

**THOMAS DAY'S LETTER TO HIS DAUGHTER, MARY ANN DAY**

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

**Overview**

In this lesson, students examine a rich and interesting type of primary source document, the personal letter. The letter was written by the free black North Carolina cabinetmaker, Thomas Day to his daughter while she was attending boarding school at the Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts in 1851. In this letter, Thomas Day gives his daughter fatherly advice but also reveals his personal opinions on a variety of topics, such as living in the town where he resides in the South; what he thinks about some of the young people he deals with in the town; and other personal views and particular observations. This letter, like many personal letters, provides great insight into the personality of Thomas Day, as well as into his beliefs, motivations, and opinions. Completing an exercise that dramatic actors use to uncover the motivations and personalities of characters in a play or story, students are asked to listen very carefully as the letter is read aloud to them and to write down one word or phrase that grabs their attention. After hearing the letter read, students share the particular word or phrase that especially struck them and they explain why it grabbed their attention. A discussion and analysis of the words and phrases follows as students delve more deeply into the personality and mindset of Thomas Day.

**Learning Objectives**

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

- Recall who Thomas Day was and recite critical facts about his life.
- Recall who Mary Ann Day was and recite critical facts about her life.
- Discuss some of the issues that nineteenth-century free blacks faced in the South.
- Provide information about personal letters as informative primary sources.
- Analyze a personal letter using an acting technique for delving deeply into the character.

**Guiding Questions**

What can we learn about Thomas Day from the letter that he wrote to his daughter, Mary Ann, in 1851? What kind of information is revealed in a personal letter that is not revealed in a primary source like a census record? Why are personal letters invaluable primary sources of information?

**Suggested Time**

1 class period

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography of Thomas Day.
2. Review the short video, *Who Was Thomas Day?*, which provides an overview of Thomas Day's life and work.
3. Review Teacher Tool 2: A Timeline of Thomas Day's Life for a breakdown of events in his life in parallel to events that were happening in the country.
4. Review Teacher Tool 3, which contains the full text of a letter that Thomas Day wrote to his daughter, Mary Ann, when she was a student at Wesleyan Academy. This letter has been slightly modified from the original version so that it is easier to read aloud. It is also annotated with notes that will help you discuss the letter with your students. You will read this letter, or some part of it, aloud to your class. If you decide to read an abbreviated version of the letter, preselect those passages that you will read.
5. Review Student Handout 1: Listening for an Emotional Connection. This Student Handout aids students as they consider the one word or phrase from the letter, which grabs them emotionally. This is a "text analysis" technique that actors use to connect emotionally with the characters they are portraying. However, it is also extremely useful for "getting inside the head" of historical figures to understand the individual beliefs and motivations which undergird the decisions they make and their behaviors.
6. Review Teacher Tool 4: What Happened to Mary Ann Day? to learn about what happened to Mary Ann after she graduated from Wesleyan Academy.
7. Teacher Tool 5 presents the letter that Thomas Day wrote to his daughter in its original form. If you are interested in seeing the letter just as it was written in the nineteenth century, review this Teacher Tool.

## Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. To begin this lesson, show the short video, *Who Was Thomas Day?*, which highlights the life and work of this nineteenth-century African American artisan.
2. Using Teacher Tool 1, provide students with a brief overview of the life and work of Thomas Day. Be sure to mention that he sent his children, including his daughter, Mary Ann, to the Wesleyan Academy.
3. Pass out Student Handout 1: Listening For An Emotional Connection and ask students to listen carefully to the letter you will read. Tell them that they need to pay close attention to the single word or phrase that grabs their attention very strongly. Ask them to write down that word or phrase. Explain that it is okay if they only have one word or phrase with which they connect emotionally and personally. Explain that it is not necessary to write down every thing that grabs their attention; they only need to write down those words or phrases that really resonate with them. Tell them that after the reading, those who wish to share the word or phrase that "grabbed their attention" will be encouraged to do so.
4. Read the letter in Teacher Tool 3 (or some part of it) aloud to your class. You should not pay attention to the notes in the right column in your initial reading to the class. Use those notes to help with the next step.
5. After reading the letter, go around the room and ask your students to share what they wrote down. It is possible that more than one student will have the same reaction to

some of the words in the letter. Using the notes in the right column of Teacher Tool 3, lead a discussion about the letter and student responses.

6. Using the information provided in Teacher Tool 4, end the lesson plan by revealing details about the later life of Mary Ann Day, the young woman to whom Thomas Day wrote his 1851 letter.

### **Assessment (Optional)**

Review the Assessment. If you decide to use it, print the document for distribution to your students. Students are asked to list three character traits of Thomas Day and provide evidence to support their conclusions. An answer key is provided.

### **Extending the Lesson**

Show students the short video on this website, *My Dear Mother, A Letter by Elizabeth Keckly* a dramatic enactment of a letter from Elizabeth Keckly's narrative that she read to her mother. Keckly was an enslaved girl when she wrote her letter to her mother. Have students compare and contrast the parent-child relationships that are revealed by the two letters. How is the relationship of Thomas Day and his daughter, who are both free blacks, different from the relationship between Keckly and her mother, who are both enslaved? How are the relationships similar?

*Teachers may use and reproduce the material on the Crafting Freedom website for instructional purposes.*