

TEACHERS! If you wish your letters to reach the mushers, you must read the lesson plan and the hints on pages 4 – 8 even if you have been successful with this project in past years. NEW INFORMATION updated JUNE 2009 is included in this document. Let's ALL have successful projects this year! Your assistance in following the guidelines is appreciated! Diane Johnson

## Communicating with Mushers: Letter Writing Skills

\*\*\* Hints for success are listed below this lesson plan.

For Musher addresses: email [djohnson@iditarod.com](mailto:djohnson@iditarod.com)

TEACHERS: YOU MUST read HINTS below this lesson plan for important mailing instructions.  
 ANY TEACHER SENDING MAIL TO MUSHERS NOT ON THE LIST MUST READ PAGE 6 OF THIS DOCUMENT OR YOUR LETTERS WILL VERY LIKELY NOT BE DELIVERED TO MUSHERS.

**Developed by: Iditarod Education Department**

**Discipline / Subject: Language Arts**

**Topic: Written Communication with Mushers, teams, race volunteers, and Zuma**

**Grade Level: All Grade Levels**

**Resources / References / Materials Teacher Needs:**

**Grammar Resource book on letter writing and grammatical skills. Consult your state and the national standards.**

**Letter Writing Etiquette Chart**

**Rubric for assessment of letter writing skills**

**[www.iditarod.com](http://www.iditarod.com)**

**[www.adn.com](http://www.adn.com)**

**Lesson Summary:**

**After a letter writing lesson on friendly letters, students will work in groups to formulate written communications.**

**Writing letters to mushers is a way to practice letter writing etiquette and grammar skills, according to the standards and skills your students need to learn. It is an opportunity for students to learn proper written communications with the focus on student academic success in written communications.**

**\*See Letters to Mushers: Tips (below)**

**Standard's Addressed: (National Standards in Language Arts)**

**National Standards Mcrel Resources**

**<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/SubjectTopics.asp?SubjectID=7>**

**Writing**

- 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process**
- 2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing**
- 3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions**
- 4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes**

**Learning objectives:**

**1. Written Communications: communicating a message to the person receiving the letter.**

**2. Grammar Skills appropriate for grade level**

**Assessment:**

**Letter Writing Rubric  
(See Below)**

**Procedural Activities: Appropriate for small group or entire class project!**

**\*\*\* Prior to beginning this activity, teach and/or review the friendly letter writing skills and format for letter writing. Discuss/teach skills students will be using and share the rubric that will be used to assess student progress. KWL Chart, Letter Writing Format, Rubric, and Hints are listed below this document.**

1. After identifying mushers (or others) students wish to communicate with, fill out a **KWL chart** about the musher. Students should write first what they already know about that person in the K section of the chart. Then, they should list 3 or 4 questions they would like to know in the W section of the chart. Using the [www.iditarod.com](http://www.iditarod.com) web site, books about that particular musher, identified musher websites, news articles from [www.adn.com](http://www.adn.com), and other resources, students should then fill out information learned about the mushers from the resources PRIOR to writing the letter. \*\* This step is essential because it assists students in identifying good discussion and possible questions in their letter and helps them to avoid writing questions that are general information and will go unanswered by the musher. IF all of the questions are answered by research, students have discovered the importance of prior knowledge. If there are questions left unanswered, they might be considered as questions to include in the student generated letters, however, it should be stressed that the purpose of letter writing is communication of thoughts and not necessarily to get a response from the musher. It is essential for the educator to assist students in developing the letters so that they represent a best possible product from the students.

2. With a partner or in a small group, brainstorm ideas that students would like to share ABOUT themselves, their school, community, and what they are doing as far as activities using Iditarod as a theme in the classroom. (For example, students can write about a book they are reading or tell about maps of the trail that they are creating.) Students can share what they have learned and why what they have learned is important. Students can share good wishes for a great race or emotional support for the musher's attempt to achieve goals. Help students recognize that although getting a response from someone you write to is nice, the ultimate goal is communications from the writer to the reader. Mushers sometimes do respond, but it is not always possible for them to do so and some are not interested in responding to the letters. For hints on successful letter writing, see the document below.

3. Write well thought out and planned letters using the best handwriting or type the letters on the computer and print them off for mailing. Place a self- addressed envelope with correct return postage on the envelope for mushers wishing to respond.

**Materials Students Need:**

**[www.iditarod.com](http://www.iditarod.com) website and other websites**

**Research materials**

**Chart to show the format for a friendly letter**

**General writing tools (computer, pencil, paper, envelopes, stamps)**

<b>Technology Utilized to Enhance Learning:</b> www.iditarod.com website and/or computers to type letters
<b>Other Information</b> Share the rubric so students focus on the writing skills you expect them to demonstrate through this project.
<b>Modifications for special learners/ Enrichment Opportunities</b> Students work in small groups or with partners. Letters can also be done as a class instead of individual letters.

**Additional Information:**

Create a KWL chart similar to this, designed to brainstorm prior to writing letters to make sure the content of the letters is appropriate.

<b>Musher's Name</b>	<b>K: What I know about this musher</b>	<b>W: What I'd like to know about the person.</b>	<b>L: What I learned before writing the letter.</b>
<b>M U S H E R' S  N A M E</b>			

**Friendly letter format:**

**Friendly Letters Look Like Friendly Letters!**

**Remember to line the parts of the letter up correctly and to include the proper punctuation marks!**

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*Signature*

**THIS is a standard’s driven assignment. These letters help paint a picture of what is going on in classrooms today. What picture do you wish to help paint? Always set high standards for this lesson’s finished and mailed projects. Consider teaching a ‘mini-lesson’ on friendly letter writing before students begin to research and formulate their letters. Mini-lessons are a best practice in education. Consider writing a class letter, taking the letter writing steps including research, as a class before students begin their assignment so they have practiced the skills you expect them to demonstrate. Consider displaying sample letters that show the format for students to see ‘real life’ examples of appropriately written letters.**  
**Rubric: Develop a rubric to score and assess student progress in the letter- writing lesson. The following is a sample. Create yours according to the specific standards you address with students. Share the rubric with students prior to time they begin the assignment so students know the expectations and how they will be assessed.**

SCORE	Description: Skills
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• includes all five parts of the friendly letter</li> <li>• organized with ideas that are well developed</li> <li>• topic sentences and details add to the flow of the letter</li> <li>• variety of sentence types used</li> <li>• no errors in capitalization, punctuation, or grammar</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• includes all five parts of the friendly letter</li> <li>• organized with most ideas going together</li> <li>• satisfactory development of ideas through good supporting details</li> <li>• some sentence variety is used</li> <li>• few or no capitalization, punctuation, or grammar errors</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• includes parts of the friendly letter</li> <li>• tries to develop the topic of the letter, but shows weakness in organization</li> <li>• included unrelated details or information</li> <li>• contains few supporting details</li> <li>• contains many errors</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has some or no parts of the friendly letter</li> <li>• lacks organization and/or is too brief</li> <li>• lacks details and may be off the topic</li> <li>• poorly developed sentences</li> <li>• makes so many errors that the letter is difficult to understand</li> </ul>

## Writing to Musers! Hints and Summary

1. **Purpose:**
  - Addressing standards through letter writing activities: The standards and objectives of your curriculum should ‘drive’ this activity.
2. **Process:**
  - a. **FOCUS ON WRITING STANDARDS.** Encourage grade appropriate grammar skills, proper spelling, and encourage the message of the letter to demonstrate that the students have organized their thoughts. Letters should reflect that a foundation of knowledge has been created prior to the letter writing session. The focus of the assignment is the standards and not two-way communications.
  - b. A brainstorm session and discussion prior to the assignment will produce a better quality of letters. Discourage students from asking for booties or autographs. It isn’t polite to ask for things. Keep good manners at the top of your priority list along with teaching the standards.
  - c. Do send letters that meet your ‘mailing’ standards and demonstrate to those who will read them, that your students focus on learning and have put thought and attention to their assignment. A best question for students to ask is something students are unable to find out through research.
3. **Procedure: PAY ATTENTION TO DETAIL**
  - a. **ALWAYS** include a self addressed stamped envelope if you wish to attempt to get a response from the musher. The correct amount or **KIND** of postage **MUST** be on the envelope. **Some mushers are from other countries.** You must include the **CORRECT POSTAGE FOR THAT COUNTRY.**
  - b. **Choose a BEST TIME to send the letters IF you want to get a letter in return.** Musers are very busy in the months right before the race. You may have more success writing letters in the early fall or after the race. Return mail from a musher may arrive after your school year has ended, when mushers have more time to devote to responding.
  - c. **RECOGNIZE** that not all mushers take time to write to students. Make sure your students understand that the purpose of the project is for them to practice their skills and a letter back from the musher is a bonus some students **MIGHT** get. Some mushers may respond with a general form letter to fans.

### **ADDITIONAL HINTS:**

Check to see if a musher has a personal website. A musher’s individual website might also have a journal or race updates that can be read. Some mushers use this as their communication instead of writing letters back to fans. Students should think of a unique question vs. a question about something easily found by research and/or on the website. Asking an interesting- never asked before question- may result in a letter being answered. Encourage students to write group letters instead of each student writing a letter to the same musher. A musher may receive thousands of letters and although a musher might wish to respond, it may not be possible due to the expense of this project, even if you have included postage. **Remember**, the musher’s focus is on the race. Your focus is on teaching the standards in your curriculum. Students must focus on their skills and good manners. For musher address: email [djohnson@iditarod.com](mailto:djohnson@iditarod.com)

**Read PAGE 6 FOR INFORMATION ABOUT MAILING  
MUSHERS NOT ON OUR ADDRESS LIST**

## **TEACHERS: YOU MUST THIS AND REMEMBER:**

Not all mushers allow us to give their contact information out to those who request it. Those mushers are not officially participating in this classroom project. It is BEST if you have students write ONLY to those mushers who are on our address list that is sent to you.

Please do not mail letters to Iditarod Headquarters in Wasilla. It is most probable that letters sent to HQ will not arrive at their intended destination because mushers don't pick up mail at HQ and we don't have volunteers to address envelopes or funding to mail letters to mushers. PLEASE send letters to those mushers who are participating in this project.

\*Remember: If the musher is not from the United States, you need to put the KIND of postage on the musher's envelope that will get your letter to the musher and the correct kind of postage on the return envelope. THIS MEANS IF A MUSER LIVES IN CANADA, for example, you MUST purchase the correct kind of postage. United States postage is not accepted. Canadian postage must be on the return addresses. PLEASE pay attention to this important detail. Seek advice at the post office to make this project successful.

### **Please read these summary facts:**

The focus of the musher is to enter and finish the race. It costs a lot of money to maintain the musher's kennel during the entire year. Mushers are very busy.

Many mushers do enjoy hearing from students and race fans. Many mushers do 'write back' to students and race fans.

Many mushers do allow us to give teachers their address. Some mushers do not allow us to give out their address nor do they write back to students. Some mushers communicate by email. Look for a musher's website to find out more information.

We will send addresses to TEACHERS making a request and agreeing to follow our guidelines. We require the teacher to fill out a request form each year. Please do not ask each of your students to contact me for an address. That is not a time saving procedure and I will give addresses out ONLY to adults who follow our procedure and fill out our form. (See page 8!)

Mushers don't have extra money to spend on envelopes and postage to respond to all of the mail that they get. Since students in all 50 states and many other countries follow the race, think about HOW MANY LETTERS a musher might get. This would be very time consuming and expensive. Include self addressed envelopes with postage in EACH letter mailed to a musher.

At Headquarters, the Education Department doesn't have funding to mail letters without envelopes and postage to mushers. We don't have year round volunteers to help us, either. Mushers don't come to Headquarters to pick up mail. We need you to help keep our project successful and to keep our musher's happy. PLEASE follow our guidelines! We appreciate your consideration in this manner!

Diane Johnson  
Iditarod Education Director  
[djohnson@iditarod.com](mailto:djohnson@iditarod.com)

When you email me for musher's addresses, you will be asked for the information you see on the chart below even if you've emailed a request a previous year. Save time and copy paste this chart into an email when making a request or make a similar chart and email it to me. Your efforts will speed up the process. ALSO, remember, a complete updated musher address will not be compiled until AFTER the musher sign up deadline. (December 1) Teachers requesting prior to Dec.1 will get last year's addresses (or be asked to email a request at a later date) which will include some mushers not signed up this year and not include 'rookie' mushers. THE BEST TIME to email for a current 'this year's musher list' is January. During the race, it may take me longer to respond to your request. THE BEST TIME to write to mushers is after the race or in the fall of the year.

<b>To Receive Musher Addresses: Fill out the following Information in a reply email.</b>	<b>Type the information in the answer box.</b>
<b>Teacher's First and Last Name</b>	
<b>Teacher's school email address</b>	
<b>School</b>	
<b>School Address</b>	
<b>City, State, Zip code</b>	
<b>School Phone Number</b>	
<b>School or District Website</b>	
<b>Grade Level</b>	
<b>Teaching Area</b>	
<b>Summary of Project and reason for the request. Include goal or objectives of doing this project.</b>	
<b>I agree to include self addressed stamped for the correct amount of postage envelopes in each envelope sent just in case a musher wishes to send a response letter.</b>	<b>(Type your name to show you agree to follow this and other guidelines)</b>
<b>How long have you used Iditarod as a tool in classroom instruction?</b>	
<b>What would you like us to know about you or your students?</b>	