

## Relearn and React Series



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### **Our Love is Real: Queer Love Letters in English Literature**

*(Grade 11 English)*

# About Egale Canada

Egale is Canada's national 2SLGBTQI organization. Egale works to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale achieves this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness, and legal advocacy. Our vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all other forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

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# The Egale Relearn and React Series

The Relearn and React Series is a collection of educational toolkits with video resources created to help and support grade 7-12 teachers who wish to diversify their curriculum. The series contains curriculum-friendly teaching resources and materials featuring topics supporting 2SLGBTQI representation and inclusion within the Ontario curriculum.

Each toolkit includes:

- An educational video dedicated to the subject
- A detailed teaching guide on how to tackle the topic and guide your students through their learning journey
- A list to help you connect this topic to the current teaching curriculum
- Tailorable pre-video questions and reflection prompts
- Resources to support productive and engaging post-video discussions
- Exercises on how to help students put their knowledge into practice
- Additional resources to enrich the class according to your needs

If you wish to know more about the project, visit

<https://egale.ca/RelearnAndReactSeries/>

# Learning Outcomes

With the following toolkit, your students will learn:

- How to situate texts in the love letter genre.
- To discern the dangers that the 2SLGBTQI community faced in writing love letters.
- How love language can sometimes be coded and needs to be deciphered.
- How to interact with the love letter genre firsthand.

## Connect to Curriculum: Grade 11, Reading and Literature Studies

These are ways to connect this material in the grade 11 English curriculum. Other grades can adapt this content for use in a variety of subjects.

### Reading for Meaning

- Variety of Texts
  - *Introduce students to diverse sets of correspondence.*
- Using Reading Comprehension Strategies
  - *Invite students to read texts and discuss key points and personal reactions.*
- Demonstrating Understanding of Content
  - *Discuss the purpose of the love letter in the pre-video discussion guide.*
- Making Inferences
  - *Connect personal lived experiences with source material.*
- Extending Understanding of Texts
  - *Comparison of historic texts with contemporary issues and texts.*
- Analyzing Texts
  - *Identify thematic and structural elements of the text.*

- Evaluating Texts
  - *Consider the efficacy of the text in conveying emotions on paper.*
- Critical Literacy
  - *Connect perspectives and values embedded within the text to social issues and ideas, including human rights and oppression.*

### **Understanding Form and Style**

- Text Forms
  - *The genre of the love letter.*
- Text Features
  - *The features of the love letter as a genre.*

### **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies**

- Metacognition
  - *The knowledge in practice exercise.*


## **Teaching Guide**

### **Preparation: General Guidelines**

Each *Relearn and React Series'* toolkit is centered around a topical three-minute educational video. As you prepare to deliver this activity with your students, we encourage you to review the toolkit video more than once.

*Prepare yourself scholarly and cognitively.* Take a look at the additional content and learn as much as you can about the topic from several sources. Explore perspectives beyond the heteronormative canon of past scholarship and encourage creativity.

*Know your students.* What topics might invite engagement from your students? What components of this learning experience may cause a reaction? Which topic might require a content warning before being introduced? Prepare proactively for the topic of the discussion. The values of our upbringing,



including gender norms and biases, may mean some students are uncomfortable because they have been taught to be. Share how the topic can be an invitation to explore one's own beliefs and think through them critically. Acknowledge discomfort, validate it, and find positive ways to help move past it without delegitimizing it.

*Establish a safe learning environment* before engaging with the class. These are important topics, and students may need to first build trust with each other and with you to fully engage with this content. As a teacher, you can support a safer learning environment in your classroom by avoiding judgment and bias, setting up ground rules for discussion, demonstrating comfort with the topics and issues, and showing care for every student's opinion.

More practical guidelines to help you establish a safer learning environment include:

- Examining your own assumptions about your students.
- Learning about your students and helping students learn about one another.
- Using inclusive language that can represent and be understood by all in the classroom.
- Assessing how diverse perspectives are represented in the curriculum.
- Enriching your classes by using examples and materials representing diverse backgrounds.
- Considering ways in which to encourage active participation and reflection that does not ask one learner to speak for others.
- Providing constructive and frequent feedback to students.
- Establishing clear guidelines for discussion and classroom behaviour.
- Conveying care for students.<sup>1</sup>

Attending to students' social-emotional learning and class environment will help create the conditions for productive conversation, nurture relationships across

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<sup>1</sup> Holley L. C. & Steiner S. (2005). Safe space: student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education* 49–64.



lines of difference, and facilitate models of inclusiveness. Commit to being a classroom that both respects differences of opinion as well as inclusion.

### A note on the use of the word “queer”

Reclamation is powerful. What was once a pejorative term for anyone falling outside of societal canons is now being reclaimed by some members of the 2SLGBTQI community. While umbrella acronyms may sometimes tend to presume gender and sexual identities are binary in nature, the term “queer” is a unifying term that challenges the assumed binary of sexual and gender identity. “Queer” is about non-heteronormativity, creativity, and diversity far beyond homonormative culture. Today, the term can be used to describe a personal identity, an academic field of study, or 2SLGBTQI communities as a whole. It is in the latter sense that the term is used throughout this document. This said, outside of the queer community, this word can still harken the darkest days of legal and societal discrimination in Canada and elsewhere. Its usage, even in 2SLGBTQI spaces, may trigger hurt or negative emotions for some people. As such, it should be utilized with caution and not used in reference to any individual without their consent.

## Exploring the Genre

The love letter is a unique variation of the narrative form of the letter. As a written vessel of feelings and emotions, it does not have a specific form. It greatly varies in length, material (from scented stationery to paper scraps), and content, mixing genres (prose, poetry, even screenplays) and mediums (written word, drawings, photographs, objects).

During your class, you may choose to spend time on the essentials of a letter’s form. Name the components of a love letter and share how each contributes to the letter’s purpose.

Here is a resource that speaks to crafting a love letter specifically, with its key components.

### The Atlantic - A Modern Guide to the Love Letter

[theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/a-modern-guide-to-the-love-letter/385370/](https://theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/a-modern-guide-to-the-love-letter/385370/)



## A Modern Guide to the Love Letter

In addition to traditional love letter rules, queer love letters have often been exchanged in secret, conveying in ciphers and metaphors any sentiments that could compromise the safety or reputation of either party if the letter fell into the wrong hands. It is important, in fact, to remind students that in the period when many of these letters were written, love outside the parameters of heteronormativity was forbidden by law. Therefore, being themselves and loving each other made these authors outlaws by default.

If you wish, take a moment to ask your students to reflect on the transitory nature of the law and how laws have been unjust in the past towards many. Alternatively, have them consider how societal attitudes toward public expressions of affection can shift across time and across cultures.

As a playful resource for writing in code and one example from history can be found here:

### Thieves' Cant

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thieves%27\\_cant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thieves%27_cant)

### Simple Thieves' Cant

[thievesguild.cc/cant/](https://thievesguild.cc/cant/)

## Source Material

The video clip developed for this unit harkens the written correspondence between these four couples of authors:

- Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, English writer and novelist.
- Gilbert Bradley and Gordon Bowsher, gay WWII soldiers exchanged letters.
- Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde and English poet Alfred Bosie Douglas.
- Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, American writers and activists.

Although the letter presented in the video is fictional, it was inspired by the surviving intimate correspondences and documented lived experiences of these real couples.

Examples of source material from each pair are provided below. Consider sharing these with students as the basis for group discussion.

## Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf

Excerpt from Vita Sackville-West's letter to Virginia Woolf along with corresponding portraits:

I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way. You, with all your undumb letters, would never write so elementary a phrase as that; perhaps you wouldn't even feel it. And yet I believe you'll be sensible of a little gap. But you'd

clothe it in so exquisite a phrase that it should lose a little of its reality. Whereas with me it is quite stark: I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a good deal. So this letter is really just a squeal of pain. It is incredible how essential to me you have become. I suppose you are accustomed to people saying these things. Damn you, spoilt creature; I shan't make you love me any more by giving myself away like this — But oh my dear, I can't be clever and stand-offish with you: I love you too much for that. Too truly. You have no idea how stand-offish I can be with people I don't love. I have brought it to a fine art. But you have broken down my defenses. And I don't really resent it.

Figure 1: Vita Sackville-West (left) and Virginia Woolf (right).



Source: The Marginalian - The Greatest Queer Love Letters of All Time  
[themarginalian.org/2014/02/14/greatest-queer-love-letters/](http://themarginalian.org/2014/02/14/greatest-queer-love-letters/)

## Gilbert Bradley and Gordon Bowsher

As a preview to a classroom discussion about the risks associated with writing this kind of letter, consider sharing this article about Gilbert Bradley and Gordon Bowsher: “In WWII, Two Gay Soldiers’ Forbidden Romance Lives on in Their Love Letters” - [historycollection.com/in-wwii-two-gay-soldiers-forbidden-romance-lives-on-in-their-love-letters/2/](http://historycollection.com/in-wwii-two-gay-soldiers-forbidden-romance-lives-on-in-their-love-letters/2/)

## Oscar Wilde and Sir Alfred Bosie

Letter from Oscar Wilde to Sir Alfred Bosie Douglas along with a shared portrait:

From Oscar to Bosie:

Dearest of All Boys – Your letter was delightful – red and yellow wine to me – but I am sad and out of sorts – Bosie – you must not make scenes with me – they kill me – they wreck the loveliness of life – I cannot see you, so Greek and gracious, distorted with passion; I cannot listen to your curved lips saying hideous things to me – don’t do it – you break my heart – I’d sooner be rented\* all day, than have you bitter, unjust, and horrid – horrid. I must see you soon – you are the divine thing I want – the thing of grace and genius – but but I don’t know how to do it – Shall I come to Salisbury – ? There are many difficulties – my bill here is £49 for a week! I have also got a new sitting-room over the Thames – but you, why are you not here, my dear, my wonderful boy – ? I fear I must leave; no money, no credit, and a heart of lead –  
Ever your own, Oscar

Figure 2: Oscar Wilde (left) and Sir Alfred Bosie (right)



Source: The Marginalian - The Greatest Queer Love Letters of All Time  
[themarginalian.org/2014/02/14/greatest-queer-love-letters/](http://themarginalian.org/2014/02/14/greatest-queer-love-letters/)

It is important to note that the examples provided thus far represent White queer perspectives only. In putting their love onto the page, queer individuals would have been taking significant personal risks should their words been read by anyone other than the intended, or not received kindly by the intended. These risks would have ranged from being shunned by friends and family, to being fired, arrested, tortured, or even killed.

In preparing to introduce the final correspondence (below), consider discussing with students why and how these risks would have been compounded and made more complex for queer people of colour due to systemic racism, colonialism, and many other systems of oppression.

### **Audre Lorde and Pat Parker**

Correspondence from Audre Lorde to fellow writer and activist Pat Parker.

December 6, 1985

Switzerland

Dear Pat,

I sit in this place to write you, wanting to do it in my own hand but wanting also the clear precisions of this machine that becomes like an excising filter, sharp, inexorable. I love the way colored girls always get the message—your call, after

this letter was framed and ready to jump out my eyes onto some page. Between its intent and conception after receiving yours, and the present now, has been, as I told you, difficult days for me. But I am strong and feisty and fighting all the way. Did a benefit reading with Cheryl Clarke for a new lesbian magazine the students at Hunter are starting for the University as a whole and it gave me an enormous charge to feel what such an event could mean just in terms of change and the world's story and us, etc. and looking at their wonderful young faces? I felt very blessed to be who I am and where I was and a part of it all.

Figure 3: *Pat Parker (left) and Audre Lorde (right).*



I have always loved you, Pat, and wanted for you those things you wanted deeply for yourself. Do not think me presumptuous—from the first time I met you in 1970 I knew that included your writing. I applaud your decision. I support you with my whole heart and extend myself to you in whatever way I can make this more possible for you. I hope you know by now I call your name whenever I can and will continue to do so. But you're right, you don't want to tie yourself up with so many gigs you don't have good solid time to stare at the walls and read the words stitched into the cracks between the nail holes.

[...] When I did not receive an answer to my letter last spring, I took a long and painful look at the 15 years we have known each other and decided that I had to accept the fact that we would never have the openness of friendship I always thought could be possible being the two strong Black women we are, with all our differences and samenesses. Then your card from Nairobi,<sup>80</sup> and I thought once again maybe when I'm out there next spring Pat and I will sit down once and for all and look at why we were not more available to each other all these years. I was overjoyed to get your letter and what it means in your life. There are conversations we need to have, Pat, each for her own clarity, and neither one of us has forever...<sup>2</sup>

Invite the students to consider the role of solidarity in their exchange. Compare the letter between Audre and Pat to the previous letters as they occurred in different time and place.

As a final and crucial step, highlight for students that there is still much to do in discovering new sources and finding love letters belonging to 2SLGBTQI people of colour. Introduce the class to some of the many queer writers of colour. For example, Black queer authors: Langston Hughes, Roxane Gay, James Baldwin, and Robert Jones, Jr. Do not forget to add queer Latinx, Asian, and Two Spirit authors. To explore some of the many authors active in the queer Latinx community, see Gabby Rivera, Arturo Islas, Carlos Rico-Gonzalez, Emma Perez. Among the many notable queer writers of the Asian community, see Maulik Pancholy, Tanya Boteju, S.J. Sindu, Hieu Minh Nguyen. Notable among Two Spirit and queer Indigenous writers are Joshua Whitehead, Arielle Twist, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Tomson Highway, and Ma-Nee Chacaby.

<sup>2</sup> Enszer J. R. Sullivan M. J. Lorde A. & Parker P. (2018). *Sister love: the letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989* (First). A Midsummer Night's Press; Sinister Wisdom.

As a potential homework activity, consider having students select one queer author to research and share a portion of author’s work with the class.

## The Value of Exploring Queer Love Letters and Literature

One of literature’s greatest powers is its ability to immerse the reader into worlds and experiences beyond their own. Ensuring students have the opportunity to explore as wide a range of perspectives as possible nurtures their development in all domains of knowledge – from critical reasoning and analytic skills to empathy and social values. Exposing students to lives and experiences that defy cisheteronormative expectations helps them learn to recognize and challenge stereotype-based thinking patterns, whether their own or in others. Thus, incorporating classroom discussions and examples of literature that portray a variety of healthy and loving relationships, including non-heteronormative relationships, helps all students.

Further, research has shown that open support for 2SLGBTQI identities and experiences by teachers and school staff, which includes visibility within the curriculum, improves queer youth mental health, lowers truancy and risk of drop-out<sup>3</sup>, lowers risk of anti-2SLGBTQI violence and victimization. Additionally, it is known to contribute to critical understandings of social justice and the development of more inclusive attitudes regardless of the student’s gender identity or sexuality.<sup>4,5</sup>

For students who are queer or questioning their feelings and identities, especially, positive representation within the curriculum can support the development of positive self-image, sense of self-worth<sup>6</sup>, hope and resilience,<sup>7,8</sup>

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3 Poteat, V. P., Berger, C., & Dantas, J. (2017). How victimization, climate, and safety around sexual orientation and gender expression relate to truancy. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 14(4), 424–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2017.1365037>

4 Seelman, K. L., Forge, N., Walls, N. E., & Bridges, N. (2015). School engagement among LGBTQ high school students: The roles of safe adults and gay-straight alliance characteristics. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57, 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.07.021>

5 Malo-Juvera, V. (2016). The Effect of an LGBTQ Themed Literary Instructional Unit on Adolescents’ Homophobia. *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature*, 2(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2376-5275.2016.2.1.1-34>

6 Hatchel, T., Merrin, G. J., & Espelage, and D. (2019). Peer victimization and suicidality among LGBTQ youth: The roles of school belonging, self-compassion, and parental support. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 16(2), 134–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1543036>

7 Heck, N. C. (2015). The Potential to Promote Resilience: Piloting a Minority Stress-Informed, GSA-Based, Mental Health Promotion Program for LGBTQ Youth. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(3), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000110>

8 Dennis, J. P. (2019). Nothing out there: Community awareness and delinquency among gay and lesbian youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 16(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1524320>



and provide a model for what queer relationships can look like that contrasts the often negative or destructive messages prevalent online and in popular media.

## Pre-Video Reflection and Discussion Guide

Before showing the video clip in class, consider dividing your students into small groups (roughly four people per group) and ask them to reflect on two or more of these questions:

- What is a love letter to you? What makes a love letter special, in your opinion?
- Why would someone write a love letter to declare their love rather than show their love publicly?
- Would you use a letter to declare your love to someone else? And if not, what other medium would you use?
- Imagine you like someone. And you absolutely want it to remain a secret. Think about how the need for secrecy might shape how you choose to communicate your feelings if you choose to communicate them at all. Would you try to communicate in subtle or coded language? Would it be better or worse not to tell the person you like at all?

Right before playing the video, we suggest mentioning that students are going to explore love letters from at least four couples. Ask them to listen for how vulnerabilities and longing are conveyed in the form of a letter, along with what the potential risks are.



# Post-Video Reflection and Discussion Guide

These are some of the questions you might want to ask your students after watching the video clip:

- What surprised you?
- How is this different than texting someone you like today? (for example, time between responses, lost envelopes, stolen packages, etc.)
- What do these love letters reveal about the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in the past? How did the risks they faced in writing their feelings down shape the form of the letter? What do the queer love letters suggest about communication?
- Why is vulnerability difficult to convey? What do we have to lose? What do we potentially gain by sharing our vulnerability with another person?
- Telling someone we like them takes courage, no matter who we are. How do suppose the risks of sharing how we feel might be experienced or navigated differently based on the identities of the people involved?
- Whose voices tend to be captured in historical books and literature and why? Where might one go to find more diverse voices?
- Why is it important to study love letters written by 2SLGBTQI people?

## Extra In-Class Activity

Watch the clip below from the Netflix series Heartstopper (in which the two main characters are texting each other) and draw comparisons to the love letters in the toolkit video.

Source: YouTube - Charlie messages Nick for the first time

<https://youtu.be/XEAj2ly7Grk>

## Knowledge in Practice

Provide students with an opportunity to more directly engage with the concepts above by experiencing what it is like to articulate their intimate feelings and put them on paper.

### Here is an example prompt for the activity.

It's your turn! Write a one-page love letter in secret. Who will it be to? Will you incorporate coded language to minimize the risk of being found out? Or will you be direct? What stylistic forms will you incorporate in your letter and why? It can be prose or poetry, even song writing, or it can be an audio or visual recording or a series of text exchanges. Keep this letter for yourself – it is for your eyes only.

After creating your love letter, describe why you picked the format you chose, your process in creating your message, and what it felt like putting your intimate sentiments into words.

## Additional Resources

### Printed Sources

Enszer J. R., Sullivan M. J., Lorde A., & Parker P. (2018). *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974–1989 (First)*. A Midsummer Night's Press; Sinister Wisdom.

Norton R. (1998). *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries* (1st ed.). Leyland Publications.

Sackville-West V., DeSalvo L. A., Leaska M. A., & Woolf V. (1992). *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*. Virago Press.

Smith R., & Vesey B. (2022). *The Love that Dares: Letters of LGBTQ Love & Friendship through History*. Ilex.

Wilde O., Holland M., & Hart-Davis R. (2000). *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1st ed.). Henry Holt.

### Online Sources

#### Emily Dickinson

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/12/10/emily-dickinson-love-letters-susan-gilbert/>

## **Nathaniel Hawthorne/Herman Melville**

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2019/02/13/herman-melville-nathaniel-hawthorne-love-letters/>

## **Eleanor Roosevelt**

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2012/10/11/eleanor-roosevelt-lorena-hickok-love-letters/>

## **Margaret Mead**

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/10/23/margaret-mead-ruth-benedict-love-letters/>