this letter?*

## THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### CIVIL WAR LETTERS

- *If you were Sullivan's wife or children, would you plead with him not to enlist in the Union army? Why or why not?*
- *In how many ways does Sullivan comfort his wife by what he writes to her?*
- *Does he have regrets for himself, or only for his wife and children?*
- *Sullivan writes that he is "communing with God, my country, and thee." What is his relationship to the claims that each of these make upon his life?*
- *Images of "wind" and "breath" appear and reappear in the letter. How are these images related at different times to "God, my country, and thee"?*
- *Sullivan says that he is perfectly willing to die to pay the debt owed to those who fell in the American Revolution. What debt, if any, do students feel we owe to Sullivan Ballou and other men like him?*

#### **\*Further information about the Sullivan Ballou letter:**

Sullivan Ballou grew up in Rhode Island. His own father died when Sullivan was 14; thus he understood in a most poignant way what it would mean for his own sons to lose their father. While growing up Sullivan had to work at various times to support his family, but he fought hard to acquire an education. After attending public schools, he went to Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts and attended Brown University for two years. He was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1853. A passionate Republican, and ardent supporter of Lincoln, Sullivan naturally gravitated to politics. (The second paragraph of the letter in many ways foreshadows the Gettysburg Address.) He was elected as clerk of the Rhode Island House of Representatives. By 1857 he was so well respected that he was chosen Speaker of the House. While his further forays into politics were for the moment stymied, his law practice flourished. He married Sarah Hart Shumway in 1855. He died after his leg was amputated following the battle of Bull Run.

His wife never remarried. As Sullivan predicted, Sarah was able to successfully raise their two sons; one graduated from Brown University and became a lawyer like his father.

While Sullivan mailed other letters to his wife, this one was found in his trunk. It was probably intended for her eyes only upon his death, and may explain why he allowed himself to give into his forebodings. Another interesting fact about the letter is that it has never been found in Sullivan's own handwriting. Perhaps he dictated it in the hospital, or perhaps his wife would never part with the original copy. Sullivan Ballou has no surviving heirs.

(\*This information is based on an article that appeared in the Brown Alumni Monthly, November 1990, written by Charlotte Bruce Harvey.)

Now divide the class into small groups such that each group is given one of the pairs of letters listed below. There are letters written by southerners and northerners, including letters from a free African American family (the Demus letters). While most of the authors are men, there is a letter by Mary Jane Demus, two letters by E. and Fannie Hunt, and another set by Mary Lincoln. (You may wish to ask students if it is likely that more men's letters than women's have been preserved from the Civil War period; if so why and to what effect.) Materials at the Websites give a varying amount of information about the letters and/or letter writers.

You can print out the letters or have students work directly on them from computers. First have each group fill out a **Written Document Analysis Worksheet from the National Archives**. ([http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/lessons/analysis\\_worksheets/document.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/document.html))

In addition give them the following Civil War Letter Analysis Worksheet. As they fill it in remind students that from one person's letter they may be able to make inferences about the recipient of the letter as well as its author.

*Civil War Letters Analysis Worksheet*

1. What can we infer about the letter writer at the time the Civil War started, his or her home, family members, work, level of education? How do you know?
2. Can we tell which side the author of this letter supported, the Union or Confederacy? If so, how do we know? Give specifics.
3. What is happening during the Civil War at the time the letters were written? (Students can check their texts and/or internet sources)
4. If the author is a man, why do you think he has enlisted? Does he say anything about the views or attitudes he holds that have led him to make the commitment to fight, or can we infer them in any way?
5. If the author is a woman, does she say anything that enables us to know which side of the conflict she supports and why?
6. If either the author or recipient is a woman, what can we learn about the lives of women during the Civil War from the letters? How did women make sacrifices for or contributions to the war effort, even though they themselves could not fight or hold political power?
7. What personal concerns does the author express? Is the Civil War the only threat to his or her well being and happiness?
8. How important does it appear to be for the author to receive letters and/or to write letters at this time? Why?
9. By searching the Internet site where the letters appear, or any other sources, what can you discover about the letter writer?

THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS  
CIVIL WAR LETTERS

*Activity 2: Reading Letters from the Civil War (cont.)*

When teams have finished analyzing their letters, ask one member from each team to come before the class as the letter writer. (Draw on students with some dramatic flair to volunteer for this.) Each "author" should then describe him or herself, thereby sharing the contents of the letter(s).

As another activity you can ask students to compose a letter in answer to the last one in the set they read, responding as the addressee might have.

The following letters are from the Valley of the Shadow Web site:  
(<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/vshadow2/>).

**Franklin County, Pennsylvania: David Demus to Mary Jane Demus,**  
November 8, 1863 and February 23, 1864.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browsemod?id=F3060>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F3009>

**Franklin County, Pennsylvania: Letters of E. and Fannie Hunt,** December 1, 1861

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F0647>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F0648>

**Franklin County, Pennsylvania Samuel M. Potter to Cynthia Potter,**  
December 10, 1862 and July 20, 1863.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F0013>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F0020>

**Augusta County, Virginia: Brooks Family Letters, Andrew Brooks to Mary Susan Brooks,**  
January 23, 1861 and May 28, 1861

(<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/cwbrookslist.html>).

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new?id=Bro1e28.sgm&images=images/mod-eng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>

**Augusta County, Virginia: Letters of the Cochran Family, John H. Cochran to his mother,**  
December 11, and December 21, 1860

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=A0572>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=A0573>

The following letters written by Mary Todd Lincoln are in the Abraham Lincoln manuscript collection of American Memory (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>).

*Do a keyword search.*

**Letter, Mary Todd Lincoln to Abraham Lincoln** November, 1862

*(This letter also appears in "Words and Deeds" in the Manuscript Division where it is exhibited with background information)*

**Mary Todd Lincoln to Abraham Lincoln,** November 3.

*("Contraband" refers to fugitive slaves. Congress had just forbidden their return to their masters.)*

### *Activity 3: Becoming Civil War Letter Writing Correspondents*

Next, tell students that you are going to put them into pairs. Each pair will choose imaginary identities for themselves such that one writer is or pretends to be a girl, and the other writer is or pretends to be a boy. Assign each pair to write as either supporters of the Confederacy or the Union such that the class is about evenly divided. (During the Civil War no mail was sent across Confederate lines into Union states.) If your class has an odd number of students ask two to write as “twins” to a third student, or become a letter writer yourself.

- *After you have partnered students, tell them to look at the map of the U.S. in 1861, and then to decide the following about themselves:*
- *What are your imaginary names?*
- *How do you know one another, or how are you related? (e.g. mother/son, father/daughter, sister/brother, husband/wife, engaged couple, etc.)*
- *How old is each of you?*
- *Where does each of you live? What are your addresses (no zip codes needed back then!)*

*(Note: Students should consider the various kinds of Americans living in the 1860's – they might be an immigrant, a freeborn African American, a slave, a Mexican American, an American whose ancestor fought in the American Revolution, and so forth.)*

Pass out index cards and ask each pair to write on the top their real names and below to write down the answers to the above questions.

Once their identities have been approved by you, assign each student (in consultation with their partner) to write a biographical description of themselves, based on the following list:

- *Describe your home.*
- *Describe the most important members of your family in some detail.*
- *Describe your upbringing and the extent of your education.*
- *Describe your livelihood or how you were financially supported before the Civil War began.*
- *Describe your reasons for supporting the position of either the Union or the Confederacy.*
- *If you are a man, explain what compelled you to enlist to fight. If you are a woman, explain how you feel about your writing partner joining up to fight.*
- *Describe the most pressing concern in your life, your hopes and dreams, before the war broke out.*
- *Describe the ways in which you fear the war will change your life.*

Next, ask each student to get a photograph of their character. They can use a downloaded image from the web, or take a photo of themselves dressed in costume.

You can post their biographical descriptions and photographs under the index cards for all class members to read and see. They will generate great interest and excitement as the lesson proceeds!

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### *Activity 4: Women and the Civil War*

All the men in the primary source documents students read enlisted to fight in the Civil War, as do the men that students are role-playing. What were the choices open to women who wanted to contribute to the war effort, and therefore, how might the letter-writing roles play out for women? Ask students to brainstorm a potential list and write their ideas on the blackboard.

In order to understand gender roles in the 19th century, ask students to read the following essay about “The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood”

(<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/truewoman.html>). It describes the 19th century ideal of white middle and upper class womanhood as having four characteristics: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

## THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### CIVIL WAR LETTERS

Now ask the following questions:

- *How were women expected to behave at this time in history?*
- *What can you infer about the way men were expected to treat women?*
- *What were women not expected to do, and what were some of the negative consequences they faced if they broke with convention?*
- *To help in the war effort, what activities could be done in the home?*
- *What difficulties did women face if they ventured from their homes in order to work?*

Show the video segment “She Ranks Me” from Episode 5 of *The Civil War*, beginning at 53:31-56:34. Now introduce the following list of women who actually did contribute to the war effort in some unusual ways:

- **Louis May Alcott** – author and army nurse
- **Clara Barton** – founder of the American Red Cross
- **Mary Ann Bickerdyke** – hospital administrator
- **Belle Boyd** – spy
- **Kady Brownell** – “daughter” of a regiment
- **Lydia Maria Child** – abolitionist and author
- **Dorothea Dix** – Union superintendent of nurses
- **Rose O’Neal Greenhow** – spy
- **Sarah Edmonds** – fought disguised as a man
- **Charlotte Forten** – taught in the Freedman’s schools
- **Angelina Grimke** – antislavery activist
- **Susie Taylor King** – escaped slave, teacher and nurse
- **Mary Livermore** – hospital administrator
- **Harriet Beecher Stowe** – author and anti-slavery activist
- **Sojourner Truth** – abolitionist
- **Harriet Tubman** – abolitionist
- **Loreta Velazquez** – recruited her own battalion as a man

After students have done some preliminary research about these women, ask students in what ways these women had to break gender stereotypes in order to perform the roles they did in the Civil War.

Useful Websites about women in the Civil War:

**Women’s Activities During the Civil War: A Select List of Photographs, Library of Congress**  
([http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/107\\_civw.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/107_civw.html))

**Biography of Charlotte Forten** (<http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/charlotte.html>), a free-born African American who went South during the war to educate freed slaves.

**Rose O’Neal Greenhow Papers, Duke University**  
(<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/greenhow/>). Born in Maryland, O’Neal became a most effective spy for the Confederacy.

**Biographies of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child**  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lincolns/world/index.html>) (author and anti-slavery activist), and an essay about medical care during the Civil War.

**Lydia Maria Child’s letters to the Governor of Virginia, 1860 in American Memory.**  
([http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field\(FLD001+07016677+\):@@@SREFS](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field(FLD001+07016677+):@@@SREFS))

**Hearts at Home: Southern Women in the Civil War Era, University of Virginia.**  
(<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/speccol/exhibits/hearts/>)

**Women Soldiers of the Civil War, National Archives**  
([http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/spring\\_1993\\_women\\_in\\_the\\_civil\\_war\\_1.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/spring_1993_women_in_the_civil_war_1.html))

### *Activity 5: Letters Round 1*

Now that students can envision the roles both women and men played in the war years, they are ready to write their letters. Letters will look authentic if they are hand written on white stationery. Each should be headed with a date and the place from which the letter is being written. They should be “mailed” in envelopes with the name and address of the fictitious person being written to. For samples of Civil War envelopes go to the collection of the **New York Historical Society** (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/nhihtml/cwnyhsarcpp.html#env>). Letters can be tea-stained to make them look old.

Below are three rounds of letter writing topics and activities. It speeds the process up if each partner writes their Round 1 letters simultaneously. The postman is the teacher who then distributes all letters at once. Next, both partners respond simultaneously in Round 2 to the letters received in Round 1 and so forth. Between rounds call up pairs to read aloud their letters, or put students in groups of four (a northern pair and a southern pair) to read each other’s ongoing correspondence.)

Remind students to write about the events below in character (and not in essay style). For example, in reacting to the Emancipation Proclamation, how would the following have been affected differently: a slaveowner, a slave, a northern immigrant, a northern abolitionist. Also remind students to write about their ongoing personal lives – romances, finances, family stories and so forth.

In between some rounds suggestions are made for watching corresponding sections of *The Civil War Part 5*. (Alternatively students can follow events in their texts.)

#### **Round 1 Topics: January 1, 1863.**

- *Your wishes for the coming New Year.*
- *Your predictions about the prospects for ending the war.*
- *Your response to the Emancipation Proclamation (<http://www.nara.gov:80/cgi-bin/starfinder/7594/images.txt>) and the enlistment of freed slaves and free Negroes in the northern army.*
- *The Confederate army commandeers male slaves as laborers and factory workers; your reaction.*
- *Confederate economic woes: prices rise 10% in a month.*
- *Northern factories boom, but discontent with slow progress of the war rises.*
- *Your efforts in the war; battlefield or homefront.*
- *Personal news, news from relatives and friends.*

**Enclosure:** Send a political cartoon, a clipping from a Civil War newspaper, and/or a casualty list from a recent battle.

(For ideas go to <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/SCARTOONS/cartoons.html> or <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/civilwar.html>)

**Video Interlude:** The Battle of Gettysburg, “The Universe of Battle” from 7:36 through “Gettysburg the Third Day” to 32:15.

Questions to ask after viewing the segments:

If you had been a foot soldier in one of the battles, would you have understood the grand scheme of the battle?

If you had been a civilian in the surrounding area, how would your life have been affected?

If you had lived far away from Gettysburg how would you have learned of the battle? Would you have understood its full significance immediately?

#### **Round 2 Topics: July 4, 1863.**

- *July 4th; it’s meaning to the cause you support.*
- *Military progress this spring; revised predictions.*
- *Death of Stonewall Jackson on May 10; your feelings about it and what it bodes for the future.*

## THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### CIVIL WAR LETTERS

- *The Battle of Gettysburg.* Describe what you experienced in some detail if you either fought in the battle or served the army in some other function (e.g. nurse). Write what you have heard about it in newspapers or word of mouth if you were not there.
- *Somewhere you have seen first hand an important military or political leader.* Describe the situation and experience.
- *The Union begins a military draft.* Your reaction, the reaction of others (Note: NYC Draft Riots will erupt July 11.)
- *The effort of women you know to support the cause.*
- *A terrible personal loss (a child, a soldier, aging parent, etc. related or not related to the Civil War.)*
- *Your wishes for the person to whom you are writing.*

**Enclosure:** Send a sketch of a battlefield or homefront scene, something that helps your correspondent “see” with your eyes a scene you have experienced. For Civil War sketches go to the New York Historical-Society collection at American Memory (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/nhihtml/cwnyhsarc.html>).

**Video Interlude:** Show “A New Birth of Freedom” from The Civil War Part 5, 126:06 to 129:14. This segment is about the Gettysburg Address. Ask students to compare Lincoln’s words to those of Sullivan Ballou with which this lesson began.

#### Round 3 Topics: Thanksgiving, 1863

- *President Lincoln initiates a national day of Thanksgiving the last Thursday of November.* Experience of this day in the North; reaction in the South.
- *Gettysburg Address (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/readings/gettysburg.txt>) delivered on November 19th.* Whom did you know who fell at Gettysburg? What do Lincoln’s words mean to you?
- *The Battle of Chattanooga (fought October–November) as you experienced or learned about it; what it portends.*
- *Blockade running in the South, stories and rumors.*
- *Enlistment of African American soldiers; work of African American women.*
- *Experience of a hospital either as patient or nurse (if you have not written about one yet).*
- *Ongoing personal news about family and friends you know, health and finances, hopes, dreams and fears for the future.*
- *Your revised predictions for the future of the war.*
- *Enclosure: A keepsake to be remembered by your correspondent (e.g. lock of hair, photograph, tear-stained poem).*

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#### **Activity 6: Debriefing**

Hold a discussion posing the following questions:

- *In how many ways was 1863 a turning point of the Civil War?*
- *Why then did it take two more years for the North to win the war?*
- *How did Northerners and Southerners experience the war in different ways?*

### ASSESSMENT

Students can be assessed (either by the teacher or fellow students) on the letters they wrote, according to the following rubric:

- *Did the student create a believable character and consistently write and respond to events as that character?*
- *Did the student cover the topics in all three rounds in depth, thereby reflecting a solid understanding of Civil War events?*
- *Were the letters well written, detailed, and carefully proofread?*
- *Did the student include the enclosures with each letter, and was care taken to make them seem authentic?*
- *Were envelopes labeled properly? Was an effort made to make the letters appear authentically old?*
- *Did the student respond effectively to the letters he or she was sent?*

### EXTENSIONS

As a concluding activity you can hold a letter-reading event. Ask students to dress in costume and to practice reading aloud their letters with dramatic flair. Then invite parents, or another class studying the Civil War, to your reading.

Ask students to continue to keep a diary as their character through the end of the Civil War or even through Reconstruction.

Use the paradigm of the letter writing activity and restructure it to cover a different set of events. The activity works well with events leading up to the Civil war, with a letter assigned for each of the following years: 1856 Bleeding Kansas, 1857 Dred Scott Decision, 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debates, 1859 John Brown's raid, 1860 Lincoln elected. In this paradigm assign students to pairs with one Southerner and one Northerner per pair. As events unfold partners should grow more angry at one another as Civil war impends.