Letter Writing for Human Rights

Created by: Elizabeth Gartley
Title/Role: Grad Student / Activist
Organization/School Name: Simmons GSLIS / Get On The Bus for Human Rights
Location: Massachusetts

Grade Level: 10, 11, 12
Type of Lesson: Stand-alone lesson
Type of Schedule: Flexible
Collaboration Continuum: Intensive
Content Area:
Language Arts
Content Topic: Human Rights, Letter Writing

Standards for the 21st-Century Learner

Skills Indicator(s):
3.1.3 Use writing and speaking skills to communicate new understandings effectively.
3.1.5 Connect learning to community issues.

Dispositions Indicator(s):
3.2.2 Show social responsibility by participating actively with others in learning situations and by contributing questions and ideas during group discussions.

Responsibilities Indicator(s):
2.3.1 Connect understanding to the real world.
3.3.4 Create products that apply to authentic, real-world contexts.
3.3.6 Use information and knowledge in the service of democratic values.

Self-Assessment Strategies Indicator(s):
1.4.4 Seek appropriate help when it is needed.

Scenario: The high school Amnesty International Club will be participating in a large human rights event in the spring. In speaking with the club's faculty coordinator, the ELA teacher and school librarian have realized that the taking action model that human rights defenders use is very similar to the writing standards expected of high school students in the ELA Common Core State Standards and strands in the AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner. The ELA teacher and school librarian will have students write formal letters which identify concerns regarding a specific human rights case, establish significance of the case, provide sufficient evidence (identify which human rights are being violated, and cite appropriate human rights documents and organizations), and includes a concluding statement. ELA teacher and SL will collaborate before the lesson to compile case summaries (or "case dossiers") for each student to refer to in writing his or her letter.

Overview: Students will be able to identify which human rights are being violated in a given case summary and explain how those rights are being violated. Students will be able to clearly and formally express arguments and concerns regarding human rights violations. This lesson is designed to address two essential questions: What are human rights? How can ordinary people defend human rights?
**Final Product:** Students will write a formal letter addressed to an appropriate head of state or government official expressing concern over a current human rights violation and requesting specific action.

**Library Lesson:** Students will begin to think critically about the meaning of human rights and how ordinary people can stand up for human rights. Students will gain confidence and experience in formally expressing ideas. The lesson will stress the importance of using supporting evidence in crafting arguments.

**Estimated Lesson Time:** 90 minutes

**Assessment**

**Product:** ELA teacher will assess students' formal letters according to a rubric which covers the following criteria: 1. Addressed to appropriate target. 2. Context of human rights violation is clearly described. 3. Arguments are written to support concerns in an analysis of substantive texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. 4. Letter includes a concluding statement that follows from and supports the argument presented, and includes an appropriate call to action. 5. Letter is free of grammatical and spelling errors and maintains a formal tone.

**Process:** School librarian will assess students' active participation according to a checklist which covers the following items: 1. Actively participates in discussions, contributing questions and ideas. 2. Seeks appropriate help when needed. 3. Provides appropriate and constructive peer feedback. 4. Remains respectful of classroom rules and routines, actively listens to peers and instructors. 5. Remains focused and on-task throughout the class period.

**Student self-questioning:** After students have written the draft of their letter, instructors will lead a guided discussion touching on the following topics and questions: Did I have enough information? How did I make my argument compelling? How did I feel writing to a government official about a human rights violation? What other steps could I take to support this human rights case?

**Instructional Plan**

**Resources students will use:**
Moving Image (i.e. animations, movies, tv program, video)
Text (books, letters, poems, newspapers, etc.)

**Resources instructor will use:**
Projector
Laptop

**Instruction/Activities**

**Direct instruction:** ELA teacher and school librarian will introduce the topic of human rights and screen the video "The Story of Human Rights" (9:30, available online at www.youthforhumanrights.org). Both instructors will explain the assignment and expectations to students.

**Modeling and guided practice:** After watching the video, instructors and students will review, taking turns reading aloud, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reading a plain-text version of the 30 basic human rights (attached). In small groups of 3-4, students will discuss the Eleanor Roosevelt quote in the video: "Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close
and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: The neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world." As a whole group, the class will discuss questions such as: As individuals and citizens, what is our responsibility regarding human rights? How can ordinary people defend human rights? What are some examples? Instructors will transition to letter writing by screening the “Signatures" public service announcement by Amnesty International France (2:19, available online at youtu.be/yhdML9nGIHM) In small groups, students will review letter writing guidelines from Amnesty International/ Urgent Action Network (document attached). Instructors will circulate at this time to answer questions.

Independent practice: After reviewing the Amnesty International/ Urgent Action Network letter writing guidelines, instructors will hand out case documents to students. Based on the videos and the documents read in class, students will take about 10 minutes to draft an outline for their letter, identifying key points. Students will the read each others outlines and provide peer feedback in small groups. Instructors will circulate, providing support and feedback. Based on feedback, students will draft their formal letter. Instructors will continue to circulate, answering questions and providing support and feedback.

Sharing and reflecting: After students have written the draft of their letter, with about 10 minutes left of class, instructors will lead a guided discussion touching on the following topics and questions: Did I have enough information? How did I make my argument compelling? How did I feel writing to a government official about a human rights violation? What other steps could I take to support this human rights case?

Have you taught this lesson before: No

Strategies for differentiation: To extend this lesson, instructors may choose to have students choose and research their cases before writing their letters. The lesson may also be adapted by having students write letters in pairs.

AASL/Common Core State Standards Crosswalk

English Language Arts:

CC.9-10.SL.1 » English Language Arts » Comprehension and Collaboration » 1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (9,10)

CC.11-12.SL.1.a » English Language Arts » Comprehension and Collaboration » a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas. (11,12)

CC.9-10.SL.1.c » English Language Arts » Comprehension and Collaboration » c. Propel conversations
by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions. (9,10)

**CC.11-12.SL.1** » English Language Arts » Comprehension and Collaboration » 1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (11,12)

**CC.11-12.SL.1.c** » English Language Arts » Comprehension and Collaboration » c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives. (11,12)

**CC.9-10.R.L.1** » English Language Arts » Key Ideas and Details » 1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (9,10)

**CC.9-10.R.L.2** » English Language Arts » Key Ideas and Details » 2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. (9,10)

**CC11-12WH/SS/S/TS1** » Writing Standards » 1. Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content. (11,12)

**CC11-12WH/SS/S/TS2** » Writing Standards » 2. Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes. (11,12)

**CC.9-10.W.4** » English Language Arts » Production and Distribution of Writing » 4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (9,10)

**CC.9-10.SL.6** » English Language Arts » Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas » 6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (9,10)

**CC.11-12.W.10** » English Language Arts » Range of Writing » 10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences. (11,12)

**CC.9-10.R.I.9** » English Language Arts » Integration of Knowledge and Ideas » 9. Analyze seminal U.S.
documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts. (9,10)

**CC.9-10.L.4.c** » English Language Arts » Vocabulary Acquisition and Use » c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology. (9,10)

**CC.11-12.L.4.d** » English Language Arts » Vocabulary Acquisition and Use » d. Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary). (11,12)

**CC.11-12.L.4.c** » English Language Arts » Vocabulary Acquisition and Use » c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage. (11,12)

**CC.11-12.L.1.b** » English Language Arts » Conventions of Standard English » b. Resolve issues of complex or contested usage, consulting references (e.g., Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, Garner's Modern American Usage) as needed. (11,12)

**CC.11-12.L.3** » English Language Arts » Knowledge of Language » 3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. (11,12)

**CC.11-12.L.4.c** » English Language Arts » Vocabulary Acquisition and Use » c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage. (11,12)

**CC11-12WH/SS/S/TS1e** » Writing Standards » e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented. (11,12)

**CC.9-10.W.1.c** » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. (9,10)

**CC.11-12.W.1.d** » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. (11,12)

**CC.9-10.W.2.b** » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » b. Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic. (9,10)
CC9-10WH/SS/S/TS2c » Writing Standards » c. Use varied transitions and sentence structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts. (9,10)

CC9-10WH/SS/S/TS2d » Writing Standards » d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic and convey a style appropriate to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers. (9,10)

CC.11-12.W.2.e » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » e. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.2.f » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » f. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic). (11,12)

CC.9-10.W.8 » English Language Arts » Research to Build and Present Knowledge » 8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. (9,10)

CC.11-12.W.1.c » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.2.b » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » b. Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic. (11,12)

CC11-12WH/SS/S/TS2e » Writing Standards » e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation provided (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic). (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.1.e » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented. (11,12)

CC.9-10.L.1 » English Language Arts » Conventions of Standard English » 1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. (9,10)
CC.9-10.L.2 » English Language Arts » Conventions of Standard English » 2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. (9,10)

CC.9-10.SL.4 » English Language Arts » Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas » 4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task. (9,10)

CC.11-12.W.1 » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » 1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (11,12)

CC.9-10.W.1.b » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns. (9,10)

CC.11-12.W.2 » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » 2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. (11,12)

CC.9-10.W.2.a » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » a. Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. (9,10)

CC.9-10.W.2.c » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » c. Use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts. (9,10)

CC.9-10.W.2.d » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic. (9,10)

CC.9-10.W.3 » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » 3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. (9,10)

CC.11-12.SL.4 » English Language Arts » Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas » 4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks. (11,12)
CC.11-12.W.1.b » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.2.a » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » a. Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.2.c » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » c. Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.2.d » English Language Arts » Text Types and Purposes » d. Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.8 » English Language Arts » Research to Build and Present Knowledge » 8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation. (11,12)

CC.11-12.W.7 » English Language Arts » Research to Build and Present Knowledge » 7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. (11,12)
ADMITTED BY THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON 10 DECEMBER 1948

1 When people are born, they are free and each should be treated in the same way. They can think and have conscience and should act towards one another in a friendly manner.

2 Everyone can claim the rights in this Declaration. It does not matter if you:
   - are a different sex
   - have a different skin colour
   - speak a different language
   - think different things
   - believe in another religion
   - own more or less
   - are born in another social group
   - come from another country

3 You have the right to live, and to live in freedom and safety.

4 Nobody has the right to treat you as his or her slave and you should not make anyone your slave.

5 Nobody has the right to torture you.

6 You should be legally protected in the same way everywhere, and like everyone else.

7 The law is the same for everyone; it should be applied in the same way to all.

8 You should be able to ask for legal help when your rights are not respected.

9 Nobody has the right to put you in prison, to keep you there, or to send you away from your country unjustly, or without good reason.

10 If you go on trial this should be done in public. The people who try you should not let themselves be influenced by others.

11 You should be considered innocent until it can be proved that you are guilty. If you are accused of a crime, you should always have the right to defend yourself. Nobody has the right to condemn you and punish you for something you have not done.

12 You have the right to ask to be protected if someone tries to harm your reputation, enter your house, open your letters, or bother you or your family without a good reason.

13 You have the right to come and go as you wish within your country. You have the right to leave your country to go to another one; and you should be able to return to your country if you want.

14 If someone hurts you, you have the right to go to another country and ask it to protect you. You lose this right if you have killed someone and if you, yourself, do not respect what is written here.

15 You have the right to belong to a country and nobody can prevent you, without a good reason, from belonging to a country if you wish.

16 As soon as you are allowed to under the law, you have the right to marry and have a family, no matter what the colour of your skin, the country you come from or your religion. Men and women have the same rights when they are married and also when they are separated. Nobody should force a person to marry. The government of your country should protect you and the members of your family.
17 You have the right to own things and nobody has the right to take these from you without a good reason.

18 You have the right to profess your religion freely, to change it, and to practise it either on your own or with other people.

19 You have the right to think what you want and to say what you like. You should be able to share your ideas also—with people from any other country.

20 You have the right to organise peaceful meetings or to take part in meetings in a peaceful way. It is wrong to force someone to belong to a group.

21 You have the right to take part in your country's political activities either by belonging to the government yourself or by choosing politicians who have the same ideas as you. Governments should be voted for regularly and voting should be secret. You should get a vote and all votes should be equal. You also have the same right to join the public service as anyone else.

22 The society in which you live should help you to develop and to make the most of all the advantages (culture, work, social welfare) which are offered to you and to all the men and women in your country.

23 You have the right to work, to be free to choose your work, and to get a salary which allows you to support your family. If a man and a woman do the same work, they should get the same pay. All people who work have the right to join unions to defend their interests.

24 Each work day should not be too long, since everyone has the right to rest and should be able to take regular paid holidays.

25 You have the right to have whatever you need so that you and your family: do not fall ill or go hungry; have clothes and a house; and are helped if you are out of work, if you are ill, if you are old, if your wife or husband is dead, or if you do not earn a living for any other reason you cannot help. Mothers and their children are entitled to special care. All children have the same rights to be protected, whether or not their mother was married when they were born.

26 You have the right to go to school and everyone should go to school. Primary schooling should be free. You should be able to learn a profession or continue your studies as far as you wish. At school, you should be able to develop all your talents and you should be taught to get on with others, whatever their race, religion or the country they come from.

27 You have the right to share in your community's arts and sciences. Your works as an artist, writer, or a scientist should be protected, and you should be able to benefit from them.

28 So that your rights will be respected, there must be a local and international system to protect them.

29 You have duties towards the community. You cannot use these rights in a way that threatens the rights of others.

30 No one can take away the rights and freedoms set out in this Declaration.
Letter Writing Guide
for Amnesty International USA
and the Urgent Action Network

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Quick & To the Point:
Write and Send it Now.
Don’t Put it Off.
Make it Short.
Be Polite.
Thanks.

Revised July 2006
Why write letters?

It's simple. It works.

This guide will provide you with the tools to write an effective letter.

Letters can free a Prisoner of Conscience (POC):

“I am writing to inform you that after 6 years, 4 months, 17 days in prison, I am now free. I walked out of the prison gate… with my shoulders unbent, with my head unbowed. I feel great to be free again, to walk, once again, in the sunshine of freedom.”

-- university lecturer in history and former POC Maina Wa Kinyatti, Kenya

Letters can strengthen an individual:

“… Messages of solidarity that have been sent to me from many parts of the world, reach my cell. It feels like every time a letter of solidarity arrives, the rose in my cell blossoms. This is a very warm feeling.”

-- POC Dita Sari, Indonesia

Letters can stop torture:

“You are not dead, because too many people are concerned about you”

-- a security agent to a political prisoner, Argentina

Letters bear witness:

“Although the official investigations still have not turned anything up, the letters and faxes you sent to our offices and to government agencies have been very important. They have assured us that we are not alone and they have shown the government that an entire international network is aware of anything that might happen to us, and is ready to respond.”

-- human rights defender Victor Manuel Quintana, Mexico

Letters improve prison conditions:

“We could always tell when international protests were taking place… the food rations increased and the beatings were fewer. Letters from abroad were translated and passed around from cell to cell…”

-- a released POC, Vietnam

Letters demonstrate that there is a global community concerned for human rights:

“That is the magic of AI, its ability to gather a community of peoples all over the world for the common cause of humanity and dignity of man and woman—not only to lend hope to prisoners of conscience, but also give human fellowship and warmth.”

-- Member of Parliament and former POC Lim Guan Eng, Malaysia
Tips for Effective Letter Writing

Use shortcuts

Do whatever is necessary to make your letter writing as quick and easy as possible. This way, letters will not be put off and they can be sent out sooner. Start by making a generic file for each type of concern; paragraphs on torture, the death penalty, disappearances, denial of medical care and so on, can be copied into your working file and edited as needed. You may find it useful to refer to the sample passages on page 7 to get your letter started and shake "writer's block."

Closings

Close your letter in a formal style by using:
- Respectfully, or Yours respectfully,
- Sincerely, or Yours sincerely,
- Yours truly,

Salutations

There is no international standard for addressing authorities. These formalities vary according to different governmental structures in each country. Urgent Actions and other AI appeals will usually give you a suggested form of salutation for each official. In general, you may safely use:

- **Your Majesty** – to Kings, Queens, and other monarchs.
- **Your Excellency** – to all heads of state, cabinet level ministers, prime ministers, ambassadors and governors.
- **Your Honor** – for judges and procurators.
- **Dear Sir/Madam** – for local authorities, prison commanders, police chiefs.
- **Dear Admiral, General, Captain, etc.** – for military officials.

Online Resources

**AIUSA’S HUMAN RIGHTS ACTION CENTER**

http://takeaction.amnestyusa.org/action/

The Human Rights Action Center is AIUSA’s central hub for online actions. At the center, you will find pending US legislation and urgent human rights cases in the US and around the world, where your action can make a difference. Actions in the Action Center come from all networks and programs of AIUSA.

**AIUSA’S URGENT ACTION NETWORK ONLINE**

http://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent/

The Urgent Action Network online is the central location for current Urgent Actions and information about the program in the US. From this page, you can link to the monthly newsletter (which contains updates on all Urgent Actions), a form for joining the UAN, this letter writing guide, Frequently Asked Questions about the UAN, and the history of the UA program. We appreciate your ongoing suggestions for making this site more useful.

In the beginning…

AI launched its Urgent Action Network in 1973 during its first Campaign Against Torture. This speedy technique relied heavily on telexes and telegrams to communicate urgent concerns about torture. To learn more about the history of urgent actions, contact the UAN office to request the “UA Bio.”

Today, AI’s Urgent Action Network is the world’s largest letter writing program. Other organizations, such as Global Response (an environmental letter writing organization) have modeled their advocacy programs after this technique.

**AI Library Online**

http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex

The AI library contains an archive of most reports, news releases, and urgent actions published from 1996 to date. Documents are available in English, French, and Spanish.

**Online Human Rights Documents**

For an extensive list of United Nations human rights treaties, visit the UN office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ website:

http://www.unhchr.ch/html/intl inst.htm

For an abbreviated list of UN documents, see page 12 of this guide.
Anatomy of an Urgent Action

Below are some guidelines to help you navigate an Urgent Action case sheet as you begin writing a letter to a government official. These recommendations can also be applied to any other Amnesty International action. The most effective appeal you can write on any action is **simple, quick, and to the point.**

**Write as soon as you can.** Try to write as close as possible to the date a case is issued.

**Be factual in your appeal.** Relay the details of the case as you know them. Do not discuss ideology or politics. Your message must be for the benefit of the victim and not a vehicle for political opinions.

**Remember the Amnesty International mission.** Keep your letters within AI’s mission.

You may refer to Amnesty International in your letter, unless otherwise stated in the case sheet, however, appeals written in a personal or professional capacity will show the diversity of concern regarding the particular individuals(s) and human rights abuses.

**If you have questions, please call, write, fax, or email the AIUSA Urgent Action office.**

**If you receive a reply from a government official to one of your appeals, please send the reply to the Urgent Action office.** The UA office tracks all replies to cases and forwards the information to AI researchers in London and country specialists in AIUSA, thus helping them learn what the official response is to a given case.
RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible:
- urging the Togolese authorities to take immediate measures to prevent Marc Palanga being tortured or ill-treated and to guarantee his safety;
- stating that Amnesty International considers him to be prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release;
- requesting that a thorough investigation be conducted into the reported beatings of the six detainees held from 9 to 17 February 2003 and that those responsible be brought to justice;
- calling on the authorities to end arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment of members of opposition parties in Togo.

APPEALS TO:
President of the Republic of Togo:
His Excellency/Son Excellence
Monsieur le Général Gnassingbé Eyadéma
Président de la République
Palais présidentiel, Avenue de la Marina
Lomé, TOGO
Telegram: Président, Lomé, Togo
Fax : 011 228 221 32 04 (Please specify : « À l’attention du Président de la République »)
Email : presidency@republicoftogo.com
Salutation : Dear President/Monsieur le Président

Minister of Interior:
Monsieur Akila Essi Boko
Ministre de l’Intérieur et de la Sécurité
Ministère de l’Intérieur et de la Sécurité
Rue Albert Sarraut
Lomé, TOGO
Telegram: Ministre de l’Intérieur, Lomé, Togo
Fax : 011 228 221 22 06
Salutation : Dear Minister / Monsieur le Ministre

Minister of Justice:
Katari Foly-Bazi
Ministre de la Justice et Garde des Sceaux
Ministère de la Justice, Avenue de la Marina
Rue Colonel le Roux
Lomé, TOGO
Telegram: Ministre de la Justice, Lomé, Togo
Fax : 011 228 221 22 06
Salutation : Dear Minister / Monsieur le Ministre

COPIES TO:
Ambassador Akoussoulelou Bodjona
Embassy of the Republic of Togo
2208 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington DC 20008
Fax: 1 202 232 3190

Please send appeals immediately. Check with the AIUSA Urgent Action office between 9:00 am and 6:00 pm, Eastern Time, if sending appeals after April 8, 2003.

It is not expected that you send letters to every address listed, but rather that you choose one or more.

Addresses are not listed in order of priority; so if you do not send appeals to all, pick some at random knowing that other Amnesty activists will choose the other addresses. Sending copies to the media (when listed) may spark their own investigations as well as obtain beneficial publicity for the victim(s) of human rights abuses.

If the title of the official is set apart (italics, underlined, bold), it does not need to be included in the address of the official.

Choose one or two recommended actions to focus your letter around, in order to keep your letters fast, short, and to-the-point. It is not necessary to cover all recommended actions in each letter.

Use the recommended salutation for officials.

Often actions within Amnesty International will change, particularly Urgent Actions: a person is freed, a family receives more threats, new details arise that can help in your appeal. Please do not send appeals past the suggested stop date. If you would like to continue action past this date, contact the Amnesty office listed on the case sheet.

Never send the Urgent Action case sheet, or any other Amnesty action, to a government official or a press organization. These case sheets are meant for your information only. It may prove harmful to the victim(s) of human rights abuses for government officials to obtain UA casesheets.

“I would like to thank you sincerely and cordially for the work you do as a member of the United States section of Amnesty International and for your interest in securing the exercise of our citizens’ human rights and freedoms. In this connection I assure you that the work you do is not wasted, because each expression of international solidarity helps considerably in reparation of injustice committed upon citizens of our country.”

-- excerpt of a letter from the Chairman of the Supreme Court in Czechoslovakia. The letter goes on to inform the Urgent Action letter writer that the Prisoner of Conscience for whom she wrote was released by presidential pardon.
A Sample Letter

Use respectful language throughout your letter.

Write in English, unless you are completely fluent in the language of the country concerned.

Use professional or personal letterhead when available.

Write the official's complete address.

Be sure your mailing address is on your letter so the official can respond.

Use the proper salutation.

Always include the date.

If not typed, make sure your letter is written clearly. You may boldface, capitalize, or italicize the victim's name.

Begin by stating your main concern.

Use one paragraph to give background and details.

Use the victim's name throughout the letter.

Consider using a personal, friendly comment in your letter.

Ask for a response.

Wrap up by restating your concerns and expectations of the official.

Use the term "cc:" and the title of the agency or official to indicate that you are sending a copy of your letter there as well.

Keep your letter brief, no more than one page when printed.

If using a computer, use spell check before sending your appeal.
If You Have Writer’s Block...

Writer’s block happens to the best of us. Keeping a file of your messages can help give you a jumping off place to start a new letter, by providing inspiration. Below are some phrases and sentences that may also help get you writing again when your mind draws a blank, but remember to use them only as suggestions – it is always better to use your own heartfelt language.

Starting
I wish to appeal to you on behalf of _____, who is the subject of my deepest concern . . .

My family and I are worried about _____, who is reportedly detained unjustly in your country . . .

I am dismayed to hear that _____ has received several death threats recently.

I would like to take the opportunity to call your attention to the case of _____ . . .

We are calling on you to ensure the fair treatment of _____ . . .

Ending
. . . I hope to hear from you in the near very future.

. . . I, and all here who share my concern, would appreciate a reply from you as soon as possible. Our concern for the basic rights of individuals in your country is not of a political nature, it is simply a concern for the dignity and well being of all humans.

. . . Thank you in advance for your time on this urgent matter.

. . . Finally, in view of the above information, we urge you to act quickly to remedy this situation and ask that you inform us of the outcome of your investigation.

Death threats to a union leader:  
I was concerned to learn of recent death threats made against _____, a member of the United Confederation of Workers in Colombia on August 4. She was told that she would be killed for her trade union activity. I urge you to ensure that a full and impartial investigation is made into the threats, that the results are made public, and that those responsible are brought to justice.

“Disappearance” of a teacher:  
I am a high school teacher from the U.S. I have been greatly disturbed by the news of the “disappearance” of fellow teacher, Mr. ___, in Ankara on June 7. I would be grateful if you would inform me of his whereabouts and give assurances that he is being treated well while in detention. I would also be grateful for news of his legal status.

Inadequate medical treatment of a prisoner:  
I write this letter to you as a physician, to ensure that Professor ____, a prisoner held in ____ Prison, is given adequate diet and medical treatment. I have been informed that he is suffering from pneumonia and urgently needs to be transferred to a hospital for immediate attention. My colleagues and I here at ____ Hospital would be pleased to hear from you as soon as you are able to ensure treatment for this serious respiratory illness.

Torture of student leaders:  
I was gravely concerned by reports of the arrests of a number of student leaders at the University of ____ in October. I was particularly concerned that some of the detainees, who are being held at the _____ Detention Center, are reported to have been tortured and I seek your assurances that these students and other detainees held at _____ will be treated humanely.

Death in detention and “disappearance”:  
I am writing to express my concern over the reports of the death in custody of _____, following his arrest in Baku on January 19th. I urge an immediate investigation be conducted into the circumstances of his death and that results be made public. At the same time, I write to ask you for information on ____’s whereabouts, who was also arrested on January 19th, and I seek assurances that her physical safety be guaranteed while in detention.

Death penalty:  
As a long time member of Amnesty International, an organization that opposes the death penalty in all cases on humanitarian grounds, I urgently request that you commute the death sentence of _____. His execution violates the right to life as proclaimed in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I appeal to you to ensure that no further executions are carried out in your [country/state].

Arrest of a colleague:  
It has come to the attention of [this law firm] that three well respected lawyers in Khartoum were recently arrested for their advocacy for the human rights of your citizens. We, [your names], believe these attorneys to be prisoners of conscience, detained because of their work as legal professionals in Sudan. Although we strongly urge that these three well known attorneys be immediately and unconditionally released, until that happens, we seek assurances of their physical safety and guarantees that they will not be subjected to torture or ill treatment.
How to Send Your Appeals

Email

It is extremely easy to send your appeals via email and costs you nothing but time and care. A problem with email, however, is that many government officials either do not have email addresses or do not make their email addresses known to the public. Thus, Amnesty actions will not always list email addresses for all government officials.

If you receive your Urgent Actions via email, you might find it useful to cut and paste brief portions of the action into your own message. However, please do not send or forward the original Urgent Action directly to the official. A message composed by you that reflects your concern written in your own words will be the most effective. Carefully consider how you compose the subject line of your email: it should encourage the official to open your email, so be polite and thoughtful when choosing your words. For example: “Asking for Your Help to Find Roberto Daman Lopez.”

If you want to forward the Urgent Action itself to a friend, colleague or fellow Amnesty International activist, please send the complete text of the UA as it was sent to you without editing its content.

Fax

Most actions will include the fax numbers of one or more government officials. This is an immediate, fairly inexpensive way to communicate your concerns to governments. Because your faxed message is received as it appears, you can send petitions with signatures. You can use a letterhead that will help to individualize your appeal and make it more effective.

The cost of sending a fax is the cost of a short international phone call. A fax message can be a full length letter since it is so inexpensive to send (in contrast to a telegram or cable). You should consider including your fax number in your message and request a faxed reply from the official. If you do not have a fax machine at your home or office, many local print shops will allow you to use theirs for a fee. A variety of web-based companies will send your emailed appeal as an international fax. One such service provider is Faxaway at http://www.faxaway.com (phone: 1 800 906 4329). You should check with your own internet service provider for others.

Troubleshooting for Emails and Fax

Problems with fax numbers and email addresses often exist. When a government official’s fax or email is listed on an Urgent Action which is distributed globally to activists in over 80 countries, you can imagine how many faxes and emails begin to come in to the official’s office. This often results in the official's email or fax being turned off for a period of time. Officials may even permanently discontinue service for that address or number. For faxes, another problem may arise when inadequate phone lines in the country of destination sometimes thwart international calls. A persistent busy signal or bounced email message may mean that other activists are faxing or emailing in their appeals, which is a good thing! Have patience and keep trying. If you cannot get through on an email address or fax line for a long period of time, please airmail your letter so that the official hears your concerns in a timely manner.

Can I telephone officials?

Some Urgent Actions deal with cases of extreme emergencies in which telephone calls to officials are requested. You may see a telephone number in the address section of the UA. If possible try to find a friend or colleague who speaks the language of the target country to make the phone call; however, speaking slowly in English is usually acceptable. Be polite but firm in relaying the concerns set out in the UA. Most importantly, be certain that the name of the victim is spelled slowly and is clearly understood. Important information is sometimes gotten from a phone call. If you get any new information on the victim, please call the Urgent Action office as soon as possible at (202) 544 0200 x407.

An Amnesty writer, Nora, wrote a fax to Swaziland on an appeal case. Her phone rang on Tuesday night at 3:00 in the morning. There was no one there. It rang again at 6:00. Someone from a police station in Swaziland explained that he had received page one of her fax but not page two!  
Air Mail

Sending an airmail letter to a government official is sometimes the most feasible way of communicating your concern about a victim of human rights abuse. When fax numbers and email addresses do not work, or if you do not have access to a fax machine or the web, consider sending an airmail letter. Ideally, your letter should be one page and include your signature and return address so the official can respond to your concerns. Air mail postage rates often change. The current rate, as of July 2005, is 80 cents for one ounce (one page letter with envelope) to most countries; to Mexico and Canada: 60 cents. You can always check the international postage rate for specific countries and types of delivery at http://ircalc.usps.gov/

Postcards are also highly effective. Postcards cost 70 cents to most countries, 50 cents to Mexico and Canada. You can buy pre-stamped postcards at the post office. If you buy them elsewhere, be careful about the image on the front of the card; do not choose anything which might be deemed disrespectful or inappropriate to postal workers, government officials, or anyone else in the country where you are sending it.

Telegram/Cable

A telegram is an expensive way to send your appeal, however, it can offer an effective method of getting the attention of an official. In terms of cost, telegrams and cables should be thought of as a last resort, utilized because of the extreme nature of the case. We suggest that you send your appeal as a telegram only at times when the situation is particularly urgent and as your group’s or your own budget allows. Telegram cost is calculated per word. Since abbreviations and punctuation such as commas and periods count as words, omit them and all unnecessary words and articles whenever possible. The text of the telegram should be short and to the point. The signature should include your name and mail or email address so that the official can respond to your appeal. Here is an example of the truncated language used in telegrams (also called cables).

EXTREMELY CONCERNED ABOUT NEWS REPORTS HERE THAT ________ HAS BEEN PLACED IN ISOLATION AND DENIED FAMILY AND LAWYER VISITS. PLEASE ALLOW MORE HUMANE TREATMENT OR UNCONDITIONALLY RELEASE HER NOW

(Approximate cost of this telegram sent to Cuba: $85.00.) 7/05

There are several companies that can send a telegram for you. You may find a listing of them in the “Telegraph Services” section of your local Yellow Pages directory.

“A few days after AI Nepal launched the China Campaign, three of our members were suddenly arrested while collecting signatures... Our ordeal lasted three days, after which we were released unconditionally. Later, we found out that the Prime Minister’s office had been flooded with letters, faxes, telegrams and e-mails from people around the world demanding our release.

“Before this happened, when I prepared and wrote Urgent Action appeals, I used to try to imagine the value of letters to victims of human rights abuses. But when we ended up behind bars ourselves, we directly experienced what a letter is worth.”

-- Anil Pant, Director and UA Coordinator for AI Nepal

“We try and explain to the street children about the letters and the fact that people DO care about them. They look at me disbelievingly and ask, ‘Why would people so far away care about us when people here beat and kill us?’

I am still searching for an answer. I do not know WHY letters work – why uniformed murderers should care about the mechanic from Iowa who writes to them about a murdered street child in Guatemala City... But they do. So we must write – and keep on writing.”

-- Bruce Harris, director, Casa Alianza, Costa Rica
Beyond letters

Variations on an Urgent Action appeal

Once you have the basics down for writing an effective letter, the possibilities are endless. Letter writing can and should be creative and fun. While the largest portion of AIUSA’s Urgent Action Network is made up of individual letter writers, all Amnesty International community groups and student chapters receive monthly Urgent Actions. Urgent Action appeals can be sent as:

- Postcards to officials
- Letters to the editor in your local paper
- Telegrams/Faxes
- Emails
- Petitions
- Pre-written letters to circulate at a local farmer’s market, town festivals, faith group meetings, retirement homes, coffee shops, and brew pubs
- Local radio station broadcasts

Other ways to be involved with Amnesty International

There are many ways to be involved with Amnesty International. The basics of letter writing carry over into all programs and networks – letter writing is at the core of what AI does best. If you are looking for a way to get more involved, consider getting involved with:

- Local community or student Amnesty chapters
- AIUSA steering committees or working groups
- Human Rights Action Center (at amnestyusa.org)
- Campaigns
- Casework and Special Focus Cases
- Children’s Human Rights Network
- Corporate Action Network
- Crisis Response
- Freedom Writers Network
- Government Action Network
- Human Rights Education Network
- Interfaith Network for Human Rights
- Legal Support Network
- OUTfront (AIUSA’s program on LGBT human rights)
- Women’s Human Rights Network

For more information on any of these volunteer opportunities or programs, visit www.amnestyusa.org or call the AIUSA Regional office nearest you at 1 - 866 - A REGION

The Urgent Action Network consists of individuals and groups from all walks of life. Individuals and groups have varied and specialized interests: from journalists to attorneys, freelance photographers to international businesspersons, health professionals to students, your appeals help victims of human rights abuses.

While we encourage members to participate in all types of actions, we also provide categories of Urgent Actions to members who wish to write on special or professional interests. Please contact the Urgent Action office if you are interested in receiving regular actions on:

- artists
- business people
- children (under 18 years)
- conscientious objection
- death penalty
- educators/students
- environmental activists
- health professionals
- human rights defenders
- indigenous people
- journalists/writers
- legal professionals
- physical scientists
- political leaders
- prisoners of conscience
- refugees
- religious leaders
- sexual orientation
- social scientists
- torture
- unionists
- women
Children Can Be Human Rights Activists, Too!

For a victim of human rights abuse, hope may disappear as she feels “forgotten.” Among the most powerful voices in restoring hope in a victim and in appealing to authorities for justice are those of children. Encouraging children to participate in letter writing also benefits the children who write the letters: they gain skills in writing and composition, develop an understanding of the world, and realize they have the power to effect change.

Each month the Urgent Action program publishes and distributes an AIKids’ Urgent Action. The AIKids’ Urgent Action program also provides letter writing opportunities from other Amnesty International materials throughout the year, such as the national Special Focus Cases, the annual Summer Postcard Action, a Holiday Card Action, and an Earth Day edition. AIKids’ actions and resources are online at www.amnestyusa.org/aikids/.

Teachers, parents, after-school program leaders, and scout and camp counselors are just some of the people who enjoy working with youngsters aged nine to fourteen on letters to officials, which can save young children and teens from government mistreatment and threats. If you know a young person, teacher, or a teen interested in doing a community service project working with children, contact the UA office for an AIKids’ starter packet. AIKids’ actions are also available in Spanish.

The UA Literacy Edition program is available for those working with adult literacy groups or in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Pledging Your Support, Even When You Are Short of Time

In 1975, AIUSA's Urgent Action program recognized the growing need for a speedy response to threats of torture and execution by launching its FIRST APPEAL Pledge Program (FAPP). What began as a telegram tree, run by half a dozen office volunteers in San Francisco, is now a cutting-edge pledge program that permits the UA office to write and send individualized messages by fax, telex, telegram, or international letter service under the signatures of members who have pledged to pay for these prompt communications. While email is becoming increasingly popular as a rapid form of global communication, FAPP still ensures that on every UA case rapid communications are sent to every authority, even when the officials do not have email or fax. Messages are sent on each Urgent Action within hours of reception of the case in the UA office.

In addition to ensuring a prompt kick-off response to daily Urgent Action cases, FAPP messages are an important way to ensure a US response to the Worldwide Accelerated Response Network (WARN). WARN is an off-hours mechanism in which individuals in over 20 countries commit to taking immediate action on case information from AI researchers on weekends, evenings, and holidays. WARNs are issued when there is no time to prepare and distribute a full Urgent Action case sheet, but immediate faxes, telegrams, or telexes are urgently required. To become a FIRST APPEAL pledger or learn more about this program, contact the Urgent Action office or visit www.amnestyusa.org/urgent/fapp.html.

Dear Excellency:

I want to tell you that there’s a child in Turkey that is having all of his rights violated except one, his shelter. His name is Mehmet ali Gerdî. He got sent to jail because he’s a Kurd and the police only want Turks in the country. He’s only 9 years old; that’s as old as me! I was wondering if you can help him get out of jail. I hope you can.

From,
Arthur

25/FEBRUARY/2003

MONSIEUR AKILA ESSO BOKO
MINISTRE DE L'INTERIEUR
LOME (TOGO)

SEEKING ASSURANCES THAT MARC PALANGA IS NOT TORTURED WHILE HELD AT KARA GENDARMERIE IN NORTHERN TOGO. HE HAS BEEN DETAINED SINCE FEBRUARY 22. YOUR IMMEDIATE ASSURANCES THAT PALANGA IS NOT HARMED IMPERATIVE.

STEPHANIE MOORE
123 ACTIVIST AVENUE
NEDERLAND CO 80466
UNITED STATES
Portions of International Human Rights Documents

Strengthen your appeals by citing from relevant United Nations documents. Below are some relevant articles from four UN documents. For a full list of UN human rights treaties, visit [http://www.unhchr.ch/html/intlinst.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/intlinst.htm)

**STANDARD MINIMUM RULES FOR THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS**


- **Article 24**: The medical officer shall see and examine every prisoner as soon as possible after his admission and thereafter as necessary, with a view particularly to the discovery of physical or mental illness and the taking of all necessary measures; the segregation of prisoners suspected of infectious or contagious conditions; the noting of physical or mental defects which might hamper rehabilitation and determination of the physical capacity of every prisoner for work.

- **Article 37**: Prisoners shall be allowed, under necessary supervision, to communicate with their family and reputable friends at regular intervals, both by correspondence and by receiving visits.

**INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS**


- **Article 11**: (1) The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions…

- **Article 12**: (1) The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health…

**DECLARATION ON THE PROTECTION OF ALL PERSONS FROM TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT**

*(the Torture Declaration)*


- **Article 8**: Any person who alleges that he has been subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by, or at the instigation of, a public official shall have the right to complain to, and have his case impartially examined by, the competent authorities of the State concerned.

- **Article 9**: Wherever there is reasonable grounds to believe that an act of torture has been committed, the competent authorities of the State concerned shall promptly proceed to an impartial investigation even if there has been no formal complaint.

**UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

[www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm)

- **Article 3**: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

- **Article 5**: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

- **Article 9**: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

- **Article 10**: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charges against him.

- **Article 22**: Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

- **Article 26**: (1) Everyone has the right to education…