



“A Letter from an Immigrant” 9th-12th Grade Lesson Plan

Overview:

A LETTER FROM AN IMMIGRANT is a teacher-directed research and writing exercise that allows students to utilize the onsite exhibits at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, as well as resources provided by the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Education Department and/or the individual teacher.

In undertaking the role of a new immigrant, corresponding with friends & relatives back in Europe about the noteworthy moments of their experience, students will not only gain a deeper understanding of the many components involved in the journey of the immigrants to America during the great migration from Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, but will also determine how to utilize researched materials in creating original perspectives on the immigrant experience of the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries.

Time Frame:

- One day for research visit to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum OR for in-class research
- One days for in-class writing workshop (optional)
- One day for sharing/discussing letters in class as a means of compiling the essential

Materials:

- Handout, “The Student Researcher’s Worksheet”
- “Teacher Preparation Information: Island of Hope, Island of Tears”
- Viewing Guide, “Island of Hope, Island of Tears”
- Grading Rubric, “A Letter From An Immigrant”

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the conditions and circumstances that influenced millions of immigrants to seek a new life in the United States in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century.
- Identify and describe the multiple components comprising the stages of the journey of a typical experience of the late nineteenth – early twentieth century immigrant to the United States.
- Create a detailed first person account of the experiences of a hypothetical immigrant entering the United States through the Ellis Island.
- Utilize museum exhibits and primary & secondary sources in the creation of an original account of one immigrant's experiences.

Procedure:

1) Assume the role/personality of one of the following fictitious but fact-based characters:

---**Stephen Sojka**, a strong, hard-working 23 year-old metal/wire worker from the northeastern section of the empire of Austria-Hungary (now present-day Slovakia) in 1909.

---**Katarina Tranekovsky**, a 75 year-old woman of the Jewish faith from Russia who was brought to America by her son & his family in 1897.

---**Maria Sammartino**, a spirited 13 year-old girl who was brought to America by her family from Italy and landed at Ellis Island with a head cold in 1905.

2) For the purposes of this assignment, we will assume that all three eventually got through the processing at Ellis Island to start their lives as Americans. Your task (as the character you've chosen) is to write a letter home to your relatives in Europe describing the details of your individual immigrant experience, including your observations or impressions from among the following topics that are described in our museum exhibits and offerings:

- a) The reasons you or your family had for emigrating from your native country to America.
- b) The conditions that you encountered at the port cities and on an ocean liner as a passenger in steerage class.
- c) The experience you encountered as a steerage class passenger upon landing at the docks in New York City or Hoboken.

- d) Stages of the medical inspection you endured from the staff of the U.S. Public Health Service at Ellis Island.
 - e) The experience of being legally interrogated at the inspectors' desk in the Great Hall (including the types of questions you would be asked during this interrogation.
 - f) The possible destinations (general destinations as well as ethnic group-specific) for those immigrants departing Ellis Island.
 - g) The types of occupations that those departing from Ellis Island would initially pursue as new residents in the United States.
- 3) Gather and, later, review your accumulated facts, data, experiences, & emotions that you feel might have made up the immigrant experience for your chosen character on the provided viewing sheets and from your notes.

- 4) Now, compose a two- three page (typed, double-spaced) personal letter home to a relative that:

---Conveys your immigrant experience in the first person. Make it a personal letter

---Use of at least FIVE (5) specific facts/events/experiences that you feel your character would have encountered on their journey to and through Ellis Island , in your descriptive letter to those back home in your native country in Europe.

---Use this information creatively & clearly explain each as to how it contributed to the events & emotions of your experience.

- 5) WHAT WILL BE YOUR SOURCES OF INFORMATION IN DEVELOPING & WRITING THIS LETTER?

Some of the sources available to you for this project are the following:

- a) Research that you will compile from the exhibit areas at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, using the guide questions provided in the packet entitled "The Researcher's Worksheet".
- b) **The film, "[Island of Hope, Island of Tears](#)" (27 min.)** – click here for the film that is shown at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum today. A viewing sheet is provided for this film.
- c) If you will be preparing this assignment without the benefit of a field trip to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, please contact us in the Education Programs department for materials in formulating your letter, in addition to materials your teacher will also develop for your use:

THE STUDENT RESEARCHER'S WORKSHEET

Use the questions below to help you gather evidence you may want to use in the writing of the letter you'll send to friends & family back in Europe. With each question, the most relevant exhibit area or source from which you can gather your descriptive detail is provided.

- 1) What was your life like in Europe before you decided to immigrate to America? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 2) What reasons did you have for wanting to leave Europe? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 3) What kind of personal items did you bring with you to provide a start to your life in America? (*Treasures from Home*)
- 4) From which ports in Europe might you have departed on your journey to America? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 5) What were your experiences in the port city in Europe from which you departed? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 6) How much money of the time period did you pay for your steamship fare in steerage class? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 7) How would you describe the conditions of your experience in steerage class? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 8) What were your reactions to entering New York Harbor on your steamship? (*"Island of Hope, Island of Tears"*)
- 9) What stages were involved in the medical processing of immigrants carried out by the U.S. Public Health Service? (*Through America's Gate*)
- 10) What questions were asked of immigrants when they purchased their tickets at European port cities? How were these answers used at Ellis Island in the legal processing of immigrants in The Great Hall? (*Through America's Gate* and *"The Great Hall – Inspector Desk Manifest Pages"*)
- 11) What were some of the final destinations of the immigrants who were processed at Ellis Island? What were the reasons why immigrants chose to go to those destinations?
- 12) What was a tenement? What were the conditions faced by immigrants as they made their new lives in tenement buildings of the big cities of America in the late 19th – early 20th century?

- 13) What kind of jobs (general categories & specific jobs) did immigrants undertake to survive and prosper in America in the late 19th – early 20th century?
- 14) What kinds of social activities did immigrants partake in as they settled in and became Americans? (*Peak Immigration Years*)
- 15) What was nativism? What were the ways that the nativist movement sought to restrain the flow of immigrants into America?
- 16) What were the steps that immigrants of the early 20th century undertook to become American citizens?

Teacher Resources for “A Letter from An Immigrant”: Some Suggestions For The Classroom Teacher

- This activity is designed for use as an on-site activity at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. However with the provision of proper resources to the students, the activity could be assigned as either an in-class or take-home project
- The three choices of roles provide the students with a varying set of personalities from which to choose, as well as for the teacher to suggest to particular students to enhance their chances for successful accomplishment in developing skills of research and composition.
- Students can approach the research and assignment individually or collaborate with classmates of their choice or assigned by the teacher.
- When on site at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, it is recommended that teacher-chaperones be available to students for reference and/or guidance as they use the museum for research (depending on the grade and academic level of the class).
- Each teacher can determine how to utilize the results of this day of research as an exercise in composing a detailed and convincing first person account. The students can bring their research to class and, with the teacher’s guidance, work individually or collaboratively with other students to craft their assignment; alternatively, depending on the grade and academic level of the class, they may undertake this task individually as a take-home assignment.

Teacher Preparation Information: “Island of Hope, Island of Tears”

Film Summary

ISLAND OF HOPE, ISLAND OF TEARS depicts the long journey made by European immigrants in their quest to enter the United States in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century. It portrays the increasingly challenging conditions in Europe at the turn of the century which convinced millions to leave their ancestral lands. The often difficult trips overland to European ports and the processing endured there are presented. A detailed portrayal of the conditions experienced in steerage class during the transatlantic voyage is revealed. The initial reactions and emotions of immigrants entering New York Harbor are poignantly described as well as their handling as they disembarked from their ships at the docks in New York & New Jersey.

The experience of medical and legal processing faced by these immigrants at the Ellis Island Processing Center are graphically illustrated. Among the many aspects presented are the medical examinations, the reasons for detention and possible exclusion, the legal rights provided to detained immigrants, and the conditions of the dining and dormitory facilities at Ellis Island. The movie concludes as immigrants receive permission to enter the United States and begin their new lives as Americans.

Throughout the film, the filmmaker Charles Guggenheim presents the immigrant experience with emotion and drama, utilizing segments of oral testimony given by actual immigrants through Ellis Island as the majority of the film’s narrative, as well as archival photos and film footage. The voyage of a European immigrant to a new, unknown land comes alive as the viewer experiences the hopes, fears, and jubilation of some of the nearly thirteen million immigrants who entered the United States through Ellis Island.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY & DISCUSSION

To facilitate a more meaningful discussion of the film, “Island of Hope, Island of Tears”, and the museum exhibits in general, the following questions are provided for use by the teacher for in-class post visit activities or as substitute questions for a different viewing guide than the sample provided.

- 1) What reasons did immigrants from Europe have for choosing to migrate to America in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century?
- 2) How did immigrants describe their trip overland from their home villages to the port cities in Europe?

- 3) What port cities in Europe were most commonly used by immigrants traveling to America in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century?
- 4) How were immigrants processed and prepared for travel at the port cities in Europe? Why were they treated in such a manner?
- 5) Describe the conditions encountered by the immigrants who traveled in steerage class.
- 6) How did the immigrants describe their voyage in steerage on the ocean liners to America?
- 7) What were the reactions of immigrants as they entered New York Harbor for the first time?
- 8) How were the steerage class passengers treated differently from the first and second class passengers as they disembarked at the docks in New York City?
- 9) How did immigrants describe their first sight of Ellis Island?
- 10) Describe the appearance of immigrants as they entered the processing center at Ellis Island (clothing, belongings, etc.).
- 11) What fears did immigrants have as they entered The Great Hall at Ellis Island for processing?
- 12) What did the chalk marks placed on immigrants' coats in the Great Hall signify?
- 13) Cite & explain some of the reasons an immigrant might be detained at Ellis Island.
- 14) What were the conditions at the Ellis Island dining halls during their busiest times?
- 15) What kind of proof or evidence did immigrants bring with them to show that they were entitled to entrance into the United States?
- 16) What role did the ship's manifest play in the processing of immigrants?
- 17) Despite the many difficulties & obstacles they faced on their journey, why did most immigrants rejoice at being granted permission to enter the United States?
- 18) After watching this film, explain whether or not you would have made the voyage to America if you were an immigrant of that time period.

19) Was the meticulous processing of immigrants through Ellis Island conducted in a fair manner? Cite references to moments in the film to support your opinion

20) Why did immigrants fear deportation so much? Explain your reasons clearly.

STUDENT VIEWING GUIDE: “Island of Hope, Island of Tears”

As you watch this film about the path immigrants took to get to and into America in the late nineteenth & early twentieth centuries, gather detailed points to the following questions:

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- 1) What reasons did immigrants from Europe have for choosing to leave Europe & immigrate to America in the late 19th – early 20th centuries?
- 2) What port cities in Europe were used by millions of immigrants to emigrate to America?
- 3) What conditions were faced by the immigrants who traveled on the ships to America in **STEERAGE** class?
- 4) What did the chalk marks on immigrants’ coats represent?

**A LETTER FROM AN IMMIGRANT
GRADING RUBRIC**

NAME _____ PERIOD _____

---Provides a two- three page personal letter (typed, 1.5 spaced) -----

---Writing in the FIRST-PERSON – make it a personal letter in -----
the personality of one of the provided fact-based characters:

---Identifies at least **THREE (3)** facts/events/experiences that -----
you feel your character would have encountered on their

---Use this information creatively & clearly explain each as to -----
how it was important to your character's experience.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

