

Postcard Stories

Writing Letter-Based Fiction

Tools		
<i>Kit software:</i> Inspiration; mPOWER	<i>Other:</i> Computers; the Internet; AppleWorks; iCards; email accounts (such as Apple's iTools email)	<i>Optional:</i> A scanner; ABC-CLIO's American History Online; EdView; Talking Walls; The Writing Trek; TimeLiner; World Book Encyclopedia

Project Duration

Five to six class sessions over two or more weeks

Introduction

Fiction writers often adopt narrative personas (or masks) that give the events of a story an emotional impact. One of the classic ways of creating narrative personas is to let a story unfold solely through the letters between two characters, with each character writing half the story. How can writing from within a narrative persona advance students' storytelling and prose skills? What can they discover, in this process, about narrative structure and the conventions of fiction writing?

Project Overview

In this project, students work in pairs to write short stories that are told through a series of iCards, or Internet "postcards." Each pair begins by defining the parameters of its story (who, what, where, when, and why) and creating a chronology of events. Each student in the pair then takes on the role of one of the characters, and the two write the story by sending iCards to each other. After all the stories have been written, they are set up as mPOWER presentations on computers for the class to view and comment on.

Phase 1: Exploring letters in fiction

Introduce the epistolary (or "letter-based") form of fiction by inviting students to read aloud selections from different examples, such as the visual novel *Griffin & Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*, the epistolary plays *Dear Liar* or *Love Letters*, or the classic novels *Pamela* (1740) or *Clarissa* (1748), by Samuel Richardson. Lead the class in discussion of the selections.

Phase 2: Tracing the arc of the story

Working in pairs, students brainstorm ideas for stories that focus on the lives of two interconnected characters who tell their story by writing postcards to each other. Pairs establish provisional answers to the basic questions: Who are the two main characters who write to each other? What is happening to them? Where are they? When does the story take place? Why are they apart and writing postcards to each other?

Next, each pair uses Inspiration to map the entire story from beginning to end, listing each key point.

Phase 3: Writing the story in pairs

Each writing pair reviews its story map and selects 8 to 12 key points to use to tell the story. Then each student in the pair takes on the role of one of the main characters, and together they decide which key points in the story each character will narrate.

Pairs begin writing their stories by starting their iCard correspondence. They work directly on the iCards templates, sending them back and forth to each other's email addresses as they are completed, as they would in a real correspondence. For guidance in writing each iCard, students draw on the story parameters and the story map created in Phase 2.

Phase 4: Sharing the stories

Each corresponding pair of students brings its story to a close. Then they convert their set of iCards into an mPOWER presentation so that their "epistolary" story can be shared with other students. They place each iCard on an mPOWER slide, save the mPOWER presentation, and make it available for other students to view.

Students rotate among the computers on which the postcard story presentations are set up, viewing each set of postcards and leaving comments for the authors in an AppleWorks word-processing document set up for this purpose.

After pairs have had a chance to review the comments they receive, convene a class discussion about the experience of writing fiction in postcard form, touching on what students learned about storytelling, narrative, and economical writing.

Technical and Facilitation Tips

Facilitation Tips: Phase 1

- The word *epistolary* signals that the form is based on the idea of an epistle, or letter, from one party to another.
- In epistolary sources, such as *Dear Liar* or *Griffin & Sabine*, students can take turns reading different letters. How do the postcard images relate to the text of the postcards?
- You can also read excerpts from the letters or diaries published by various historical figures, such as those of Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower.

- After the selections are read in class, questions such as the following can spur class discussions: How do the letters convey the relationships between characters? How do the letters convey what happens in the story? How does the interplay between what is told and what is *not* told affect the impact of the selection?
- See the Background Information section and the Resources section for additional information about Samuel Richardson and his great epistolary novels, *Clarissa* and *Pamela*.
- Phase 1 can be completed in one class session.

Facilitation Tips: Phase 2

- In the first part of this phase, pairs can describe the two main characters, the setting, and the context of the story in an AppleWorks word-processing document. Alternatively, they can use the Language Arts-Literary Web template in Inspiration. This template can be opened from within Inspiration by choosing Template from the File menu, selecting Language Arts—Literary Web from the list of templates, and clicking Open.
- The Inspiration story maps should begin at the earliest relevant point in the lives of the characters, and may extend to events well past the end (just as they do in the movie *Titanic*.) However, pairs should be aware that the *telling of the story* will likely focus on a shorter stretch of time.
- Their Inspiration idea maps can help students focus on the entire universe of relevant information that gives form and texture to their stories, including biographical facts such as where and when characters were born, the story’s setting, and its themes. Encourage students to continue adding to the web of information that contributes to their stories.
- This phase can occupy two class sessions.

Facilitation Tips: Phase 3

- Encourage students to choose an initial key point that is *after* the very beginning of the story, and a closing key point that is the moment when the end of the story is clear.
- Students can take advantage of the postcard format to shape their writing processes. One student writes a postcard and sends it to his or her partner, who then writes the next postcard and sends it back, until the sequence of postcards (and the story) is completed.
- In the previous phase, students used Inspiration to outline the *story*, which can be considered the entire sequence of relevant events. In this phase, they will begin determining how to present these events as a *narrative*, or artful telling. (One story can lead to many narratives. A well-known example of this is the four books of the Gospel.) The narrative may begin well after the first events. Narrators can refer to past events to “fill in” the reader on what has happened. However the narrators, because they are characters that are passionately involved in the events of the story, may twist events, or try to “spin” them in their communication.
- The postcard form can help young writers learn about narrative. Space is limited on an iCard, so messages, feelings, and even events may be *implied* in a few well-chosen words rather than described in detail. Writers need to think in terms of *what can be left out* of the telling.

- iCard templates feature a wide range of images. Students should try to choose images that have some bearing on the story, the place from which the iCard is being sent (in the story, not actually!), or the thoughts expressed on the iCard. If students feel restricted by the available templates, they can create their own, using images of places or natural wonders, or even cartoons (see the Tech Tips for Phase 3).
- In general, the epistolary form will help pairs of writers achieve results and understanding, because each writer can adopt one persona and be responsible for half the story. Differences in writing style between students will help the natural “voices” of the writers contribute to the characterizations of each of the narrators.
- Writing pairs must save the iCards they send to each other for use in Phase 4 (how they do this will depend on the nature of their email accounts and the computers they use). When an iCard is received, it should be saved with a unique and descriptive filename so that students will know its place in the story later on. To begin Phase 4, each writing pair will need to have the full set of its iCards saved in a single folder accessible from one computer.
- You can shape this phase to fit your needs and resources. If all students can access their email outside of class (at home or in a media center or computer lab), much of this phase can take place outside of class over a period of weeks (each student in a pair could, for example, send one iCard to his or her partner each day).

Tech Tips: Phase 3

- If students do not currently have individual email accounts, they can get one free through Apple’s iTools. The Step-by-Step Card “Setting Up an iTools Account” provides the necessary information.
- To write and send an iCard, a student needs a computer with Mac OS 9 or later, an Internet connection, and an Internet browser, such as Netscape Navigator. An iCard can be sent by following these steps:
 - 1 On Apple’s main Web page (www.apple.com) click the iCards tab.
 - 2 Click a card category, then select an image.
 - 3 Type a message in the message box.
 - 4 Select a font, then click Continue to preview the card.
 - 5 To correct problems or make changes, click Edit Card. When the changes have been made, click Continue.
 - 6 Type your name and email address.
 - 7 Type the email address of the recipient.
 - 8 Click Send Your Card.
- If they want, students can also create custom iCards, using images that they create in AppleWorks, copy from any of the software CDs, download from the Internet, or draw by hand and then scan. To find images for their custom iCards on the Internet, students can use EdView or another search engine (see the Step-by-Step Cards “Searching the Internet With EdView” and “Finding Clip Art and Photographs on the Web”). To create custom iCards, students will need an iTools account, which is free and can be shared (see the Step-by-Step Card “Setting Up an iTools Account”).

- Once you have an iTools account and a digital image, you can create a custom iCard by following these steps:
 - 1 On Apple's main Web page (www.apple.com) click the iTools tab.
 - 2 Sign in by typing your member name and password. Click Submit.
 - 3 On the main iTools page, click iDisk on the bar below the iTools tab.
 - 4 Click Open My iDisk. An iDisk icon appears on your desktop.
 - 5 Double-click the iDisk icon to open the iDisk window.
 - 6 Drag the image you want to use on your iCard to the Pictures folder in the iDisk window. (You can copy more than one image to the Pictures folder and use the other images for other custom iCards. Once an image is in the Pictures folder of your iDisk, you can start at step 7 to create a custom iCard using that image.)
 - 7 Click the iCards tab on Apple's main Web page or from the iTools page.
 - 8 Click Create Your Own.
 - 9 Select the image from your iDisk. Click Select This Image.
 - 10 Complete the card and send it.
- iCards allow 10 to 15 lines of text per card (depending on the card chosen), and are extremely easy to use, guiding students toward economical writing.

Facilitation Tips: Phase 4

- As students view the postcard story presentations, their comments can address the following questions, among others: How does the story make you feel? What ideas do you have about the characters in it? When does the writing give you too much information? When does it give you not enough information?
- If necessary, remind students to make their comments constructive. Students should attempt to understand and support the objectives of each story, and not impose their own ideas.
- Students can leave their comments as a journal-like entry, listing their names and the time and date at the beginning.
- With an adequate number of computers, the mPOWER presentations can be created in a single class session or less. The time needed for students to read and comment on all of the class's postcard stories will range between one and two class sessions.

Tech Tips: Phase 4

- Follow these steps to convert a set of iCards into an mPOWER presentation:
 - 1 From the mPOWER Menu, click New Presentation, give the presentation a name, and click Save.
 - 2 From the Presentation Menu, click Add New Slide.
 - 3 From the Slide Menu, click Images.
 - 4 From the Images Menu, click Add New Image. Select the source of the image (Computer), and click OK.

- 5 Navigate to the folder containing the saved iCards (which are JPEG files). Select the first iCard in the story and click Open.
 - 6 Click to open the Slide Menu and then click Done With Slide.
 - 7 Repeat steps 2-5 for each of the iCards in the story.
 - 8 To view the presentation, click Show Presentation.
 - 9 To close the presentation, click Done With Presentation.
- The completed presentations can be explored by other students from within the mPOWER application. Another option, suitable for this project, is to save each presentation as an mPOWER Player document. A Player document can viewed on a computer on which the mPOWER application is not installed; the user or viewer simply double-clicks the document's icon. Follow these steps:
 - 1 Click Output Presentation on the Presentation Menu.
 - 2 Click Player Document on the Output Presentation Menu, then click OK.
 - 3 Select the location for saving the Player document, type a name for the file, and click Save.
 - 4 Select from among the options presented on the screen, then click OK.

Outcomes

After completing this project, students will be able to

- distinguish between the events in a story and the way the story is told (story vs. narrative)
- write to create a character
- structure exposition (information about past events or conditions) in a story
- write a story in epistolary form

In addition, students will have

- increased their understanding of literature and the conventions of fiction writing
- developed their abilities to write economically
- gained confidence in their ability to tell a story and think imaginatively, and to share their work with other students
- learned skills or acquired knowledge relating to each of the state and national standards referred to in the Project Standards section

Project Standards

From the Secondary Language Arts & Social Studies Web site, you can identify select state curriculum standards and national educational technology standards that correlate to this student project. To locate these standards, go to the kit Web site and click the Curriculum button. Locate and open this student project and click the "Project Standards" button.

Assessment Suggestions

The postcard stories can be assessed using one or both of the following methods:

- Apply a rubric based on criteria such as the following: narrative structure, depth and precision of characterization, integration of text and images, management of expository information, and use of expressive and descriptive language.
- Students can peer-assess one another's stories as part of their viewing of the class's mPOWER presentations, using a set of teacher-written questions or student-created rubrics.

Preparation

- Visit the Apple Web site (www.apple.com) to experiment with an iCard.
- Visit the library or another resource to collect one or more examples of published letters or letter-based fiction.
- Ensure that each student has an individual email account (see the Tech Tips for Phase 3).

Resources

Internet

ABC-CLIO's American History Online

<http://www.americanhistory.abc-clio.com>
(Activate your subscription at www.abc-clio.com/apple/)

Apple Computer (to access iTools)

<http://www.apple.com/education/itools>

EdView

<http://edview.apple.com>

EHow to Write a Short Story

<http://www.ehow.com/eHow/eHow/0,1053,3337,FF.html>

Guide to Grammar and Writing

<http://ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

Madison Public Library

<http://www.scls.lib.wi.us/madison/booklists/epistolary.html>

Step-by-Step Cards

- Finding Clip Art and Photographs on the Web
- Getting Started With Inspiration
- Making a Presentation With mPOWER
- Publishing Your Web Pages With iTools
- Searching the Internet With EdView
- Setting Up an iTools Account

Prerequisite Skills

To complete this project successfully, students should be able to do the following:

- access the Internet and use email
- create and modify a concept map using Inspiration (see the Step-by-Step Card “Getting Started With Inspiration”)
- use mPOWER to create a simple presentation (see the Step-by-Step Card “Making a Presentation With mPOWER”)

Background Information

Here is some information you may find useful as you plan how to implement this project or introduce it to your students:

- One of the advantages of the epistolary form in fiction writing is that it guides the writer and reader in constructing a story from the characters’ necessarily limited perspectives.
- One of the earliest epistolary (or letter-based) novels was *Pamela*, written by Samuel Richardson in 1740, and considered by some to be the first modern novel. Richardson followed this work with *Clarissa*, considered by many to be his masterpiece. In Richardson’s hands, the epistolary form shifted literary narrative away from the telling of sequences of events (as in that masterpiece of 125 years before, *Don Quixote*) to focus on the inner life of his narrators and other characters. This change corresponded to changes in the tastes of literate audiences in England, who became interested in “sentimental” art in all its forms, art that wrung all the tempestuous passion possible out of the lives of essentially ordinary, often middle class, women and men.
- The possibilities that Richardson uncovered in letter-based fiction were quickly taken to extremes. In *Tristram Shandy* (written in the 1750s), Laurence Sterne created a narrator whose goal was to record his entire life. Unfortunately, Tristram Shandy found that writing required a great deal of time, almost as much as living; he required pages and pages just to describe his first three weeks of life! By the end, Sterne’s poor narrator gives in to expedience, and covers pages with ink or asterisks or other designs to communicate as swiftly and as much as possible. (You may want to share a copy of *Tristram Shandy* with your class as an example of one of the first “graphical novels,” and as an inspiration for their iCard stories.)

- Other epistolary novels that may be appropriate include *The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*, by C.S. Lewis (1942), and *The Rites of Passage* (1980), by William Golding.
- *Dear Liar: A Biography in Two Acts*, by Jerome Kilty, uses the correspondence of the playwright, George Bernard Shaw, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, to reveal Shaw's famous wit, humanity, and quirkiness.
- *Griffin & Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* was written and illustrated by Neil Bantock in 1991, and features the brief and cryptic correspondence of the two characters, along with the author's extravagant postcard illustrations.

Options and Extension Activities

Options

- The Story Place in The Writing Trek features a Concepts section that provides a great deal of information about the process of fiction writing, such as plot, characters, themes, and setting. Students can explore this section of the software in their writing pairs prior to making final decisions about the parameters of their own stories in Phase 2.
- Students can review one or more stories with which they are familiar to learn about exposition in fiction writing. They will find that early in a story, writers tend to provide their readers with answers to three of the basic questions (who? where? when?). As the story proceeds, additional details will emerge, of course, but by the end the story focuses on the most important questions: what? and why?
- This project can be completed by pairing each student in the class with an Internet penpal in a partner classroom anywhere in the world. To find another teacher with whom to collaborate, visit the Apple Learning Interchange site (www.ali.com), go to the Forums area (click Collaborate on the ALI main page) and add a message to the Language Arts Round Table forum. You can also visit the Global Schoolhouse site (www.gsn.org) and post a message on one of the discussion boards in the Communication Tools section. Or, go to the Forum in the Communications section of the Apple Learning Series Secondary Language Arts & Social Studies Web site (sign in at www.apple.com/learningseries) and post a message saying that you are seeking a partner classroom for this project.
- In addition to using Inspiration, students can use TimeLiner to map the sequence of key events in their stories. If stories are based on real historical characters or historical events (see the option below), a timeline can display the events of the story against an overlay of relevant historical events.

- Stories can be based on real historical figures at a specific time in their lives when they might have plausibly corresponded with a confidante or other public figure. For example, a pair could imagine the correspondence that might have occurred between Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein as Oppenheimer worked on the first hydrogen bomb. Another option is for students to set their stories at a particular time in history, and to have historical events play some part in the story. For both of these options, students can find relevant background information in American History Online, World Book Encyclopedia, or Talking Walls, or by searching the Internet with EdView. These sources can help students find specific historical contexts or specific environments for their stories.
- Groups' mPOWER presentations in Phase 4 can be exported easily as HTML files and then posted (individually or as a set) to the Internet. From the Presentation Menu in mPOWER, click Output Presentation, click "Export to HTML," name the file and choose where to save it, and then click Save. These files can be published on the Internet using an iTools account (see the Step-by-Step Cards "Setting Up an iTools Account" and "Publishing Your Web Pages With iTools").
- If your computers do not have Mac OS 9 or Internet connections, you can complete this project without using iCards by having pairs write short letters to each other in AppleWorks (they can also use the Postcard template in AppleWorks to make custom printed postcards to "send" to each other).

Extension Activities

- Good writing starts with good reading. Students can advance their understanding of the epistolary form (and its close cousin, the diaristic form) by reading stories, novels, and other works (see the Resources section).
- After mastering their iCard stories, students can move on to the creation of Internet-based hypertext fiction, stories in which the reader has a choice of pathways along which to navigate.

The Home-School Connection

- During Phase 1, students can bring to class postcards received by their families, as well as old letters received by their grandparents or great grandparents, if these are available. The appearance of these letters, and their importance as communication, can be discussed.
- Invite family members to view students' postcard stories, in the form of the mPOWER presentations created in Phase 4. During a family night event, for example, the presentations could be set up on computers for family members to browse through.

This Project as a Model

In this project, students use Inspiration to outline a work of fiction and then use mPOWER as a way of "telling" the story to others in a multimedia format. These applications can serve the same roles in any project that involves writing a creative work with a strong narrative basis. For example, a short story could be outlined in Inspiration, then written, part by part, on mPOWER slides that include images and sound, and finally presented to others as a multimedia experience.