

Reading and Writing Letters to the Future

Concept:

Sometimes people use pen and paper to send a message from their time to the future. They write down what they think people who came after them will want to know about their era. They try to imagine how people of the future will judge them. They make predictions about how the world will change in the decades and centuries to come. Reading letters to the future shows both how logical and how completely unpredictable the future can prove to be.

People also leave messages for the future that they don't mean to leave. People write letters or keep diaries all the time. They usually don't mean for this information to become public. However, letters and diaries can be an invaluable source for historians. They can provide a historian with information on a specific individual and his or her family and friends. They also tell us about the culture of the writer's time and the writer's world. They not only allow historians to document events and change, but they also show us how events affected individuals. Keep in mind that letters and diaries can be biased, though!

Activity # 1: Letters to the Future

Procedure:

1. The following list of predictions for the year 2000 appeared in the December, 1900 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. The language will be difficult to your students to understand, but they could easily be summarized in more grade-appropriate language. You may want to read them to your students as they appeared in *The Ladies' Home Journal* and then summarize or just provide a summary:

Five Hundred Million People. There will probably be from 350,000,000 to 500,000,000 people in America and its possessions by the lapse of another century. Nicaragua will ask for admission to our Union after the completion of the great canal. Mexico will be next. Europe, seeking more territory to the south of us, will cause many of the South and Central American republics to be voted into the Union by their own people.

The American will be Taller by from one to two inches. His increase of stature will result from better health, due to vast reforms in medicine, sanitation, food and athletics. He will live fifty years instead of thirty-five as at present – for he will reside in the suburbs. The city house will practically be no more. Buildings in blocks will be illegal. The trip from suburban home to office will require a few minutes only. A penny will pay the fare.

There will be No C, X or Q in our every-day alphabet. They will be abandoned because unnecessary. Spelling by sound will have been adopted, first by the newspapers. English

will be a language of condensed words expressing condensed ideas, and will be more extensively spoken than any other. Russian will rank second.

Hot and Cold Air from Spigots. Hot or cold air will be turned on from spigots to regulate the temperature of a house as we now turn on hot or cold water from spigots to regulate the temperature of the bath. Central plants will supply this cool air and heat to city houses in the same way as our gas and electricity is now furnished. Rising early to build the furnace fire will be a task of the olden times. Homes will have no chimneys, because no smoke will be created within their walls.

Ready-Cooked Meals will be bought from establishments similar to our bakeries of to-day. They will purchase materials in tremendous quantities and sell the cooked foods at a price much lower than the cost of individual cooking. Food will be served hot or cold to private houses in pneumatic tubes or automobile wagons. The meal being over, the dishes used will be packed and returned to the cooking establishments where they will be washed. Such wholesale cookery will be done in electric laboratories rather than in kitchens. These laboratories will be equipped with electric stoves, and all sorts of electric devices, such as coffee-grinders, egg beaters, stirrers, shakers, parers, meat-choppers, meta-saws, potato-mashers, lemon-squeezers, dish-washers, dish-dryers and the like. All such utensils will be washed in chemicals fatal to disease microbes. Having one's own cook and purchasing one's own food will be an extravagance.

Photographs will be Telegraphed from any distance. If there be a battle in China a hundred years hence snapshots of its most striking events will be published in the newspaper an hour later. Even to-day photographs are being telegraphed over short distances. Photographs will reproduce all of Nature's colors.

There will be Air-Ships, but they will not successfully compete with surface cars and water vessels for passenger or freight traffic. They will be maintained as deadly war-vessels by all military nations. Some will transport men and goods. Others will be used by scientists making observations at great heights above the earth.

Mann will See Around the World. Persons and things of all kinds will be brought within focus of cameras connected electrically with screens at opposite ends of circuits, thousands of miles at a span. American audiences in their theatres will view upon huge curtains before them the coronations of kings in Europe or the progress of battles in the Orient. The instrument bringing these distant scenes to the very doors of people will be connected with a giant telephone apparatus transmitting each incidental sound in its appropriate place. Thus the guns of a distant battle will be heard to boom when seen to blaze, and thus the lips of a remote actor or singer will be heard to utter words or music when seen to move.

Telephones Around the World. Wireless telephones and telegraph circuits will span the world. A husband in the middle of the Atlantic will be able to converse with his wife sitting in her boudoir in Chicago. We will be able to telephone to China quite as readily

as we now talk from New York to Brooklyn. By an automatic signal they will connect with any circuit in their locality without the intervention of a “hello girl.”

2. Discuss the accuracy of these predictions. Have they all come true? Were the predictors at least partially right? About what things were they wrong? Explain that predictions are just one part of a message to the future. Students should also remember that letters to the future can include information that the writer thinks that people of the future will want to know about the present. The writer of a letter to the future may also imagine how people of the future will judge the people of today. For example, are there things about our civilization that we could be doing or making better – working harder for peace? Cleaning up the environment? Trying harder to end poverty?

3. Each student will now write his or her own letter to the future. They might even choose to address the letter to their future self and specify that it be opened in twenty years. In the letter, they can predict:

- What type of job they will have
- Where they will be living
- Whether or not they will be married
- How many kids they will have
- What type of hobbies they will have, etc.

Activity # 2: Letters from the Past

Ask a grandparent or older family friend if they have any letters or diaries they have saved and would be willing to share with you. What can you learn about the past from these documents? Share what you learn with the rest of the class.