



From George to Martha: Writing a Sonnet Using Primary Sources

Intended Grade Level: High School

Lesson Purpose: Only two letters from George Washington to his wife are known to exist. Martha Washington destroyed her personal letters from Washington after his death. From these two surviving letters, historians have long tried to analyze the relationship between the two. In this assignment, students will perform their own analyses by reading the letters and writing an original English sonnet – a poetic form often used to convey themes of love, romance, and relationships.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will analyze George Washington's letters to his wife and make inferences about his feelings for her.
- Students will compose a research-based poem to Martha Washington from her husband utilizing the characteristics of an English, or Shakespearean, sonnet.

National Standards:

NL-ENG.K-12.2 Understanding the Human Experience

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

NL-ENG.K-12.3 Evaluation Strategies

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

NL-ENG.K-12.6 Applying Knowledge

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

Materials:

- Transcriptions of the two surviving letters from George Washington to Martha Washington, June 18 & 23, 1775, available online through the University of



Virginia's Alderman Library:

<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/revolution/martha.html>

Timeframe: Approximately two class sessions

Procedures:

1. Distribute to students the two remaining letters from George Washington to Martha Washington. Provide background by explaining that, in order to protect their privacy, Martha Washington burned all the letters from her husband after his death – a practice that would not have been particularly unusual at the time. However, two surviving letters were later found in a desk that Martha Washington had given to a granddaughter.

Historians have examined these letters for evidence about the Washington's relationship. Other surviving records indicate that they had a long and apparently mutually beneficial marriage and that Washington was caring and responsible toward the stepchildren and step-grandchildren he and Martha raised together. (They had no children of their own; Martha Washington was previously married and widowed and had two surviving children.) However, not much documentation exists to shed light on the personal interaction or feelings between this intriguing and notable couple. Therefore, these letters are of special interest.

2. Have students read the letters aloud. Discuss and interpret them as a class; challenging students to paraphrase excerpts in their own words.

3. In pairs or small groups, students will make lists of words and phrases found in the letters describing Washington's feelings for his wife. They will also paraphrase these excerpts in their own words, recording their work.

4. Rejoining as a class, students will share and discuss the descriptive words and phrases they located and the synonyms they generated.

5. Next, guide students in a review of the characteristics of English or Shakespearean sonnets. These rhyming poems follow a pattern of fourteen iambic pentameter lines divided into three quatrains of four lines each and a final couplet of two lines. Iambic pentameter is a type of poetic meter that has five feet of two syllables each. The first



syllable in each foot is unaccented, and the second is accented: da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM. The rhyme scheme is typically as follows: abab cdcd efef gg.

A slightly different version of this poetic form first appeared in Italy in the early 13th century. Within a couple of hundred years, the form had become very popular with English writers as well, whose sonnets bore the characteristics described above. Shakespeare wrote over 150 sonnets; hence, the English sonnet is often referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet. Throughout its history, the sonnet's theme has quite often been love, romance, and relationships, making it an appropriate form through which to analyze Washington's surviving correspondence to his wife.

6. As a culminating activity, each student will author a sonnet as if it were written by Washington to his wife. In addition to representing Washington's point of view, it should also incorporate the sentiments for his wife evidenced in the letters.



*This has been adapted from a lesson by Martha Buse,
George Washington Teachers Institute 2006.*