

Write_On Challenge: How We Did It

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We began the Write_On Challenge in room 20 on March 31st. Kids walked into our room to find a large box under a big blue blanket with a note that read, "No peeking!" Some kids thought it hid new books. Others were convinced that it concealed a new vacuum cleaner. They were in for a surprise!

We then watched the Write_On 2016 video and I shared that we would be taking the Write_On Challenge to write 30 letters in 30 days in April. Several kids said, "Ooh! We can do that!" I pulled back the big blue blanket to reveal hundreds of letterpress cards that were donated by Egg Press. Showing the many different card designs, I explained that each kid would get to choose 30 cards over the course of the month.

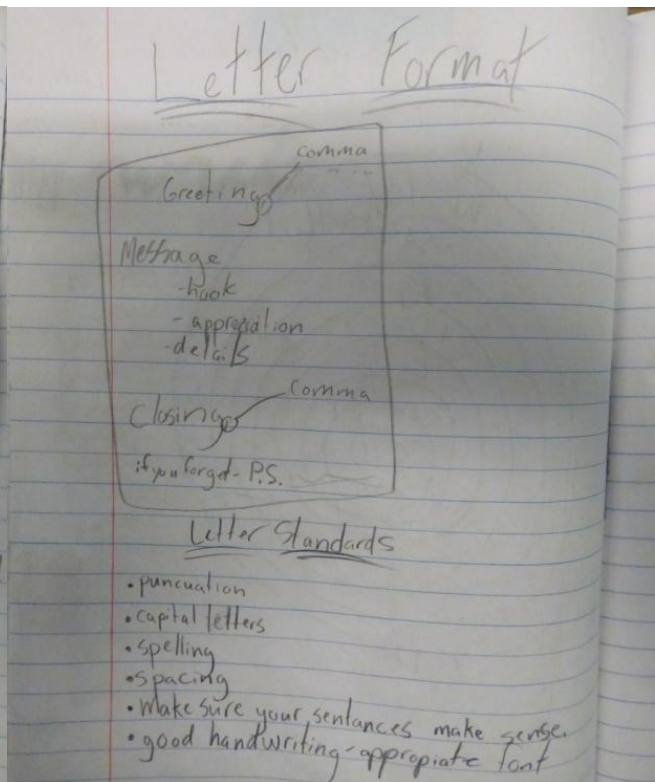
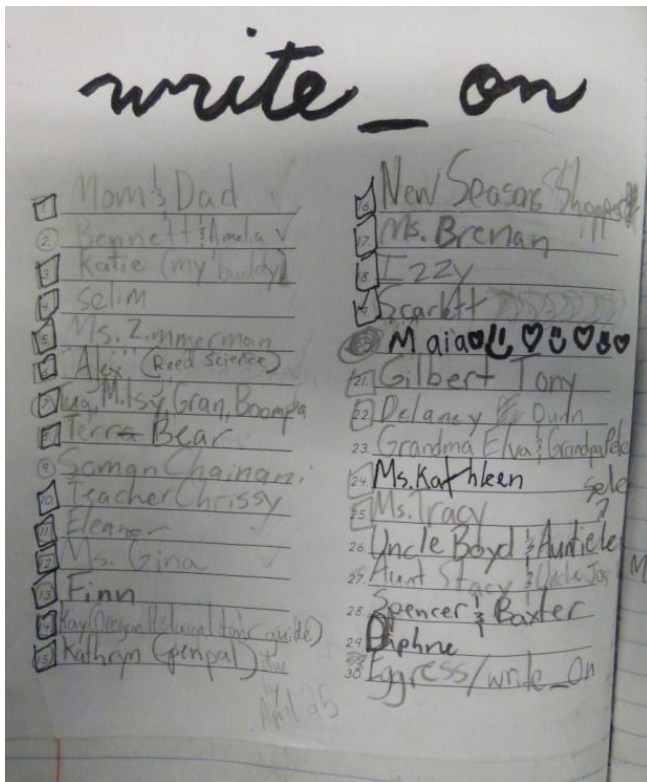
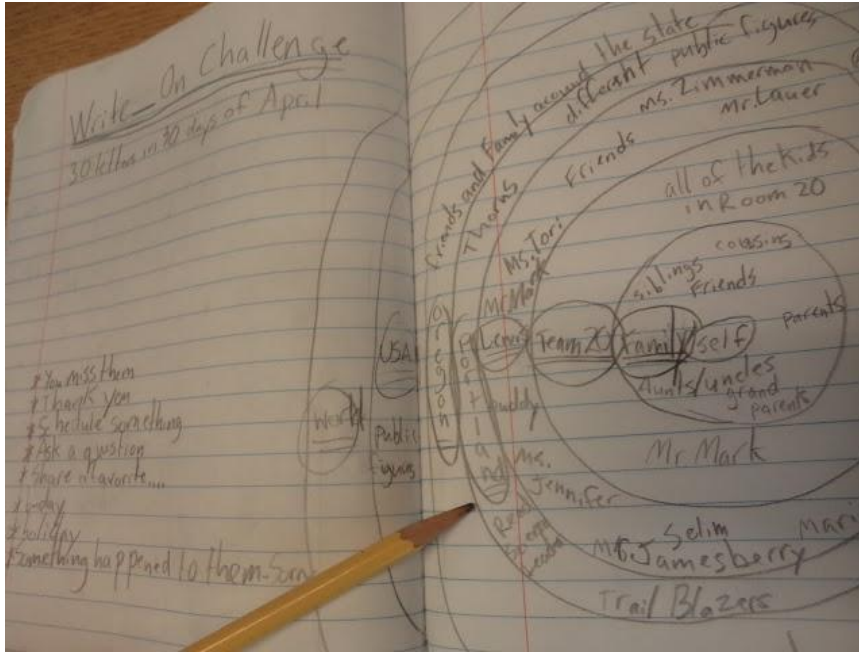


I asked the kids why they thought the focus of this challenge was on handwritten letters or note cards. Kids talked about living in a digital age, about how technology sometimes speeds things up, and that this can make communication less personal. They talked about how writing something by hand takes more time, about how the person who receives something handwritten knows that the writer took their time, and that this makes the message more personal and more special.

In their sketchbooks, we worked as a team to brainstorm the possible audience for our letters. Kids drew a series of circles on the page that included self, family, Team 20 (which is our classroom's name), Lewis (which is our school's name), Portland, Oregon, USA, and World.

For example, within family, kids listed siblings, cousins, friends, parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. For Team 20, kids listed their classmates and their teacher. For Lewis, kids listed their first grade buddy, their principal, their librarian, their music teacher, their custodian, and other teachers.

Next we made a list of reasons why we might write. Kids shared many ideas, including that you miss that person, to say thank you, to schedule something, to ask a question, to share a favorite, to wish someone happy birthday, to celebrate a holiday, and because something happened to that person. Then kids added a page to their sketchbooks to begin making a list of 30 people to whom they would like to write. Some kids took this one day at a time. As the project evolved, some kids planned out who they would like to write to on which day for several days or weeks in advance.



I modeled writing a thank you letter to my parents. As a team, we pulled on that letter to name the parts of a letter – greeting, message, and closing. We also created a standards checklist together, which kids would use as a guide when writing and as a tool for reflection as they read through their completed letters. Kids listed punctuation, capital letters, spelling, spacing, making sure your sentences make sense, and using good handwriting of an appropriate size for the card.

We talked as a team about when in our day this project would fit and decided that during our morning routine as kids came into the room and during some workshops would work best. At the end of the day we organized the first letter. Kids wrote a first name on their list of 30, chose a card from the collection, and placed it at their table spot so that they would be prepared for the next morning – day one of the Write_On Challenge.



On day one of the Write_On Challenge, kids entered our room and began writing their first letters.

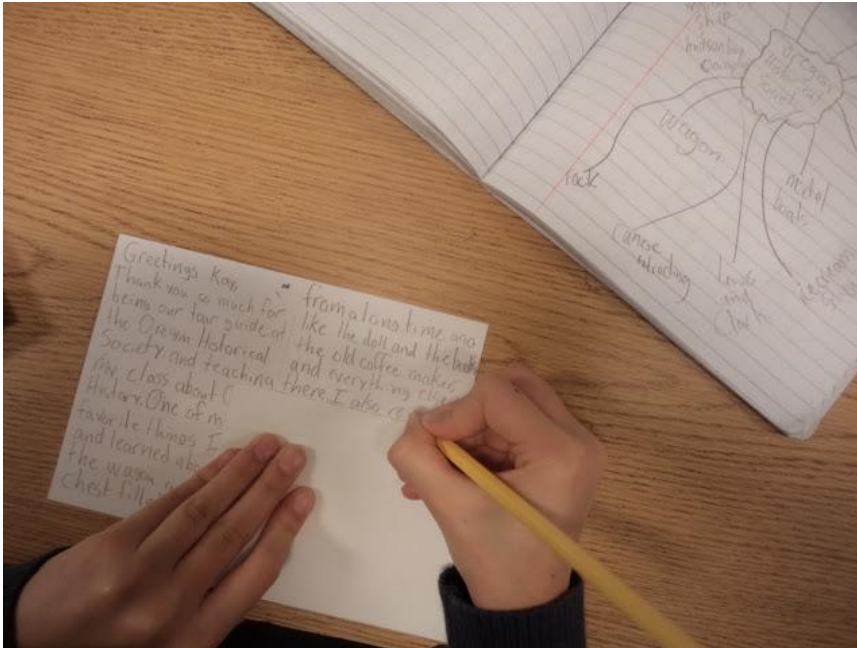


During our morning workshop that day we revisited our editing and revising checklist and talked about formatting. We talked about the Write_On Challenge being 30 letters in 30 days for the month of April and that Monday would be Day 4. I asked what we should do about weekends. Kids suggested taking two cards home over the weekend and focusing the audience for these letters on family members so that they could utilize some help from family when thinking about what to write. This meant that some kids were using the weekend to write to family members that they did not know as well.

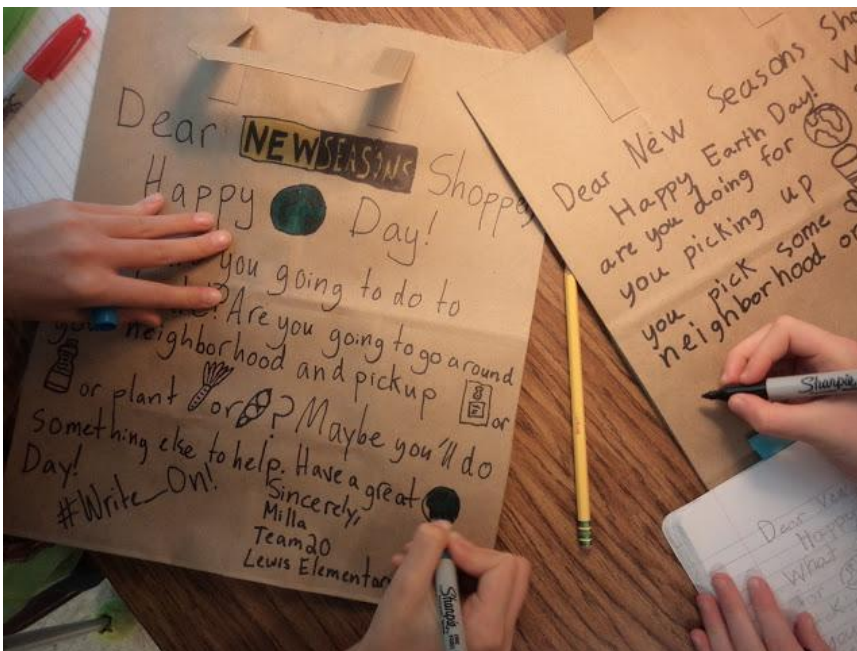
Kids finished the day by choosing two cards for the weekend and one for Monday morning. Our routine continued...writing in the mornings and choosing a new card at the end of each day.



During Write_On, kids wrote many letters to teachers, classmates, and family members. While kids had choice of audience for most of their letters, a few audiences were assigned. These included writing thank you letters to our Reed College science teachers, an artist in residence, the docents on our Oregon Historical Society field trip, and school staff for Administrative Professionals' Day. For these, kids planned their work by making webs or lists. We agreed on due dates and kids added these names to their list of 30 in their sketchbooks.



We incorporated making Earth Day bags for our nearby New Seasons Market into the Write_On Challenge. As a team, we created a bank of Earth Day words. Then kids wrote letters on one side of their bag and replaced words with symbols to create a rebus puzzle. For this we talked about standards of quality and acceptance for this audience. Kids made practice copies in their sketchbooks, conferenced with me, and made a final copy letter on a grocery bag, illustrating the other side.



During Write_On, I would conference with kids one-on-one or in small groups about their writing.



Kids wrote letters to their pen pals in Madison, Wisconsin, giving some extra special care to their envelopes.

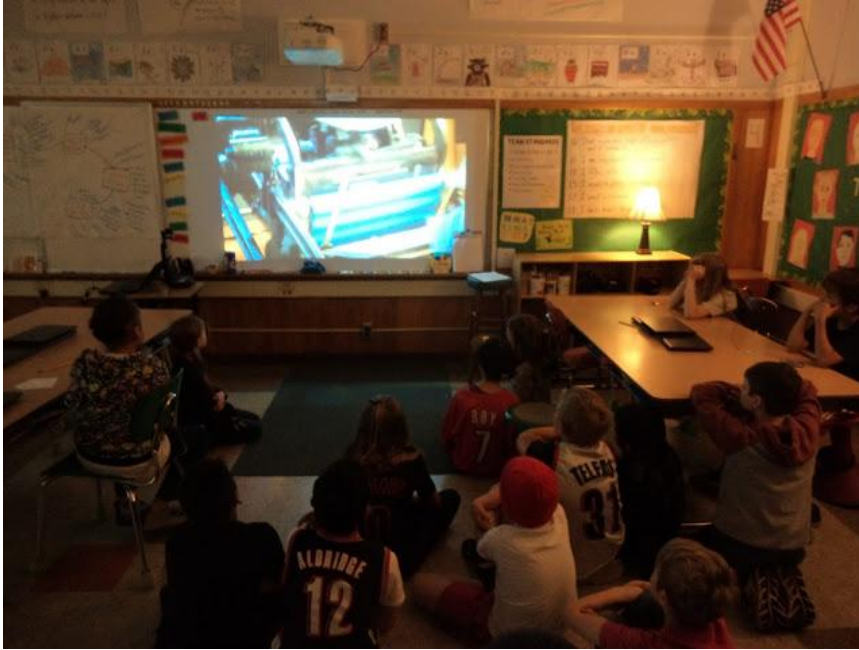




Then it was time for day 30 of the Write_On Challenge. To celebrate our hard work, we had a Last Letter Party. Our party began with sharing letters that were written to our class from the folks at Egg Press.

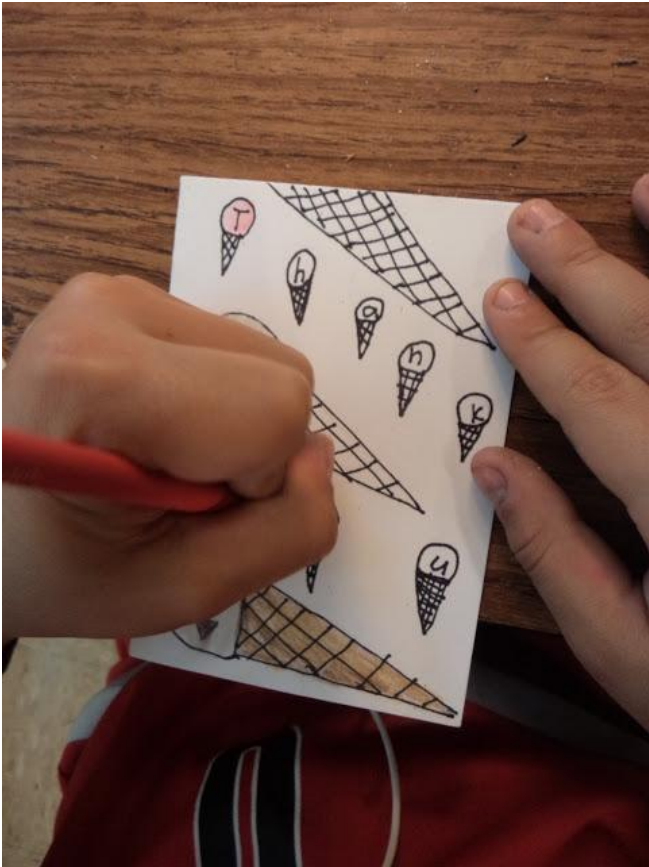


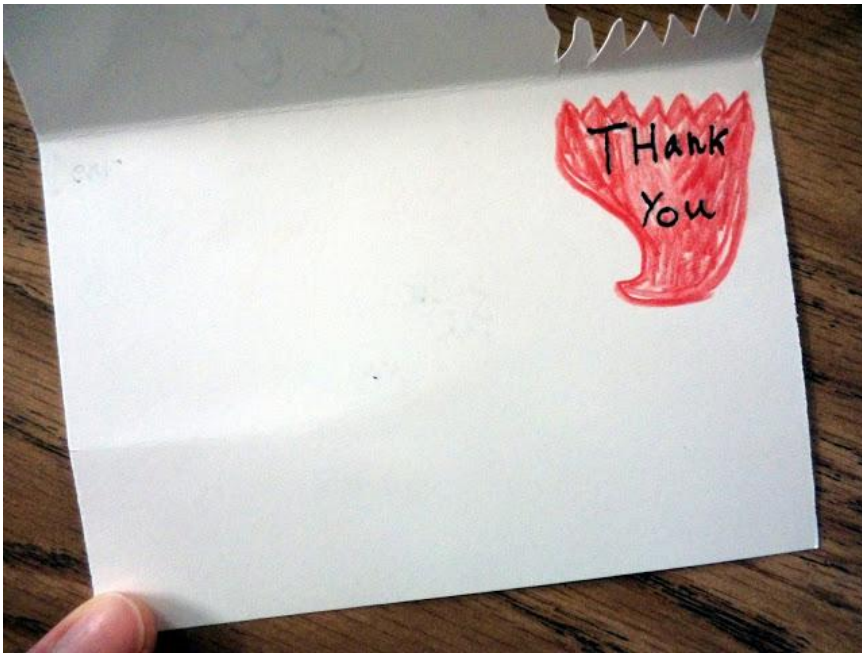
Kids had been curious about how the cards were made, so we watched a YouTube video about letterpress.



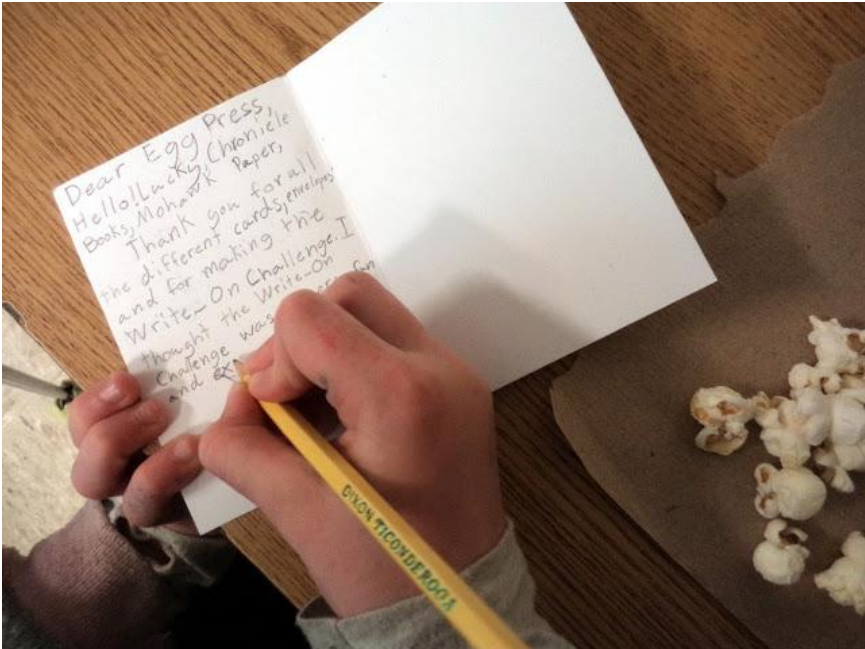
For their last letter, kids wrote a thank you to Egg Press, Hello!Lucky, Chronicle Books, and Mohawk Paper for providing the generous supply of letterpress cards and envelopes to make this project possible. We talked as a team about card design. Kids made a practice copy of their design in their sketchbooks. I conferenced with each kid and gave them a piece of cardstock.







Later that morning, we talked as a team about standards for the written portion of the letter. As kids wrote, they snacked on popcorn and lemonade. At the end, I gave them a pen to keep writing on.





This was a project that we surely hope to continue in the future. I think our school principal put it nicely when he wrote, "It was great see our students involved in the daily practice of reflecting and writing to family and friends."

Here are some quotes from Team 20's last letters, which were written to the project's sponsors.

"Thank you all for the different cards, envelopes, and for making the Write_On Challenge."

"The cards you gave us were amazing!"

"Just to let you know, we enjoyed the challenge!"

"The Write_On Challenge was one of the best things I did this year."

"I never knew letter writing could be so fun!"

"What I enjoyed about this project is that I get to write to friends and family I haven't seen or talked to in forever!"

"I enjoy that it is so relaxing."

"You taught me that the best type of letter is handmade."

"I think writing letters is important because it gives you time to put thought into it."

"Writing letters is a lot more fun than texting somebody."

"I say letter writing is important because people don't take their time on emails, they just write a couple words and are done. But with letters, people care. They tell you about the person."

"I think handwritten cards are important because it really brings you together."

"By writing letters I have opened a new hobby, writing letters!"

"This project was so fun and it's inspired me to write two letters a week."

"The Write_On Challenge has inspired me to write more letters in my life."

"I want to do this again next year."