

Letters About Literature and the Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework

The Massachusetts Center for the Book (MCB) believes that the *Letters About Literature* program is a valuable tool for teaching English language arts skills and actively encourages teachers to incorporate the program into their curricula. The MCB finds that *LAL* participation supports *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* principles and standards. Guiding Principles of the *Framework* that apply to the *LAL* program, include:

- Guiding Principle 1: An effective English language arts curriculum develops thinking and language together through interactive learning.
- Guiding Principle 4: An effective English language arts curriculum emphasizes writing as an essential way to develop, clarify, and communicate ideas in persuasive, expository, narrative, and expressive discourse.

Letters About Literature asks students to write personally and reflectively about their own lives and experiences in relation to a text rather than submitting a book report, fan letter, or critical analysis of the text. This focus supports Guiding Principles 8 and 9:

- Guiding Principle 8: An effective English language arts curriculum builds on the language, experiences, and interests that students bring to school.
- Guiding Principle 9: An effective English language arts curriculum develops each student's distinctive writing or speaking voice.

The MCB has identified specific *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* standards that apply to the *LAL* program, especially the writing process for "extended composition assignments" in the Composition Strand:

From the Reading and Literature Strand (*bearing in mind the personal and reflective nature of the assignment*):

- Standard 8: Understanding a Text. Students will identify the basic facts and main ideas in a text and use them as the basis for interpretation.
- Standard 11: Theme. Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of theme in a literary work and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.
- Standard 15: Style and Language. Students will identify and analyze how an author's words appeal to the senses, create imagery, suggest mood, and set tone, and will provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.

In addition, the themes of the books students select provide opportunity for connections with other Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks subjects.

From the Composition Strand:

- 19: Writing. Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail.
- 20: Consideration of Audience and Purpose. Students will write for different audiences and purposes.
- 21: Revising. Students will demonstrate improvement in organization, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, and word choice (diction) in their compositions after revising them.
- 22: Standard English Conventions. Students will use knowledge of standard English conventions in their writing, revising, and editing.
- 23: Organizing Ideas in Writing. Students will organize ideas in writing in a way that makes sense for their purpose.

The MCB highly recommends the Teacher Guide provided by the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, (www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/letters-teacherguide.html). The Guide includes information about NCTE and IRA standards:

Listed below are the standards recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association which apply to the *LAL* program. Students will:

- apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts.
- adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language for a variety of audiences and purposes.
- employ a wide range of writing strategies.
- apply knowledge of language structure, conventions.
- participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes.

The Guide also provides a four-part lesson plan unit with reproducible activity sheets for all competition levels:

- Lesson 1: Focus. Introduces readers to the concept that books can change lives
- Lesson 2: Inquiry. Provides activities to help readers explore the unique relationship between themselves, an author, and a book.
- Lesson 3: Application. Provides writing tips to help readers shape their letters.
- Lesson 4: Assessment. Provides a checklist for editing and rewriting their letters.

Sample Integrated Learning Scenario for Grades 4-12

The Letters About Literature Program at the Massachusetts Center for the Book

Learning Standards Taught and Assessed:	<p><i>Language Strand</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2: Students will pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge. <p><i>Reading and Literature Strand:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8: Students will identify the basic facts and main ideas in a text and use them as the basis for interpretation.• 11: Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of theme in a literary work and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.• 15: Students will identify and analyze how an author’s words appeal to the senses, create imagery, suggest mood, and set tone, and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. <p><i>Composition Strand:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 19: Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail.• 20: Students will write for different audiences and purposes.• 21: Students will demonstrate improvement in organization, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, and word choice (diction) in their compositions after revising them.• 22: Students will use knowledge of standard English conventions in their writing, revising, and editing.• 23: Students will organize ideas in writing in a way that makes sense for their purpose.
Introduction:	The teacher and students review <i>LAL</i> guidelines together. The class discusses how books can change someone’s life. (Standard 2). Individual students consider books they have read and identify a text that has had a significant impact on them, one that has affected the way they view themselves or the world (Standards 8, 11, 15). Students are encouraged to use their school or public library as an aid in selecting a book.
Practice/Assessment:	Students write a draft of a letter to the author of the book they chose, describing the effect the book and the author’s words had on them and keeping the intended audiences of the author and the <i>LAL</i> program in mind. (Standards 19, 20, 23). Students edit and revise their work as needed for organization, detail, word choice, and standard English conventions (Standards 21, 22).

Culminating Performance and Evaluation:	Students submit their letters to the teacher for evaluation, and the teacher submits the letters to the Massachusetts Center for the Book's <i>Letters About Literature</i> program before the December deadline.
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[Note: This scenario employs General Standards from the *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework*. Specific Learning Standards for each grade level would apply.]