

# Dear...Letter Poems to Animals

**Grades:** 5 to 9

**Subject:** Language Arts

**Group size:** Whole class, working individually

**Duration:** 50-minute period with potential for take-home work

**Skills:** Creativity, writing poetry

## **OBJECTIVES:**

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Write a letter poem
- Gather information needed for a writing assignment

## **MATERIALS:**

- **Guidelines for Letter Poems**

## **BACKGROUND:**

Letter poems reinforce the elements of poetry. They get attention because they are written in the language of poetry and look different from regular letters. Writing letter poems allows students to demonstrate their knowledge of an animal as well as their feelings for it.

## **PROCEDURES:**

- Share the following letter poems written by middle school students with your class. This will give them an idea of the content and style of a letter poem:

*Dear Tomorrow,*

*See your animals fade away  
Like the night at dawn.  
Watch the leopard's fur  
Being used for show.  
See the king of beasts,  
The bravest one,  
Run for cover  
At the noise of the hunter's gun.  
Watch the ruthless killers  
Grow greedy and rich.  
They seem more like an enemy  
Than a friend.  
See the animals die poor  
Just as before.  
Yet they are still beautiful  
As more and more  
They fade away*

*Yesterday*

*- Julie Patten*

*Dear Nature,*

*Your anger is of no surprise.  
I don't understand how our children can treat us like gigantic trash cans and barren  
wasteland.  
I sympathize with your position, and I realize the danger you face.  
But remember, like that which consumed the dinosaur, I too am in danger of rapid  
extinction.  
Pray for those trying to heal us.  
Hope for the best; and get some rest, for tomorrow you will need your strength.*

*Mother Nature*

*- Tracy Valstad*

- Give each student a copy of the “Guidelines for Letter Poems.” Have them follow these guidelines independently in class or at home to research their subjects and write their own letter poems. (This is a good library period activity, particularly if students choose animals other than wolves and need to do background research.)

## Guidelines for Letter Poems

Dear Student:

Letter poems begin and end like the letters you are used to reading and writing. That, however, is where the similarity ends! In this letter poem exercise, you are not writing to thank someone for a birthday present, exchange news or ask for something. You are writing to an animal to tell it how you feel about it.

1. List animals that interest you. You can list the wolf and all of its prey - the elk, the caribou, the deer. Don't forget the relatives of the wolf and other predators, too. How about the scavengers? Birds? Insects?
2. If you could write to only one of these animals, which would it be? Choose one from your list.
3. Draft a letter to that animal. One page is the minimum length!

Here's the basic format:

---

Tell your animal who you are and what's on your mind. Maybe you want some advice about something. Perhaps you have some specific questions you would like to ask the animal about its own life, or you would like the animal to react to something you have read or seen on TV about it. Maybe you would like to give the animal some advice of your own. You can be silly or serious, formal or informal, but be yourself! Reveal some things about yourself; share your real feelings.

4. Now write another one-page letter from the animal to you. The letter will be signed by the animal.
5. Go back to your letter to the animal and revise it. In this second draft, be more specific. For example, instead of saying "you are beautiful," say what is beautiful about the animal. Instead of saying "you made me feel sad when you howled," try "the lonely sound of your voice made me long to be your friend." If it will help you reveal more of your feelings, you can sign the letter "Friend in Maine" or "Still Scared of Wolves in Syracuse" or just "Anonymous." Express your emotions: joy, hope, fear, anger. The feelings should be your own even if the signature does not reveal your name.

**Write several drafts, until you have one you're satisfied with.  
Now you are going to change your letter from prose to poetry...  
Try doing each of the following steps, and you'll be on your way to a letter poem!**

6. Now get down to the nitty-gritty. Grab your red pen and start slashing. Look at every sentence and get rid of unnecessary words or phrases. Eliminate adverbs! Most of the time, they just prop up weak verbs. Instead of saying "very hungry," say "famished." Instead of "walked slowly," say "strolled" or "ambled." Substitute tired, overused words and cliches with something new and original.

7. After you have cut and condensed, expand again! Can you find places where a metaphor or simile would conjure up an image, a picture, a sensory experience? In his poem "Wolves," John Haines writes about being awakened in the night by wolves howling from across a frozen river in Alaska. The poem contains several striking images that appeal to the reader's imagination. Notice the difference between the matter-of-fact language of a newspaper or magazine and the language of poetry.

#### Wolves

*Last night I heard the wolves howling,  
their voices coming from afar  
over the wind-polished ice – so much  
brave solitude in that sound.*

*They are death's snowbound sailors;  
they know only a continual  
drifting between moonlit islands,  
their tongues licking the stars.*

*But they sing as good seamen should,  
and tomorrow the sun will find them  
yawning and blinking  
the snow from their eyelashes.*

*Their voices rang through the frozen water of any human sleep,  
blown by the night wind  
with the moon for an icy sail.*

-John Haines

8. Change the order of phrases; shift the parts around if the effect would more dramatic.

9. Read the poem aloud as you work and try to improve the rhythm by discovering interesting places to end lines. Lines of poetry can end anywhere you want them to.

**Congratulations! You have created a letter poem! You and your classmates might want to display all your letter poems around the classroom.**