



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

GRATITUDE LETTER FOR STUDENTS

"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."

— William Arthur Ward

OVERVIEW

Students write a letter of thanks and deliver it in person.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Any time during the school year

TIME REQUIRED

- In studies, students worked on their Gratitude Letters for about an hour, spread across five different days in a two-week period. The writing could also be completed on a single day.

LEVEL

- Pre-K & Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice expressing gratitude through writing
- Experience how it feels to express gratitude in person and to see the person's response

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to write a gratitude letter to someone you haven't thanked. If you have time, try to deliver it in person. How did this exercise make you feel?

INSTRUCTIONS

THE PRACTICE

- To introduce the practice, the following script may be helpful (feel free to adjust the language to fit the age level of students, especially younger students):
 - *Most everyone enjoys thanks for a job well done or for a favor done for a friend, and most of us remember to say "thank you" to others. But sometimes our "thank you" is said so casually or quickly that it is nearly meaningless.*
 - *In this exercise, you will have the opportunity to express your gratitude in a very thoughtful manner. Think of the people—parents, friends, coaches, teammates, and so on—who have been especially kind to you but whom you have never properly thanked. Choose one person you could meet individually for a face-to-face meeting in the next week.*
 - *Your task is to write a gratitude letter (a letter of thanks) to this individual and deliver it in person. The letter should be specific about what they did that affected your life. Make it sing!*
 - *It is important that you meet them in person. Don't tell this person, however, about the purpose of this meeting. This exercise is much more fun when it is a surprise to the person you are thanking.*

CLOSURE

- Ask students to reflect on the practice of writing and delivering the letter in person. What did the experience feel like? How did the person who received the letter respond? Did it change students' relationship with that person for the better? If so, how? Would they do it again? What advice might they give to someone who is thinking of writing a gratitude letter?

NOTE

- When teaching about gratitude in a school setting, it is important to keep in mind that students differ in terms of culture, race, socioeconomic status, and religious background. This may mean that they also differ in the way they express and practice gratitude, including verbal expressions, gestures, acts of kindness or caring, rituals, or gifts. Welcoming discussion of these and other differences in the classroom will deepen students' understanding of gratitude.
- In addition, the experience of gratitude may be challenging for children facing personal struggles, community suffering, or systemic inequality. Rather than simply encouraging them to "look on the bright side," researchers Jeffrey Froh and Giacomo Bono suggest listening deeply, empathizing, and acknowledging their feelings. This can help them cultivate resilience, which—along with other qualities like self-compassion and hope—could help plant the seeds for gratefulness.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you notice if students show more positive emotion and/or optimism after this practice? Are they expressing gratitude more often?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a study, students in various grades either wrote and delivered a [Gratitude Letter](#) or journaled about their daily activities and feelings. The Gratitude Letter led to more positive feelings afterward; two months later, students who started the experiment relatively low in positive emotion showed significant improvements.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In addition to its benefits for adults, research suggests that gratitude is also [good for youth](#), going hand in hand with greater hope and optimism, higher satisfaction with life, and fewer health complaints. [Grateful adolescents](#) also have better relationships, receiving more social support from others and being more kind and helpful in turn.

Like adults, however, students may miss opportunities to express their gratitude. The Gratitude Letter offers them a chance to reflect on the people who have made their life better, and to reach out and connect (or reconnect) with those people. As the instructions suggest, this can be fun and meaningful.