Franklin as correspondent & advisor
A lesson for high school American literature students
Janet Gugeler, 2009

The students for whom this lesson has been prepared are 11th graders studying American literature chronologically in a suburban school district. This lesson occurs in the section of study "pre-colonial through 1800" in the standard curriculum.
What will students gain?

- Understanding of Franklin's use of personal narrative/anecdote incorporated into correspondence
- Understanding of personal narrative/anecdote as a vehicle for providing advice.
- Experience in writing personal narrative/anecdote

THE LETTER appears on the next 2 pages with the assignment following.
I received my dear friend's two letters, one for Wednesday and one for Saturday. This is again indolent as I am, and averse to writing, the fear of having no more of your pleasing epistles, if I do not contribute to the correspondence, obliges me to take up my pen; and as Mr. B. has kindly sent me word that he sets out tomorrow to see you, instead of spending this Wednesday evening as I have done its namesakes, in your delightful company, as I sit down to spending it in thinking of you, in writing to you, and in reading over and over again your letters.

I am charmed with your description of Paradise, and with your plan of living there and I approve much of your conclusion that in the meantime we should draw all the good we can from this world. In my opinion, we might all draw more good from it than we do, and suffer less evil, if we would take care not to give too much for whistles. For to me it seems, that most of the unhappy people we meet with, are becoming so by neglect of caution.

You ask what I mean? You love stories, and will excuse my telling one of myself.

When I was a child of seven years old, my friends, on a holiday, filled my pockets with coppers. I went directly to a shop where they sold toys for children; and being charmed with the sound of a whistle that I met by the way in the hands of another boy I voluntarily offered and gave all my money for one. I then came home, and went whistling all over the house, much pleased with my whistle, but disturbing all the family. My brothers, and sisters, and cousins, understanding the bargain I had made, told me I had given four times as much for it as it was worth; put me in mind what good things I might have bought with the rest of the money; and laughed at me so much for my folly, that I cried with vexation; and the reflection gave me more chagrin than the whistle gave me pleasure.

This however was afterward of use to me, impression continuing on my mind; so that often, when I was tempted to buy some unnecessary thing, I said to myself, Don't give too much for the whistle; and I saved my money.

As I grew up, came into the world, and observed the actions of men, I thought I met with many, very many, who gave too much for the whistle. When I saw one too ambitious of court favor, sacrificing his time in attendance on levees, his repose, his liberty, his virtue, and perhaps his friends, to attain it, I have said to myself, This man gives too much for his whistle.
When I saw another fond of popularity, constantly employing himself in political bustles, neglecting his own affairs, and ruining them by that neglect, *He pays, indeed, said I, too much for his whistle.*

If I knew a miser, who gave up every kind of comfortable living, all the pleasure of doing good to others, all the esteem of his fellow-citizens, and the joys of benevolent friendship, for the sake of accumulating wealth, *Poor man, said I, you pay too much for your whistle.*

When I met with a man of pleasure, sacrificing every laudable improvement of the mind, or of his fortune, to mere corporal sensations, and ruining his health in their pursuit, *Mistaken man, said I, you are providing pain for yourself, instead of pleasure; you give too much for your whistle.*

If I see one fond of appearance, or fine clothes, fine houses, fine furniture, fine equipages, all above his fortune, for which he contracts debts, and ends his career in prison, *Alas! say I, he has paid dear, very dear, for his whistle.*

When I see a beautiful sweet-tempered girl married to an ill-natured brute of a husband, *What a pity, say I, that she should pay so much for a whistle!*

In short, I conceive that the great part of the miseries of mankind are brought upon them by the false estimates they have made of the value of things, and by their *giving too much for their whistles.*

Yet I ought to have charity for these unhappy people, when I consider that, with all this wisdom of which I am boasting, there are certain things in the world so tempting, for example, the apples of King John, which happily are not to be bought; for it they were to put to sale by auction, I might very easily be led to ruin myself in the purchase, and find that I had once more given too much for the *whistle.*

Adieu, my dear friend, and believe me ever yours very sincerely and with unalterable affection.
THE ASSIGNMENT

Background

In 1779 Benjamin Franklin was serving as the first American Minister (what we would today call an ambassador) to France. He made his home in Passy, a village outside Paris. Among the ladies of Paris who admired Franklin was Madame Anne-Louise d’Hardancourt Brillon de Jouy (1744-1824), wife of a French treasury official. It is to this young woman the letter was written. The two became close friends in spite of their age difference. Franklin, at 73, was 38 years older than the 35 year old Madame Brillon. She often referred to him as if he were her father, calling him "papa" and asking his advice.

Lesson

- We will read aloud the handout: a letter from Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon

- We will discuss the following:
  1. How does this letter differ from the "friendly letter" format we have in our grammar text?
  2. How is it the same as that format?

- We will examine the letter for examples of 18th century language and determine the meanings of unfamiliar terms.
  Example: “the apples of King John” refers to a type of apple which were said to mature on St. John’s Day (May 6) and which were known for their ability to remain edible for long periods of time, some say as long as 2 years, even though they appeared shriveled

- Students will work in pairs to complete Task #1.

- Each student will complete Task #2 independently, referring to the grading rubric for guidance in preparation.

- Teacher will evaluate task #1 for accuracy and provide feedback.
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Culture Workshop

- Teacher will evaluate task #2 using the grading rubric to provide feedback.
Task #1: Examining the letter's content

- With your partner, find the answers to the following questions based on the letter. Use only the letter, no outside sources. Write your answers on your own paper, using the standard heading, making sure both yours and your partner’s names appear.

1. When was this letter written?
2. What was the occasion for the writing of this letter? What influenced Franklin's decision to write it?
3. What conclusion had been reached by Madame Brillon in a previous letter to Franklin? What is his opinion of that conclusion?
4. Why does Franklin say he includes a personal narrative/anecdote in this letter?
5. How did Franklin come to have his whistle?
6. What was Franklin's family's response to his purchase?
7. What lesson did the child Franklin learn from his experience with the whistle?
8. Choose one of Franklin's examples and explain how it demonstrates "giving too much for the whistle."
9. Why does Franklin say he ought to be charitable towards those who are his examples?
10. For what might Franklin fall into the trap again himself? What saves him from that?
Answer key:
1. November 10, 1779
2. Franklin had received 2 letters from Madame Brillon and had been slow to answer them. Because he wanted to be sure he would continue to receive letters from her, he chose to write this letter and send it by his friend Mr. B. who was going to visit her.
3. She had written about her view of Heaven and had concluded it was important to get as much good as possible from earthly life before death. Franklin agrees, thinks it important to get as much good from life as possible and suggests that would be more likely if people would avoid "giving too much for the whistles."
4. He includes it to answer what he thinks she will wonder: what does he mean?
5. When he was 7, he was jealous of another boy who had a whistle and gave up all his pennies to buy it from that boy.
6. They made fun of him because he’d spent too much for something of little value.
7. He realized he’d been cheated, used up all his money and made fun of so that he cried and the toy lost all its amusement value.
8. Any of these examples is acceptable:
   - A person courting favor
   - A person concerned with popularity
   - A miser
   - A person intent on pleasure
   - A person concerned about appearances
   - A person in a bad marriage
9. Franklin admits he is not as wise as he seems because he’s still susceptible.
10. Franklin covets the apples of King John enough that he might fall into the trap but he doesn’t because they aren’t available.
Task #2: Demonstrating Franklin's thesis

Write a well considered, carefully crafted letter, using "friendly letter" format. (This may be directed to a sibling, an entering high school freshman student or to whomever would be appropriate. Please make sure your teacher knows who the intended recipient is, either from context or by your informing the teacher directly.)

- Your letter must include a personal narrative/anecdote which demonstrates a time when you, like Franklin, gave "too much for the whistle."
- Your letter must be written legibly in blue or black ink on plain, white paper, not lined notebook paper. (You may find it easier to do this if you put a piece of lined paper behind the white paper to see the lines through as a guide for your writing.)
- Consult the grading rubric "Advanced" column to be sure you are meeting all requirements.
- DEADLINE ______________________________
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<tr>
<th>NOT YET PROFICIENT</th>
<th>PROFICIENT</th>
<th>ADVANCED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attempts to incorporate narrative into correspondence; attempts to demonstrate thesis providing advice; student's personal voice does not come through in the writing; inconsistent point of view and/or verb tense</td>
<td>Appropriate choice of personal narrative/anecdote incorporated into correspondence; provides advice to recipient; demonstrates BF's thesis; student's personal voice lacking in some parts; consistent point of view and verb tense</td>
<td>Excellent choice of personal narrative/anecdote to demonstrate Franklin's means of incorporating such into correspondence; providing advice to recipient &amp; demonstrating Franklin's thesis of &quot;giving too much for the whistle&quot; in interesting personal voice with consistent 1st person point of view &amp; consistent verb tense</td>
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<td>2 or more errors in &quot;friendly letter&quot; format, margins or punctuation</td>
<td>1 error in &quot;friendly letter&quot; format, margins or punctuation</td>
<td>Correct format: heading of address, city, state, zip code and date; salutation with recipient's name; indented body paragraphs; appropriate closing; student's signature with appropriate &quot;friendly letter&quot; margins &amp; punctuation</td>
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<td>Difficult to read; incorrect ink color; 6 or more errors in conventions</td>
<td>Legible, blue or black ink, one sided; 2-5 errors in conventions</td>
<td>Legible, blue or black ink on one side of paper; ZERO errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar</td>
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Teaching notes:

- This lesson does not require students to have previous knowledge of Benjamin Franklin's works, though it has proven effective when used following a study of his *Autobiography*.

*I would appreciate hearing from those who use the lesson as to its success with your students.*

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