

## Balancing Act: First graders write letters to assisted living residents whose visitors are blocked by coronavirus: ‘I hope your glasses work’

1 The first-grade classes at Eugene Field Elementary School in Park Ridge, Ill., spent Thursday writing letters to residents of an assisted living facility a few blocks away.

2 The students, 6 and 7 years old, are learning to string letters together to make sentences, fill up pages and record their observations, stories and feelings. They’re also learning about empathy.

3 “Part of the social-emotional component of our lessons deals with showing kindness,” teacher Julie Chalberg told me. “How do we show kindness and flexibility and patience with ourselves and with others?”

4 When the coronavirus pandemic forced schools to close, activities to be canceled, and friends and family members to maintain a responsible, but lonely, physical distance, Chalberg and her colleagues started brainstorming how to weave together writing lessons with empathy lessons and use the results for the greater good.

5 Chalberg’s 94-year-old-grandmother passed away in January. She spent her final years in an assisted living facility near Chalberg’s Schaumburg home, and Chalberg and her four children visited frequently.

6 “She would just light up when we got there,” Chalberg said. “It was the highlight of her day, her week.”

7 Chalberg worries about the residents in facilities whose visitors are now locked out. The isolation. The confusion. The stripping away of a trusted source of joy and connection.

8 “The last year was difficult for my grandmother to remember things,” she said. “If she were still here, would she have to wonder every day why we weren’t coming to see her?”

9 Maybe her first graders could fill in a little bit of the space where visitors used to be, Chalberg thought. She pitched the letter-writing idea to her teaching team and school administrators.

10 “Instantly, they were all like, ‘Yes. We need to do this,’” she said.

11 She contacted Summit of Uptown, a senior living facility in Park Ridge that provides independent living, assisted living and dementia care. She told the staff to expect a flood of letters to start arriving next week. They said, in effect: Bring it.

12 On Thursday morning, using e-learning technology, the first graders gathered around for a group reading of “It Came in the Mail,” a picture book by Ben Clanton about a boy named Liam who longs for something to arrive in his mailbox with his name on it.

13 Then Chalberg and her fellow first-grade teachers instructed their students to write letters to their neighbors a few blocks away.

14 They asked the kids to make the letters conversational and talk about some of their favorite hobbies. They asked the students to have grown-ups take photos of them mailing the letters. They told the students to invite their siblings to write letters too.

15 To stave off loneliness, the more the mightier.  
16 The results speak for themselves.

**17** Ethan, a first grader at Eugene Field Elementary School, reads a letter he wrote to neighbors in nearby assisted living during the coronavirus pandemic.

**18** “We really try to teach these kids (that) the words they say and their actions really have an impact, even though they might just be 6 or 7 years old,” said Chalberg, who’s been teaching for 18 years. “We tell them all the time, ‘It doesn’t matter how little you are – you have a lot of love.’ I just want them to feel like they’re making a difference, even in the lives of people they’re not going to meet.”

**19** Simple, brilliant guidance for all of us to follow.

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**CRITICAL THINKING ANSWERS**

The following is the answer key for the *XTRA Weekly* lesson about first-graders who wrote letters to assisted living residents. The answer key is correlated to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for Grades 6–12. (For more information about these standards, please visit [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)). The critical thinking skills identified for each question were adapted from a thinking skills framework developed by San Diego City Schools educators.

(Note: Point out to students that this article was published on March 23, 2020 in the *Chicago Tribune*.)

**Vocabulary  
Idioms**

**(Critical Thinking Skills: Synthesizing information—Drawing conclusions and making inferences; Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use—Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate; Craft and Structure—Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone)**

1. empathy (n.) – the ability to understand and share the feelings of another; component (n.) – a part, element or ingredient of something; pandemic (n.) – an epidemic spread over a wide area, such as a country or the world; dementia (n.) – a state of serious emotional and mental deterioration, such as memory loss; sibling (n.) – a brother or sister.
2. The phrase “light up” in paragraph #6 means to express interest or pleasure.

**Fact and Opinion**

**(Critical Thinking Skills: Analyzing information—Fact and opinion; Synthesizing information. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas—Distinguish among fact, opinion and reasoned judgment in a text)**

3. Answers will vary.

Facts: a. Julie Chalberg is a teacher at Eugene Field Elementary School, as noted in paragraph #'s 1 and 3. b. Chalberg's 94-year old grandmother died in January, as noted in paragraph #5. c. Summit of Uptown is a senior living facility in Park Ridge, Ill., as noted in paragraph #11.

A fact is a statement that can be proven or verified.

**CRITICAL THINKING ANSWERS**

Opinions: a. “The last year was difficult for my grandmother to remember things,” as noted in paragraph #8. b. Simple, brilliant guidance for all of us to follow, as noted in paragraph #19.

An opinion is a personal belief, judgment or appraisal regarding a particular matter.

elementary school, and because the residents are not allowed to have visitors at the facility to the COVID-19 situation; therefore, they face isolation and loneliness.

**Drawing Conclusions**  
**Making Inferences**

**(Critical Thinking Skills: Synthesizing was information: drawing conclusions and making inferences; Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Key Ideas and Details—Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text)**

4. Answers will vary. Julie Chalberg wants her school’s first-grade students to write letters to assisted living residents for several reasons: a. To show students the importance of caring about others who they might never meet, as noted in paragraph #18; b. To help residents of assisted living facilities overcome isolation and loneliness by having students connect with them through letter writing, as noted in paragraph #7.
5. Answers will vary. Chalberg choose Summit of Uptown as the senior living facility to receive letters from first graders because the facility was close to their

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The Extension Activities listed below were developed to extend the questions on the article about first graders writing letters to assisted living residents whose visitors are blocked from seeing them due to the coronavirus outbreak.

### WRITING ACTIVITY (PERSONAL LETTER)

*(Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Text Types and Purposes—Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information)*

- Read aloud, or have a student volunteer read aloud, paragraph #14 from this week’s article, which notes the topics the first graders at Eugene Field Elementary School are asked to include in their letters to residents of an assisted living facility in Illinois.
- Tell students that for this week’s writing assignment, they will be writing a letter to a resident of the Summit of Uptown senior living facility. Write the following prompt on the board:

Write a letter to a resident of the Summit of Uptown senior living facility describing yourself, your favorite hobbies and what career you would like to pursue as an adult.

- Discuss the parts of a personal letter (date, greeting/salutation, body, closing, signature), and answer any questions students might have about the writing assignment.
- Distribute paper and pencils and have students begin writing.

### SPEAKING ACTIVITY (ORAL SUMMARY)

*(Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Key Ideas and Details—Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas)*

- Tell students that for this week’s speaking assignment, they will deliver an oral summary of the article about the first graders who are writing letters to residents of a senior living facility. Make sure they understand the following terms: *main idea* (subject of the article) and *supporting details* (additional important information about the main idea).
- Write the following on the board and review the following steps with students to help them understand how to do an oral summary of an article:

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### Delivering Oral Summaries

- Reread the article to find its *main idea*. Underline key words that best express this main idea. (The main idea is usually included in the headline or in the first few paragraphs of the article.)
  - Reread each of the remaining paragraphs to find *supporting details*. Once again, underline key words.
  - Review the sections of the article you have underlined. Then, in your own words, write a summary that states the most important information contained in the article.
  - DO NOT add thoughts of your own; just restate what the author says.
  - Your summary should be about one-third as long as the article. For example, if the article has 15 or 16 paragraphs, your summary should have 5 or 6.
- Answer any questions students might have about this part of the assignment.
  - Distribute paper, pencils and index cards (if available). Have students begin taking notes on the article. Once they have completed the steps outlined above, have them use their notes to deliver their oral summaries to the class.

### ELL ACTIVITY—“Read Aloud”

Have students take turns reading aloud each paragraph in the article, “Balancing Act: First graders write letters to assisted living residents whose visitors are blocked by coronavirus: ‘I hope your glasses work.’” After each paragraph is read, have the class discuss and summarize its main point.

### PARENT/GUARDIAN INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITY—“Rewriting Headlines”

(**Note:** Make a copy of this activity for students to take home to complete with their parents/guardians.)

A good headline uses language that catches the reader’s attention.

With your parent/guardian or other relative or friend, review the headline for this week’s article, “Balancing Act: First graders write letters to assisted living residents whose visitors are blocked by coronavirus: ‘I hope your glasses work.’” Discuss whether this meets the requirements of a good headline. Work with your parent/guardian or other family member or friend to create an alternative headline that will invite the reader’s attention. Before beginning to write, reread the article carefully to find additional interesting facts that could be used for a “catchy” headline.

Bring your rewritten headline back to share with the class.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### POSTER BOARDS

For this assignment, students will need sheets of poster board or white construction paper (12" × 18"), scissors and art supplies (colored pencils, crayons, felt-tip pens, glue, etc.). Using the Internet, books, newspapers and magazines as resources, have students work in pairs to create a poster with a theme of showing kindness.

Instruct pairs to assemble their photos or drawings on the poster board to create an effective display. Have students create their own illustrations to include on the poster. Finally, ask students to give their posters a title.

### INTERVIEWING

Tell students to imagine they are journalists at a major newspaper. They have been asked to interview Julie Chalberg, the teacher who inspired first-grade students at her school to write letters to residents at an assisted living facility. Have them list 10 questions that they would ask Julie.

**FOR THE INSTRUCTOR**

<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	The “For the Instructor” page is intended to give instructors ideas to introduce the main topic of this week’s XTRA Weekly article to students before they read the selection.
<b>AGE GROUP</b>	Level II (Grades 6–8)
<b>RELATED COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS</b>	<p><b>Vocabulary and Concept Development:</b> Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</p> <p><b>Reading Comprehension:</b> Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.</p> <p><b>Writing Applications:</b> Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.</p> <p><b>Speaking Applications:</b> Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</p>
<b>SUPPLIES NEEDED</b>	<p>Images of first graders writing letters Paper Pens or pencils Index cards Poster board or construction paper (12" × 18") Art materials (felt-tip pens, colored pencils, crayons, etc.)</p>
<b>SUGGESTED TIME FRAME FOR ACTIVITIES</b>	<p><b>Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension:</b> 1 hour  <b>“For the Instructor”:</b> ½ hour  <b>Writing Extension—Narrative:</b> 1 hour  <b>Speaking Extension—Oral Summary:</b> 1 hour (½ hour for preparation; ½ hour for class presentations)  <b>ELL Activity:</b> ½ hour  <b>Parent/Guardian Involvement Activity:</b> ½ hour</p>



## FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

### PREPARATION

- Locate an image of young children writing letters. If you have difficulty finding a suitable image at your location, you can download a graphic from the following website (Google Images):

[https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+children+writing+letters&rlz=1C1GCEB\\_enUS886US886&oq=images+of+children+writing+letters&aqs=chrome..69i57.11761j0j7&sourceid=chrome8](https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+children+writing+letters&rlz=1C1GCEB_enUS886US886&oq=images+of+children+writing+letters&aqs=chrome..69i57.11761j0j7&sourceid=chrome8)

- For more information related to the article and extension activities, visit the following websites:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+children+meeting+seniors+at+an+assisted+living+facility&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwiKg8vWo9PoAhW-ADQIHWYCA1YQ2-cCegn>

[https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+assisted+living+facility&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwiRla3ro9PoAhV3HTQIHWLQB0Q2-cCegQIABAA&oq=images+of+assisted+living+facility&gs\\_lcp=CgNpbWcQA1DbmwZY25sGYJn](https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+assisted+living+facility&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwiRla3ro9PoAhV3HTQIHWLQB0Q2-cCegQIABAA&oq=images+of+assisted+living+facility&gs_lcp=CgNpbWcQA1DbmwZY25sGYJn)

The following are additional facts related to topics in the article to share with students:

*--These nationwide closures of schools due to COVID-19 are impacting over 89% of the world's student population.*

*--More than one million older adults live in assisted living facilities.*

### WARM-UP ACTIVITY

To prepare students for reading this week's article, do the following activity:

1. Ask students if they have ever visited a senior living facility or if they know of someone who has visited a senior living facility. Have them describe their experiences.
2. Read aloud the headline of this week's news article, "Balancing Act: First graders write letters to assisted living residents whose visitors are blocked by coronavirus: 'I hope your glasses work.'" Record their responses on the board; then discuss.
3. Show students photos of students writing letters. Tell students that by reading this week's news article, they will learn about first graders from an Illinois elementary school who are writing letters to residents of an assisted living facility.

## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

### Vocabulary Idioms

1. Use the contextual clues in the article to define/explain the following words and phrases.

empathy (para. 2)  
component (para. 3)  
pandemic (para. 4)  
dementia (para. 11)  
sibling (para. 14)

2. What is meant by the phrase “light up,” which is found in paragraph #6 of the article? Use this phrase in an original sentence.

### Fact and Opinion

3. List three facts from the article. Identify the paragraphs where these facts are located. Why are these facts? Are there any opinions in the story? List two opinions and identify the paragraphs where they are found. What makes these statements opinions?

### Drawing Conclusions Making Inferences

4. Why did teacher Julie Chalberg want her school’s first-grade students to write letters to assisted living residents? Cite evidence in the article that supports your answer.
5. Why did Chalberg choose Summit of Uptown as the senior living facility to receive letters from first graders at Eugene Field Elementary School? Explain.