

A Guide to the Activity: Gratitude Letter

Learning to express gratitude is a gateway to a more positive attitude and overall happiness. Dr. Martin Seligman, founder of Positive Psychology — a movement based on countering the traditional “disease model” of psychology, which focuses on how to relieve suffering rather than how to improve well-being — has dedicated his life’s work to the question of what causes happiness. He and others have empirically proven the link between expressions of gratitude and happiness.

Though to a cynical eye, this letter-writing exercise might appear old-fashioned or overly self-help-y, it is based on decades of research and brings to life some of modern psychology’s most important findings.

Seligman and his colleagues investigated a gratitude exercise completed over the course of one week. People from all walks of life logged on to the researchers’ website and received instructions there. Participants had one week to write and then hand-deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially helpful to them but whom they had never properly thanked. In other conditions, participants received alternative self-guided happiness exercises. Those participants who did gratitude letters showed the largest boosts in the entire study — that is, they were much happier and less depressed — and these boosts were maintained one week after the letter and even one month later.¹

Even if your students choose to write the letter but not deliver it, this activity can still have an impact. A recent study from the Gratefulness.org laboratory found that “simply writing a gratitude letter and not sending or otherwise delivering it was enough to produce substantial boosts in happiness.”

These findings reveal just how powerful it can be to express your gratitude directly to an important person in your life. It’s an activity you can assign your students on a regular basis, perhaps mixing gratitude letters (directed at the same or different individuals) with keeping a weekly gratitude journal.

Objectives of the Gratitude Letter Activity

- **Happiness objective:** Seligman has shown that this activity increases student-motivated optimism, improves academic performance, and can also reduce stress and improve one’s overall sense of well-being.
- **Writing objective:** common core encourages real-life writing, such as letters. Use this opportunity to teach students about the structure of a 3-paragraph, roughly 300-word letter. This will help them understand the differences between traditional letters and the emails and text messages with which they may be more familiar, in preparation for writing cover letters for job applications or other more formal, professional communications.
- **School culture objective:** students who spend time being grateful are nicer to be around. This activity has been shown to increase happiness significantly. Your students will enjoy themselves — and school — more.

Your feedback on this activity will help us improve it and reach more classrooms. Please tell us how it goes with your students by emailing EduGuide@EduGuide.org, and we will send you additional free offline activities like this one.

¹ Seligman, Martin E. *Flourish*. Simon & Schuster Free Press, 2011.