

Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson

Description of the Interpreter Experience:

Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson were, for all practical purposes, from two completely different worlds. She was born in New England, the second daughter of a parson, and described herself as “destitute in every part of education.” Thomas Jefferson, by contrast, was the highly educated and privileged first son of a wealthy Virginia planter. Their spheres should never have brought them together in friendship, yet the extraordinary events of their lifetimes brought these two highly intelligent individuals into a lasting correspondence and intellectual exchange. Through their letters, they engaged in a remarkable dialogue that provides a unique window into the differing roles, expectations, and opportunities for men and women in the 18th century, the emerging and often opposing political philosophies shaping the new nation, and the importance of maintaining civil and respectful discourse despite deeply divergent experiences and beliefs.

Before You Go: Background Knowledge Through Scripting Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 7th Grade- 8th Grade

Subject Area(s): Civics and U.S. History

Time Length: 1 class period (45–60 minutes)

OBJECTIVES:

Students will analyze differing perspectives on liberty and practice civil discourse by engaging in a structured written exchange modeled after historical correspondence.

- ★ **Objective 1:** Student will explore multiple interpretations of liberty.
- ★ **Objective 2:** Students will engage in respectful, evidence-based disagreement.
- ★ **Objective 3:** Students will use historical context and quotes to support ideas.

STANDARDS:

- ★ **SS.7.CG.1.2** – Trace the principles underlying America's founding ideas on law and government.
- ★ **SS.7.CG.2.1** – Define the term “citizen,” and explain the constitutional means of becoming a U.S. citizen.
- ★ **SS.7.CG.2.2** – Evaluate the roles, rights, and responsibilities of U.S. citizens, and determine methods of active participation in society, government, and the political system.
- ★ **SS.8.CG.1.1** – Analyze the principles and ideas in foundational documents (such as the Declaration of Independence) including natural rights, equality, and liberty.
- ★ **SS.8.CG.2.1** – Identify the constitutional provisions for establishing citizenship.
- ★ **SS.8.CG.2.2** – Compare the legal obligations of citizens at the local, state and national levels.
- ★ **SS.8.CG.2.3** – Analyze the role civic virtue in the lives of citizens and leaders from the colonial period through Reconstruction.

- ★ **SS.8.CG.3.1** – Trace the foundational ideals and principles related to the U.S. government expressed in primary sources from the colonial period to reconstruction.

MATERIALS:

- ★ **Student Handout:** [Civil Discourse & Liberty Letter Exchange Activity](#)
- ★ **Selected Quotes** on liberty (included in handout)
- ★ **Writing Paper** or devices

BELL RINGER/HOOK:

Ask students: “What does liberty mean to you?” Have students do a quick write and share responses with a partner. The purpose of this activity is to activate thinking and introduce the idea that liberty is complex and often debated.

ACTIVITIES- CIVIL DISCOURSE & LIBERTY: LETTER EXCHANGE ACTIVITY

Objective:

Students will explore different perspectives on liberty by engaging in a structured, respectful written exchange modeled after historical correspondence.

Background:

In the early years of the United States, leaders often debated important ideas through letters. These exchanges allowed them to ask questions, challenge each other’s thinking, and build mutual understanding—even when they disagreed.

In this activity, you will take on the roles of two historical figures and write a series of letters debating the meaning of liberty.

Student Task:

Working with a partner (or small group), you will write **three short letters** in response to one of the scenarios below.

Letter Structure:

Letter 1:

- ★ One writer asks a thoughtful, open-ended question about what “liberty” means
- ★ The tone should be respectful and curious

Letter 2:

- ★ The second writer responds directly to the question
- ★ Include reasoning and at least one idea from the provided quotes

Letter 3:

- ★ The first writer replies
- ★ Acknowledge the other person's point of view
- ★ Offer a respectful disagreement or refinement of the idea
- ★ End on a note of mutual respect

Scenarios (Choose ONE):

Scenario 1: Liberty for Women- One writer questions why the promises of liberty do not fully include women, especially when it comes to education and legal rights.

Scenario 2: Liberty and Slavery- One writer questions how a nation founded on liberty can allow slavery to continue and the contradiction between America's fight for liberty from Britain and the continued existence of slavery in the southern states (and on Jefferson's own plantations).

Scenario 3: Liberty and Power of Government- Writers debate whether a stronger central government is necessary to protect liberty or whether too much federal power actually threatens individual and state liberty.

Use of Evidence: You must include **at least one quote** from the list below in your letters. You may paraphrase or quote directly.

Quotes on Liberty:

"Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

Abigail Adams to John Adams (March 31, 1776)

(This appears in Abigail Adams's letter urging greater consideration of women's rights during the founding of the nation.)

"All men are created equal."

Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence (1776)

(From the opening principles of the Declaration of Independence.)

"The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground."

Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington (May 27, 1788)

(Jefferson reflecting on the tension between liberty and governmental power.)

"Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must undergo the fatigue of supporting it."

Thomas Jefferson (reflective writing, late 18th century correspondence and political philosophy)

WRITING EXPECTATION:

- ★ Use a respectful and thoughtful tone.
- ★ Write in complete sentences.
- ★ Try to use formal or historical-style language.
- ★ Clearly respond to your partner's ideas.
- ★ Reference historical ideas or events.

Optional Challenge: Use period-style phrases from examples provided or be creative and make your own.

Examples:

- ★ "I remain, your humble servant..."
- ★ "I have the honor to address you..."
- ★ "My dear Sir/Madam,"
- ★ "Permit me to bring to your kind attention..."
- ★ "Kindly grant my humble writings a little space..."
- ★ "Respected Sir,"
- ★ "I have the honor to remain, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant."
- ★ "I remain, my dear Sir, yours faithfully."
- ★ "Yours with esteem."
- ★ "Sincerely and entirely yours."
- ★ "Your obliged and affectionate friend."
- ★ "Ever yours."
- ★ "Believe me always your affectionate father."

SUCCESS CRITERIA:

- ★ Asks and responds to meaningful questions about liberty
- ★ Uses evidence (quotes or ideas) to support thinking
- ★ Demonstrates respectful disagreement
- ★ Shows understanding of multiple perspectives
- ★ Uses clear and effective writing

QUICK REFLECTION (EXIT TICKET):

In 2–3 sentences, answer:

Did your thoughts about liberty change after this activity? Why or why not?

ASSESSMENT:

Formative Assessment:

- ★ Participation in discussion
- ★ Completion of 3 letters
- ★ Use of evidence and reasoning

Success Indicators:

- ★ Students ask meaningful questions
- ★ Students respond directly and thoughtfully
- ★ Students demonstrate respectful disagreement
- ★ Students use quotes or historical ideas

DIFFERENTIATION:



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Support:

- ★ Provide sentence starters:
 - “I respectfully ask...”
 - “I understand your point; however...”
- ★ Allow verbal brainstorming before writing.

Extension:

- ★ Require use of two quotes
- ★ Encourage period-style language
- ★ Ask students to reference historical events

OPTIONAL EXTENSION (IF TIME ALLOWS OR NEXT DAY):

- ★ Turn letters into a short discussion or debate.
- ★ Have students revise letters for clarity and argument strength.
- ★ Connect themes to modern-day issues of liberty and rights

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Liberty is not a single, simple idea—it has been debated, challenged, and redefined throughout history. Practicing civil discourse helps us better understand differing perspectives while maintaining respect.