

# NEBRASKA STORIES OF HUMANITY INQUIRY #1

## WHAT ROLE DID LETTERS PLAY IN WWII?



“Finished V-Mail bundled, bagged and ready for dispatch through the APO to the troops.” Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 1944

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mail-call-v-mail>

- *This lesson can also be adapted to examine other watershed events by studying historical perspectives through correspondence.*

***Teacher's Note: (Best Practices)***

**About Trauma Informed Teaching, Social Emotional Learning Skills, and the CASEL Framework**

Because these supporting questions and formative tasks ask students to engage with emotionally difficult material, it is important to implement a safely-in, safely-out policy during this task. Prepare students for reading the letters by discussing the reality that Clarence is writing his letters from inside the war zone. In these sources, he is closely experiencing the danger of war time weaponry and witnesses the horrific aftermath of an airplane being shot down and the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp.

- Sharing with students the general nature of each letter and asking them to make a decision about which letter they feel prepared to read is appropriate.
- Discussing the students' responses to readings and encouraging them to process the difficult nature of the material after they complete their formative task is essential for safely leading them out of the assignment.

Teachers will want to refer to the CASEL Social-Emotional Learning Framework, specifically focusing on SEL Instruction and Classroom Climate, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, and Responsible Decision Making. A teacher's awareness of students' ability and readiness must guide their decision about which students will engage with which letters.

Learn more about the [CASEL Framework](#).

# WHAT ROLE DID LETTERS PLAY IN WWII?

<p><b>Social Studies Standards</b></p>	<p>SS HS.4.5 (US) Apply the inquiry process to construct and answer historical questions.</p> <p>SS HS.4.5.c (US) Select, organize, and corroborate relevant historical information about selected topics in U.S. History. For example: Compare the sources and determine an initial answer to the inquiry.</p> <p>SS HS.4.5.d (US) Synthesize historical information to create new understandings. For example: Compare the answer students have created to secondary sources and potentially revise students' answers.</p> <p>SS HS.4.5.e (US) Communicate inquiry results within a historical context.</p> <hr/> <p>LA.12.RI.3 Evaluate an author's perspective or purpose and how it contributes to the meaning, significance, or aesthetic of an informational text.</p> <p>LA.12.RI.7 Analyze and evaluate multiple perspectives within and across a wide range of informational texts.</p> <p>LA.12.W.4 Write arguments that develop a perspective with supporting reasons and evidence, organized as appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.</p> <p>LA.12.W.5 Write informative/explanatory pieces to clearly convey ideas, information, and concepts in which the development and structure are appropriate to the task, discipline, purpose, and audience.</p> <p>LA.12.W.6 Gather and use credible evidence from multiple authoritative sources, evaluate the strengths and limitations of sources in terms of the task, purpose, and audience, and assess their relevance in answering the research question(s).</p>
<p><b>Assessment</b></p>	<p><i>NOTE:</i> Instructors should create an assessment tool that aligns with the language of the standards and the learning outcomes included in the standards.</p>
<p><b>Staging The Compelling Question</b></p>	<p>Students will share answers to the following questions in whole-class discussion:</p> <p><b><i>How do you stay in contact with the people you love? What types of information do you share with your friends and family that way?</i></b></p> <p>Students will engage in a think-write-share for the following questions: (Can be done in a pair-share with a follow-up whole class discussion or whole-class share after writing)</p> <p><b><i>Describe a time when you've had to wait a long time for a reply you were anxious to receive. How would you feel if you had to wait weeks or months for replies?</i></b></p> <p>Ask students to keep in mind their responses to the previous questions as they begin their exploration of the role of communication, particularly in the form of letters, during WWII.</p>

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
<p><i>How were soldiers able to send and receive mail during World War II?</i></p>	<p><i>What was the value of letters and telegrams to the people at home?</i></p> <p><i>Why was communication home so valuable to Clarence?</i></p>	<p><i>What might people choose to leave out or not say when they write home?</i></p> <p><i>What is Clarence not telling Gretchen in the following letters?</i></p>	<p><i>Though information in correspondence might be distressing to read, what is its value to history?</i></p> <p><i>What is the value of these letters both to Clarence and to history?</i></p>
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<p><b>Part One:</b> Divide students into groups of four for the duration of the lesson. Students will engage in a conversation round table activity to make predictions about the answers to the questions, <i>“How was the U.S. military able to deliver letters to soldiers during WWII?”</i> and, <i>“What were the potential difficulties?”</i> Conversation Round Table Template can be found in <i>“Student Materials”</i> on p. 20.</p> <p>Each student will record their thoughts in the first box in the top left corner of the <i>Conversation Round Table</i> graphic organizer. Then, they will each share their thoughts for 30 seconds. Students will record the name of the speaker and their ideas in subsequent boxes. After all participants have shared, students will write an explanation of their new</p>	<p><b>Part One:</b> Students remain in groups of four. Assign each student one letter (Sources E, F, G, and H). Students will write the answers to the following questions and then share their findings with their groups. After reporting to their groups, they can complete Part Two.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What type of information is Clarence mainly sharing in the letters?</li> <li>2. What words and phrases does he use to demonstrate his feelings about receiving letters?</li> <li>3. How does this relate to your own connectedness with your friends/family?</li> </ol> <p>Write a short analysis of the role the letters played in his life while he was in Europe during WWII.</p>	<p><b>Part One:</b> As in the previous task, divide students into groups of four and instruct them to analyze the letters and envelopes and make inferences about what type of information Clarence is not reporting to his wife.</p> <p><b>Teacher’s Note:</b> Students can each work with one letter and report back to the group or all students can analyze all the letters together. Given that this task might prove challenging, teachers will determine options based on the experience and skill level of students.</p> <p>Using the categories, <i>“What he cannot share,”</i> and, <i>“What he is choosing not to share,”</i> have students list evidence about the types of information not being revealed in the letters. Evidence can be gathered from the text</p>	<p><b>Part One:</b> Students will each choose one letter from sources P, Q, R, and S.</p> <p><b>Teacher’s Note: Teacher should address the sensitive nature of the content of the letters with students before assigning the letters. (See *TEACHER’S NOTE after “Sources” in Overview: Structure of the Inquiry section under Supporting Question #4.)</b></p> <p>Students will download their letters and use markup tools to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Highlight in <b>yellow</b> when Clarence writes information that might be distressing to Gretchen.</li> <li>2. Highlight in <b>green</b> places where he shifts topics or distracts from stressful information.</li> <li>3. Highlight in <b>blue</b> the lines in which he is educating.</li> </ol>

<p>understandings in the center box.</p> <p><b>Part Two:</b> One member from each group will share their conclusions and the teacher will record the list of ideas on a white board/chart paper.</p> <p><b>Part Three:</b> Students will read <a href="#">“Mail Call: V-Mail” National World War II Museum</a> and answer the question (in writing or class discussion), “How was the U.S. military’s solution to the mail problem similar to the way we use technology today?” The “Mail Call: V-Mail” Handout from the National WWII Museum can be found in <i>“Student Materials”</i> in this inquiry on pp. 21-23.</p> <p><b>Part Four:</b> Read the letters in the featured sources below and discuss Gretchen and Clarence’s feelings about V-Mail versus regular letters. Look at the accompanying images and discuss the benefits and limitations of the two types of letters.</p>	<p><b>Part Two:</b> Students will read sources I and J and analyze the value and potential detriment of faster forms of communication.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What might it mean to a mother to receive a Mother’s Day telegram in this context?</li> <li>2. What emotions do you expect the series of telegrams caused Mrs. Margaret Gerald when she received each one? How does the responsibility of timely communication balance with the potential distress caused by partial information?</li> </ol> <p>Add this analysis to the writing from Part One.</p>	<p>of the letters or the envelopes.</p> <p><b>Part Two:</b> Writing from the perspective of Gretchen, students will write 2 follow-up questions she could write to Clarence to elicit more information about what he has written. Each question should be specific and reference a piece of information in Clarence’s letter.</p> <p><b>Part 3: Optional</b> If students are analyzing their letters and writing questions individually, have them share with other members of their group and allow students time to revise their lists and questions based upon feedback from group members.</p>	<p>4. Highlight in pink those in which he is expressing his emotions.</p> <p><b>Part Two:</b> Each student will choose one perspective from which to write a short analysis of the value of these letters. In writing their analysis, students should consider what is distressing about the letters from that person’s point of view, why the communication of the information to them is necessary, and how they, as the receiver, can manage the stress of receiving that information.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarence</li> <li>2. Gretchen</li> <li>3. Historians</li> <li>4. Modern teenagers</li> </ol>
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Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: <a href="#">“Mail Call: V-Mail” National World War II Museum</a></p> <p>Source B: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 3, 1945</a></p> <p>Source C: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 25, 1945</a></p> <p>Source D: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 27, 1945</a></p>	<p>Source E: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, December 31, 1944</a></p> <p>Source F: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 9, 1945</a></p> <p>Source G: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 15, 1945</a></p> <p>Source H: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, April 23, 1945</a></p> <p>Source I: <a href="#">Telegram from Thomas Wilson to Jane Wilson, May 15, 1945</a></p> <p>Source J: <a href="#">Telegrams to Mrs. Margaret Gerald</a></p>	<p>Source K: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 10, 1945</a></p> <p>Source L: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 20, 1945</a></p> <p>Source M: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, February 10, 1945</a></p> <p>Source N: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, February 13, 1945</a></p>	<p>Source P: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 15, 1945</a></p> <p>Source Q: <i>Trigger Warning: Description of violent death.</i> <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 20, 1945</a></p> <p>Source R: <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 21, 1945</a></p> <p>Source S: <i>Trigger warning: Description of death in Dachau.</i> <a href="#">Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, April 30, 1945</a></p>

<p><b>Summative Performance Task</b></p>	<p><b>ARGUMENT</b></p> <p><b>WHAT ROLE DID LETTERS PLAY IN WWII?</b></p> <p>Using the information gathered in the inquiry, students will create a written argument about the value of these resources for us today and why such primary sources should or should not be taught in World War II units of study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Write a 250-word persuasive letter to their school board or to their high school history teacher analyzing the value of using letters as primary source educational materials in schools during units of study.</li> <li>● Student’s letter must include specific evidence from one or more of the letters the student has read to support their argument.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>EXTENSION</b></p> <p>Ask students to view the <a href="#">42nd Rainbow Division European Campaign Route Map</a></p> <p>Choose 3 of the human caricatures included on the map, research the context, and explain the historical significance of them. Students should also explain the puns or humor behind the choice of caricatures.</p>
<p><b>Taking Informed Action</b></p>	<p><b>UNDERSTAND</b> the impact communications from historic events can have on those engaged in the events and those outside looking in.</p> <p><b>ASSESS</b> current use of social media such as TikTok and Twitter from people inside conflict zones such as Ukraine, Iran, and Syria.</p> <p><b>ACT</b> Create a social media campaign (on social media or on a planning document) to educate their fellow students about a current conflict and amplify the voices of people experiencing the conflict. Students will choose what information/videos/messages they share based on the analysis they have done about the value of communication in the main focus of this inquiry lesson.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Write a letter to the editor of the school or local newspaper encouraging awareness about the conflict.</p>

\*Featured sources are suggested and links are provided. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience should these links not function properly. Please try the [Search](#) tool in the NE Stories of Humanity or contact [bdotan2@unl.edu](mailto:bdotan2@unl.edu).

## Overview

### Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of letters written by soldiers during World War II to analyze the role of letters for the soldiers and how it connects to their own communication.

This inquiry highlights the following additional standards:

- SS HS.4.5 (US) Apply the inquiry process to construct and answer historical questions.
- SS HS.4.5.c (US) Select, organize, and corroborate relevant historical information about selected topics in U.S. History. For example: Compare the sources and determine an initial answer to the inquiry.
- SS HS.4.5.d (US) Synthesize historical information to create new understandings. For example: Compare the answer students have created to secondary sources and potentially revise students' answers.
- SS HS.4.5.e (US) Communicate inquiry results within a historical context.
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- LA.12.RI.3 Evaluate an author's perspective or purpose and how it contributes to the meaning, significance, or aesthetic of an informational text.
- LA.12.RI.7 Analyze and evaluate multiple perspectives within and across a wide range of informational texts
- LA.12.W.4 Write arguments that develop a perspective with supporting reasons and evidence, organized as appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.
- LA.12.W.5 Write informative/explanatory pieces to clearly convey ideas, information, and concepts in which the development and structure are appropriate to the task, discipline, purpose, and audience.
- LA.12.W.6 Gather and use credible evidence from multiple authoritative sources, evaluate the strengths and limitations of sources in terms of the task, purpose, and audience, and assess their relevance in answering the research question(s).

REMINDER: Instructors should create an assessment tool that aligns with the language of the standards and the learning outcomes included in the standards.

It is important to note that this inquiry requires prerequisite knowledge of the basic facts of America's involvement in World War II and the European Theater of Operations. The following resources introduce why, how, and when the United States became involved in the war.

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/united-states-enters-world-war-ii>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/dday-world-war-two-europe/>



Note: This inquiry is expected to take three or four 50-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (e.g., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, featured sources, writing). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their students. This inquiry lends itself to differentiation and modeling of historical thinking skills while assisting students in reading the variety of sources.

### Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question, ***“WHAT ROLE DID LETTERS PLAY IN WORLD WAR II?”*** students will engage in the following activities:

- Students will stage the compelling question with class discussion and reflective writing about the ways they communicate and how it would affect them if they no longer had access to the rapid communication sources they rely on today.
- Students will read an informational article to understand the types of communication available to soldiers during World War II and analyze letters between Clarence Williams and Gretchen Williams to determine how those options affected their communication.
- Students will analyze the information contained in letters and write and discuss their analysis about the value of the letters to soldiers.
- Students will make inferences about the type of information Clarence did not or could not share in the letters.
- Students will make judgments about the value and necessity of sharing distressing information with loved ones and consider their own responses to reading such communication.
- For their summative experience, students will write a letter to their school board or to their high school history teacher demonstrating the value of the letters as primary source documents.
- The Extension experience allows students to continue to develop inference skills while also engaging in some historical research.
- The Taking Informed Action activity provides students the opportunity to research current conflicts and apply what they have learned in the main body of the inquiry to a modern-day situation.

## Staging the Compelling Question

Students will share answers to the following questions in whole-class discussion:

***How do you stay in contact with the people you love? What types of information do you share with your friends and family that way?***

Students will engage in a think-write-share for the following questions: (Can be done in a pair-share with a follow-up whole class discussion or whole-class share after writing)

***Describe a time when you've had to wait a long time for a reply you were anxious to receive. How would you feel if you had to wait weeks or months for replies?***

Ask students to keep in mind their responses to the previous questions as they begin their exploration of the role of communication, particularly in the form of letters, during WWII.

**TEACHER'S NOTE:** *In staging the compelling question, it is important to help students make the connection between the types and frequency of the communication they rely on and the fact that soldiers and family members during World War II had to rely on communication that took a lot more time. In spite of the wide disparity between the instantaneous communication of SnapChat or text messages and soldiers waiting weeks or months for letters from home, we see that the types of information we communicate to each other - seemingly unimportant daily events to new experiences to shocking incidents - are the same. We also make calculated decisions about the types of information we do not want to share via those media.*

## Supporting Question 1 - *How were soldiers able to send and receive mail during World War II?*

The first supporting question, “*How were soldiers able to send and receive mail during World War II?*” asks students to learn about the options for correspondence between soldiers and people in other places during World War II and to analyze public opinion about the means of communication.

### The formative task is:

**Part One:** Divide students into groups of four for the duration of the lesson. Students will engage in a conversation round table activity to answer the question, “*How was the U.S. military able to deliver letters to soldiers during WWII?*” and, “*What were the potential difficulties?*” See Conversation Round Table Template in “*Student Materials*” in this inquiry on p. 20.

Each student will record their thoughts in the first box in the top left corner of the Conversation Round Table graphic organizer. Then, they will each share their thoughts for 30 seconds. Students will record the name of the speaker and their ideas in subsequent boxes. After all participants have shared, students will write an explanation of their new understandings in the center box.

**Part Two:** One member from each group will share their conclusions and the teacher will record the list of ideas on a white board/chart paper.

**Part Three:** Students will read “[Mail Call: V-Mail National World War II Museum](#)” and answer the question (in writing or class discussion), “*How was the U.S. military’s solution to the mail problem similar to the way we use technology today?*” See handout in “*Student Materials*” in this inquiry on p. 21-23.

**Part Four:** Read the letters in the featured sources below and discuss Gretchen and Clarence’s feelings about V-Mail versus regular letters. Look at the accompanying images and discuss the benefits and limitations of the two types of letters.

The following sources were selected to inform students about the innovations in mail distribution during World War II and the opinions of soldiers and their families about V-Mail.

- **Featured Source A** is “[Mail Call: V-Mail National World War II Museum](#)” an online article from the National World War II Museum. The “Mail Call: V-Mail” Handout from the National WWII Museum can be found in “*Student Materials*” in this inquiry on pp. 21-23.
- **Featured Sources B, C, and D** are letters from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams in which he discusses the different types of correspondence they are sending.

**Source B:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 3, 1945](#)

**Source C:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 25, 1945](#)

**Source D:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 27, 1945](#)

## Supporting Question 2 –

***Why was communication with home so valuable to Clarence?***

***What was the value of letters and telegrams to the people at home?***

The second set of supporting questions, “*Why was communication with home so valuable to Clarence?*” and, “*What was the value of letters and telegrams to the people at home?*” provide students the opportunity to make inferences from the information the soldiers shared, and the types of communication received.

**The formative task is:**

**Part One:** Students remain in groups of four. Assign each student one letter (Sources E, F, G, and H). Students will write the answers to the following questions and then share their findings with their groups. After reporting to their groups, they can complete Part Two.

1. ***What type of information is Clarence mainly sharing in the letters?***
2. ***What words and phrases does he use to demonstrate his feelings about receiving letters?***
3. ***How does this relate to your own connectedness with your friends/family?***

Write a short analysis of the role the letters played in his life while he was in Europe during WWII.

**Part Two:** Students will read sources I and J and analyze the value and potential detriment of faster forms of communication.

1. ***What might it mean to a mother to receive a Mother’s Day telegram in this context and what might it mean to the son to send it?***
2. ***What emotions do you expect the series of telegrams caused Mrs. Margaret Gerald when she received each one? How does the responsibility of timely communication balance with the potential distress caused by partial information?***

Add this analysis to the writing from Part One.

The following sources were selected to allow students to make inferences about the value of letters.

Featured Sources E-H are letters from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams.

Source E: [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, December 31, 1944](#)

Source F: [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 9, 1945](#)

Source G: [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 15, 1945](#)

Source H: [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, April 23, 1945](#)

## C3 TEACHERS

**Featured Source I** is a Mother's Day telegram from American soldier Thomas Wilson to his mother, Jane Wilson.

**Source I:** [Telegram from Thomas Wilson to Jane Wilson, May 15, 1945](#)

**Featured Source J** is a series of telegrams to Mrs. Margaret Gerald indicating her son's missing status, safe recovery, and return to the United States.

**Source J:** [Telegrams to Mrs. Margaret Gerald](#)

**TEACHER'S NOTE:** Because the students are making inferences about the value of the letters, encourage them to closely consider the wording of the letters.

### ***Supporting Question 3 - What is Clarence not telling Gretchen in the following letters?***

The third supporting question, ***“What is Clarence not telling Gretchen in the following letters?”*** asks students to make inferences based on what Clarence does and does not write about in the featured letters.

**\*TEACHER’S NOTE:** *Students may find this task difficult because they are not used to being asked to seek information that is not present. If they are struggling to make inferences, ask them what type of information Clarence does share about his daily activities and what he is probably also doing as a member of the medical corps in the American Army that isn’t revealed in his writing.*

#### **The formative task is:**

**Part One:** As in the previous task, divide students into groups of four and instruct them to analyze the letters and envelopes and make inferences about what type of information Clarence is not reporting to his wife.

**TEACHER’S NOTE:** *Students can each work with one letter and report back to the group or all students can analyze all the letters together. Given that this task might prove challenging, the teacher will determine options based on the experience and skill level of students.*

Using the categories, “What he cannot share,” and, “What he is choosing not to share,” have students list evidence about the types of information not being revealed in the letters. Evidence can be gathered from the text of the letters or the envelopes.

**Part Two:** Writing from the perspective of Gretchen, students will write 2 follow-up questions she could write to Clarence to elicit more information about what he has written. Each question should be specific and reference a piece of information in Clarence’s letter.

#### **Part 3: Optional**

If students are analyzing their letters and writing questions individually, have them share with other members of their group and allow students time to revise their lists and questions based upon feedback from group members.

**Teachers may implement this task with the following procedures:**

Because of the nature of this task, the teacher may want to model this activity in think-aloud form before releasing students to work independently. This letter is a useful resource for modeling: [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 24, 1945.](#)

What he cannot share: Where they are located, specific activities related to their military preparation, information they have about where they will be going or future orders.

- What he is choosing not to share: Information about why their sleeping conditions are so poor, what army business he is engaged in during the day, where they are spending most of their day time, if he has experienced any war activity, and how he feels about what is happening.
- Questions Gretchen might ask Clarence:
  1. “You mentioned that you are using a lot of blankets and overcoats to stay warm during the night, but how are you staying warm during the day?”
  2. “Have you seen any signs of destruction or damage from the war yet where you are? How did it make you feel?”

**The following sources** were selected to provide students the opportunity to make inferences about what Clarence is doing, seeing, and feeling beyond what he is sharing in the letters.

**Source K:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 10, 1945](#)

**Source L:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, January 20, 1945](#)

**Source M:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, February 10, 1945](#)

**Source N:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, February 13, 1945](#)

Supporting Question 4 - *Though the letters might have been distressing to read, what is the value of the information in the following letters to Clarence and to history?*

The fourth supporting question, “*Though the letters might have been distressing to read, what is the value of the information in the following letters to Clarence and to history?*” asks students to decide about the value of the information being shared in the letters from multiple perspectives.

**The formative task is:**

**Part One:** Students will each choose one letter from sources P, Q, R, and S.

**TEACHER’S NOTE:** *Teacher should address with students the sensitive nature of the content of the letters before assigning letters to students. (See **Trigger Warning** mentioned in Source Q and S below.)*

Students will download their letters and use markup tools to:

1. Highlight in yellow when Clarence writes information that might be distressing to Gretchen.
2. Highlight in green places where he shifts topics or relieves the stress of the information.
3. Highlight in blue the lines in which he is educating.
4. Highlight in pink those in which he is expressing his emotions.

**Part Two:** Each student will choose one perspective from which to write a short analysis of the value of these letters. In writing their analysis, students should consider what is distressing about the letters from that person’s point of view, why the communication of the information to them is necessary, and how they, as the receiver, can manage the stress of receiving that information.

1. Clarence
2. Gretchen
3. Historians
4. Modern teenagers

**Featured sources P-S** are letters from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams that include information that is upsetting to Clarence as the author, potentially upsetting to Gretchen as the receiver, and potentially upsetting to the students as readers.

**Source P:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 15, 1945](#)

**Source Q:** *Trigger Warning: Description of violent death.*  
[Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 20, 1945](#)

**Source R:** [Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, March 21, 1945](#)

**Source S:** *Trigger warning: Description of death in Dachau.*  
[Letter from Clarence Williams to Gretchen Williams, April 30, 1945](#)



## Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined how soldiers were able to send and receive communications during World War II, the types of information they did and did not share in their letters, and the potential impact of disturbing information communicated from the war zone.

Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understanding and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students will use the information they have learned from the inquiry about the value of letters from soldiers in World War II as primary source documents that not only played a role in the lives of the soldiers but also serve as information for students and historians. They will cite evidence from the sources they have studied to write a persuasive letter to history educators or school board members analyzing the value of the letters as primary source documents in units focusing on World War II.

Students' arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- Letters provide insight into the daily life of the soldiers.
- The letters do not provide unique details about the daily experiences of soldiers.
- Letters provide valuable historical information about the events experienced by soldiers.
- Letters do not provide information that is not available in other sources.
- Letters provide insight into the type of information Americans were receiving on the home front.
- These letters are a narrow slice of information and do not represent the larger body of available information.
- Analyzing letters provides students' the opportunity to make inferences from both what the soldiers do and do not write in the letters.
- Analyzing the letters requires higher-level thinking skills.
- Analyzing the letters' contents from multiple points of view provides students the opportunity to engage in social emotional learning.

Students can Take Informed Action by using what they have learned about the value of communication from conflict zones to analyze social media communication emerging from current areas of conflict in the world and creating a social media campaign or writing a letter to the editor to encourage awareness of the current conflict.

# ***Student Materials***

## Conversation Roundtable

I think...	My classmate _____ thinks...	
My classmate _____ thinks...	I now think...	My classmate _____ thinks...

## Mail Call: V-mail

Between June 1942 and November 1945, over 1 billion V-mails were processed.

December 7, 2019

The war was the impetus behind a great number of inventions, some of them brand new and some wartime alterations made to existing practice. Many of these developments would continue to endure and evolve, while others remain particular to the period, employed during World War II only, as a way to address a specific wartime need. One specific wartime demand was the efficient and expeditious delivery of mail to US forces serving around the country and overseas.

The critical nature of the mail effort was addressed in the 1942 Annual Report to the Postmaster General which stated: “The Post Office, War and Navy departments realize fully that frequent and rapid communication with parents, associates and other loved ones strengthens fortitude, enlivens patriotism, makes loneliness endurable and inspires to even greater devotion the men and women who are carrying on our fight far from home and from friends.”

The military mail system and the amount of post flowing back and forth internationally during the war was massive. An unprecedented amount of mail was moved about during the war with Army post offices, fleet post offices and US post offices flooded with mail. Each year of the war, the number of pieces of mail increased. In 1945, 2.5 billion pieces went through the Army Postal Service and 8 million pieces through Navy post offices. To bring mail service to those serving worldwide, the military postal system required a global network and innovative practice.

V-mail, short for “Victory mail,” was a particular postal system put into place during the war to drastically reduce the space needed to transport mail thus freeing up room for other valuable supplies. Although the V-mail system was only used between June 1942 and November 1945, over 1 billion items were processed through these means. Officially entitled the “Army Micro Photographic Mail Service,” War Department Pamphlet No. 21-1 describes V-mail as “an expeditious mail program which provides for quick mail service to and from soldiers overseas. A special form is used which permits the letter to be photographed in microfilm. The small film is transported and then reproduced and delivered. Use of V-mail is urged because it greatly furthers the war effort by saving shipping and airplane space.”

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The increased demand on the mail service was new, but the technology employed to meet that demand was not. Microphotography had been used since the 1850s, primarily for business and banking. To keep track of checks and money, a machine called the “Checkograph” was developed. In 1928, Kodak debuted the “Recordak I” as a way to film documents, and in 1935, Kodak began filming and then publishing the *New York Times* on microfilm.

By the beginning of the war, American postal planners also had their eyes on Britain. Aerograph Ltd. was Britain’s use of microphotography of mail, implemented in 1941 when the first Aerograph letter was sent by Queen Elizabeth. The United States studied the British model and developed the V-mail system. In May 1942, the United States entered into a contract with Kodak for V-mail microfilming. On June 12, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt received the first two V-mails. Then on June 1, 1942, V-mail service began.

An important part of the V-mail system was the use of a standardized stationery which combined the letter and envelope into one piece of paper. Even without microfilming, this was a great space-saving measure. The form was a sheet specially designed by the Government Printing Office and was provided free of charge by the Post Office at the rate of two sheets per person per day. Consumers could also purchase sheets made by different sanctioned providers. All of the paper used for V-mail had to be the same size and weight so that the pages could be fed into the processing machine for microfilming. The way one wrote on the letter also played a big part in whether one would ultimately be able to read the reduced version. Users of V-mail were instructed: "Use typewriter, dark ink, or dark pencil. Faint or small writing is not suitable for photographing." The original forms could accommodate up to 700 typed words. Despite instruction, there was still some confusion about the use of V-mail.

The Post office, the War, and Navy Departments worked together in the complicated V-mail operation. There were three giant postal centers in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. All of the mail was funneled through these centers. Kodak trained filmers to work with the Recordak machines. The military was then responsible for transporting the reels overseas. The V-mail station overseas would print and distribute. Some centers had machines that would open and flatten the letters before filming, but most were prepared by hand. Censors would also read each letter before they were filmed. Because they were going to be filmed, the letters had to be blacked out rather than cut out should they contain any sensitive material.

The Recordak could film 40 letters per minute and 1600 letters were accommodated per roll. The clerks assigned numbers to each V-mail, which corresponded to reel numbers. Each sender station kept the original copies as backups until they were notified by the receiving station that the reel had been properly transmitted. At the receiver station, clerks reproduced each frame onto photographic paper. Because of this there was the claim that no V-mail was ever lost. This was a selling point in the use of V-mail. It was supposed to be a more secure mail system. All V-mail was sent air mail, so it was also quicker. V-mail was also free of charge for all servicemen.

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Was V-mail a success? It took a while to catch on and there is evidence that V mail was seen as less than a "real" letter. In February 1943, one correspondent, Ida "Dee" Ehlers wrote to her husband Lt. Harry Ehlers "I have not written you many letters lately. Have sent V Letters instead because they say (the papers) that only V Letters are sure to be delivered."

V-Mail had its drawbacks. It was somewhat limiting in that only certain number of words could be used. Since the photo prints were  $\frac{1}{4}$  size of the original letter, if the print was too small then the final product was unreadable. Some stores actually sold special "V-mail readers," magnifying glasses so that readers could decipher the reduced print. Another downside of V-mail is that one also couldn't send enclosures (at least initially) and could not leave a personal imprint in the form of a lipstick kiss on the paper. Lipstick was referred to as the "scarlet scourge," because it would gum up the machines used to film the letters. Any dirty,

damaged or crumpled letters had to be sent through as is without microfilming. Anyone who has ever dealt with a paper jam, knows how sensitive automatic feed equipment can be. Some letters whether because of condition or because of the lack of time or equipment to process, were sent through un-filmed, or in their original unprocessed format, instead of the photo print.

But despite its faults, V-mail was aided by marketing which branded the use of V-mail as a patriotic duty and use of the service picked up over the years. There is no denying that the V-mail practice saved vital shipping space. Space saving were great: 37 mail bags could fit within 1 mail bag of V-mail and around 1600 letters could fit on a single 100-foot roll of 16mm film. It also most certainly an initiative tied specifically to World War II, having only been produced between June 1942 and November 1945. The Museum's collection contains several thousand V-mails, which pose the same challenge to Museum catalogers' eyes as they did to the recipients' 75 years ago.

Source: National World War II Museum

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mail-call-v-mail>

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