

Social and Emotional Learning

Lesson Title: Advice Column, Part 1

Grade Level: Middle School

Project and Purpose

Students analyze advice column letters and advice responses as basis for writing their own letters. They will then select a letter that is not their own and write an advice response.

Essential Question

What is the benefit of writing an anonymous letter to a columnist for advice? Explain your answer.

Note: This is part 1 of a two-part lesson. Students should be familiar with letter writing.

Materials

- Copies or slides of advice column examples (provided)
- 2-3 Large chart papers with title "Letter Topics" posted in different areas of the room
- Post-it notes and writing tools
- Paper or computers with writing programs and access to printers
- Envelopes

Teacher

1. Ask students if they have ever read or heard about advice columns. Explain that historically, advice columns were found in newspapers. People would write in with their problems and the columnist would do some research and respond. The most famous advice columnists have been Abigail Van Buren of "Dear Abby," Ann Landers of "Dear Ann Landers," Judith Martin of "Miss Manners," and George W. Crane of "The Worry Clinic." In England, newspapers had "agony columns," and people would write to "Agony Aunts" or "Agony Uncles" about their personal despair or love loss. Now advice columns appear on the Internet and are targeted to specific groups, including young people.
2. Show the examples of Dear Abby and Dr. Web and ask students to make observations about what the letters and responses have in common.
 - a. Students should notice that the letters usually:
 - Identify the writer's age and sometimes gender
 - Identify the problem
 - Usually use a pseudonym for the person who is causing the problem or just refer to them as "a boy" or "a girl;" they never use real names
 - Tell a brief story to illustrate the problem
 - Ask for specific advice
 - Use a signature that is either anonymous or just a first name and an age; sometimes the problem that is being expressed is used to create anonymous and/or clever signatures

b. Students should notice the advice letters usually:

- Restate the problem
- Offer a personal connection
- Analyze the problem, including identifying what is going right and what is going wrong with the situation the writer described
- Give some research or context to the problem
- Offer one or two pieces of positive advice

- 3.** Ask students to think about problems or challenges or issues that kids their age have every day. Give or ask for several examples. These might include: dealing with people who are mean, wanting a boyfriend/girlfriend, wanting to break up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, too much homework, not understanding schoolwork, etc.
- 4.** Distribute 2-3 Post-it notes to each student and tell them to write one problem with a few details on it, but not to use specific names. In other words, if they want to talk about the person who constantly teases them in the lunchroom, then write, "This one person always teases me in the lunchroom by calling me Four-eyes." If they want to talk about a specific boy/girlfriend, then write "There is a boy/ girl who likes my boy/girlfriend and always flirts with them when I'm there." These will be the basis for a full letter to an advice column, but they don't have to write the entire letter on the Post-it, only the kernel of the problem. If students struggle with writing anything personal, ask them to write about an issue they have observed in the school, their neighborhood, or in their community that concerns them. This process should take no longer than five minutes.
- 5.** Have students post their concerns Post-it notes on the Letter Topic charts and read the notes aloud OR have students peruse the charts in small groups.
- 6.** Ask students to select one of the Post-it notes that is not their own from the chart. They will "flush out" the ideas and write a "Dear..." letter to an advice columnist that follows the format of the examples.
- 7.** Have students write the letter and collect them for the next session.

Conclusion

Ask students to discuss: What is the benefit of writing an anonymous letter to a columnist for advice?

Notes

Advice Column Examples

Example from Dear Abby

Dear Abby,

I'm a 12-year-old girl. My friend "Bailey" and I both like the same boy but didn't want him to come between us. We made a pact that we wouldn't ask him out.

Bailey can be selfish, and I know she'd say yes if he asked her. When I told her my friendship with her meant more to me than the boy, she laughed and said that meant she'd get him. I'm not sure what to do. I have liked him longer than she has, and I think he likes me back. He knows me much better at least.

If he asks me, should I say yes and risk my friend getting hurt, even though I know she'd say yes in my place?

— A Reader in Missouri

Dear Reader in Missouri,

When you told Bailey your friendship with her meant more than the boy, her response showed that your friendship is less important to her than he is, and the pact means nothing to her. If the boy likes you, he will probably ask you out to do something. If he does — and your parents agree — you should accept. I say this because I don't think Bailey is a true friend at all.

— Abby

Examples from Dr. Web Example #1

Hi. I am extremely shy and extremely quiet. Every one will be in their groups talking and I will be there by myself and it sucks. I wanna be more outgoing but the thing about me is that if I don't have anything meaningful to say, then don't expect me to say anything at all. I don't wanna change who I am, but I wanna make more friends and get closer to students in my class. Can you tell me how to?

— Jay, 13

Dear Jay,

As someone who used to be a shy introvert myself, I completely understand where you are coming from. You don't have to change who you are to make more friends, but you do have to show others that you want to get to know them better. Ask questions since most people like those who demonstrate an interest in them. And express your opinion when a topic comes up that's of interest to you. During a group project, maybe you could discuss a topic you know well or have figured out a way to help the group—something that will be appreciated. I also recommend asking a parent to put you in a social skills group for teens, a safe environment for practicing these skills and meeting other kids going through similar struggles.

— Kim

Examples from Dr. Web Example #2

My school was in the news recently. It had to with school safety, but now people in my school are saying that now our school is going to get attacked. At first I didn't care. Then I found out some people had not come to school that day because of it. That made me a little scared. Now I am a little worried. My parents tell me everything is fine. I am still worried. When I try to talk to people about it for reassurance they always say it is true. I really just don't know what to think. Any advice?

— Smile, 11

Dear Smile,

I understand your fear since, in recent years, there have been many attacks in school buildings. And with so much news coverage, it's easy to become convinced that your school will be next. However, school is generally a very safe place, and whatever led to your school being written about in the news, the situation most likely has already been taken care of. Your parents are right to reassure you that "everything is fine." But sometimes, taking action is a way to reduce anxiety. You might get together with other students, and perhaps a group of parents and teachers, to discuss additional safety measures that can be taken at your school, and become part of the solution.

— Dr. M.