

Not Too Far Distant -Letter Analysis Lesson Plan

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In this activity, students will analyze real letters written by World War II medic Clarence William to his wife, Gretchen. Using the analysis guide, students will learn more about life as a soldier through Clarence's stories and read between the lines to uncover more about life in combat. To be paired with the play *Not Too Far Distant* by Becky Boesen

LESSON OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze the World War II letters of Clarence Williams using the letter analysis model.

PREREQUISITE KNOWLEDGE

- WWII (1939–1945) involved nearly every major country in the world. There were two sides, the Allies (the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union) and the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan).
- This war mainly took place in Europe and the Pacific. Starting in 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States sent soldiers, including those drafted, overseas to assist in the war effort.

Nebraska State Education Standards

SS 7.4.4
 SS 8.4.2
 SS HS.4.1.b (US)
 SS HS.4.1.c (US)
 SS HS.4.4.b (US)
 SS HS.4.5.c (WLD)

Lesson Details

Time Requirement:
45-90 minutes

Grade Level:
7th - 12th grade

- Lesson Materials:**
- Letter Analysis Guided
 - Documents A-D
 - [Electronic version \(bit.ly/NTFD-Letters\)](https://bit.ly/NTFD-Letters) or printed
 - Post-It notes (optional)

LESSON STRUCTURE

Lesson Introduction

1) Display [Document A: Envelope](#) or provide copies for each student. Individually or in small groups, have students look at Document A and answer each guided question. *Recommended time: 3–5 minutes.*

2) Discuss each guided question as a class and demonstrate where students found evidence for each answer in Document A.

Procedure

1) **Introduce the documents:** Explain to students that soldiers in WWII often wrote letters to their friends and family. These letters are primary sources that help us understand WWII. The letters of Clarence Williams inspired the play, *Not Too Far Distant*.

Recommended time: 3–5 minutes.

2) **Analyze the documents:** Give students Documents B–D. Also, pass out one Letter Analysis Guide for each document. Have students work individually or in small groups to read each document and complete the Letter Analysis Guide. *Recommended time: 30–75 minutes.*

3) **Modification:** Have students use the “read aloud” feature in the [digital version \(bit.ly/NTFD-Letters\)](#). Read each document aloud to the class before students complete the Letter Analysis Guide. Pause to identify and define unknown words and phrases.

Exit Ticket

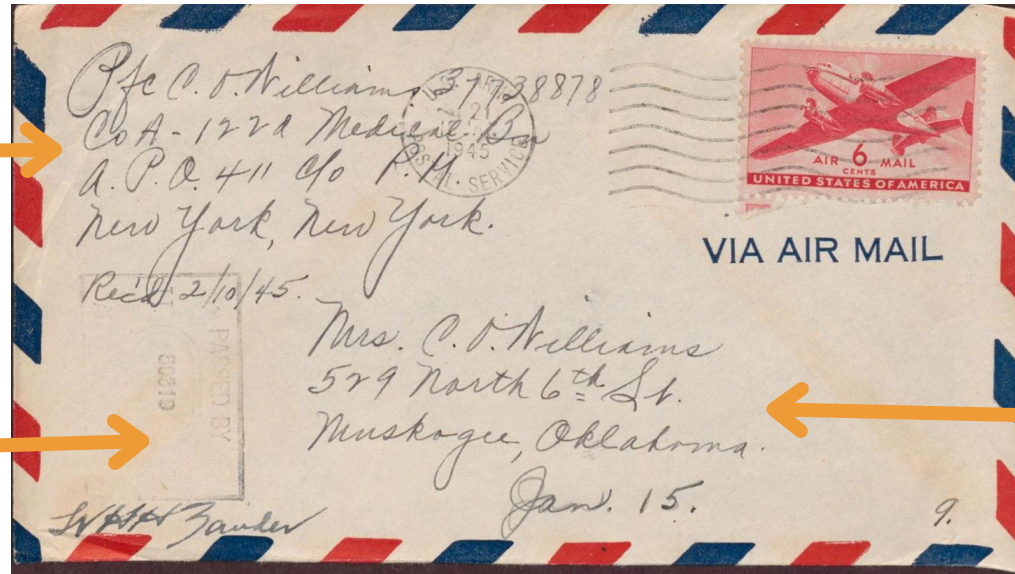
1) Ask: What type of written documents will historians in one hundred years analyze to understand life today?

2) Give each student a Post-It note to record their answers. Have students display Post-It notes in a common space as they leave the classroom. *Recommended time: 3–5 minutes*

Document A: Envelope

Pfc. C.O. Williams 37738879
Co A - 122d Medical Bn
A.P.O. 411 c/o P.M.
New York, New York
Rec'd 2/10/45

PASSED BY
US Army Examiner
50819
Lt. H H Zander



Mrs. C.O. Williams
529 North 6th St.
Muskogee, Oklahoma
Jan. 15.

Source: Clarence Williams Collection, Institute for Holocaust Education

Guided Questions

- 1) How much did this letter cost to mail? How do you know?
- 2) How many days passed between when the letter was sent and when it was received? Why do you think it took so long for the letter to arrive?
- 3) Why do you think a U.S. Army Examiner needed to “pass” or approve the letter before it could be sent?

Document B: Letter from Clarence Williams, January 15, 1945

Monday
15 January 45.

Darling Wife —

(1) Well honey we are still rolling, rolling over the deep blue sea. It has really been grand sailing today, beautiful sunshine and very warm. Also the water has been calm but I will still be glad when we again set foot on land for a change.

(2) Honey I am surely getting homesick for some of your letters and hope there will be some waiting when we arrive at our destination. Also it will be a lot easier to find some thing to write about when we get there I think. Then again perhaps everything of interest will be censored as it now is.

(3) We had a fairly good dinner tonite, nothing to rave about but better than usual. Had roast pork, noodles, asparagus, lettuce salad and some peaches for desert. Honey when I come back your going to be a very busy little girl in more ways than one. One of course will be cooking and what I mean I don't believe I will ever get my fill of it. Was talking with one of the boys today and he remarked how well he liked hot biscuits with good steak gravy. It reminded me of many happy memories which I hope will soon return.

(4) Just had to take time out for a cigarette and try to think of some thing new to write however can't say it helped much. When we have a cigarette we either have to go up on deck or into the latrine and of course there is no smoking on deck after dark. Also every place we go of course we must wear our life belts and pistol belt with a full canteen

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Source: Clarence Williams Collection, Institute for Holocaust Education

Document B: Letter from Clarence Williams, January 15, 1945 (continued)

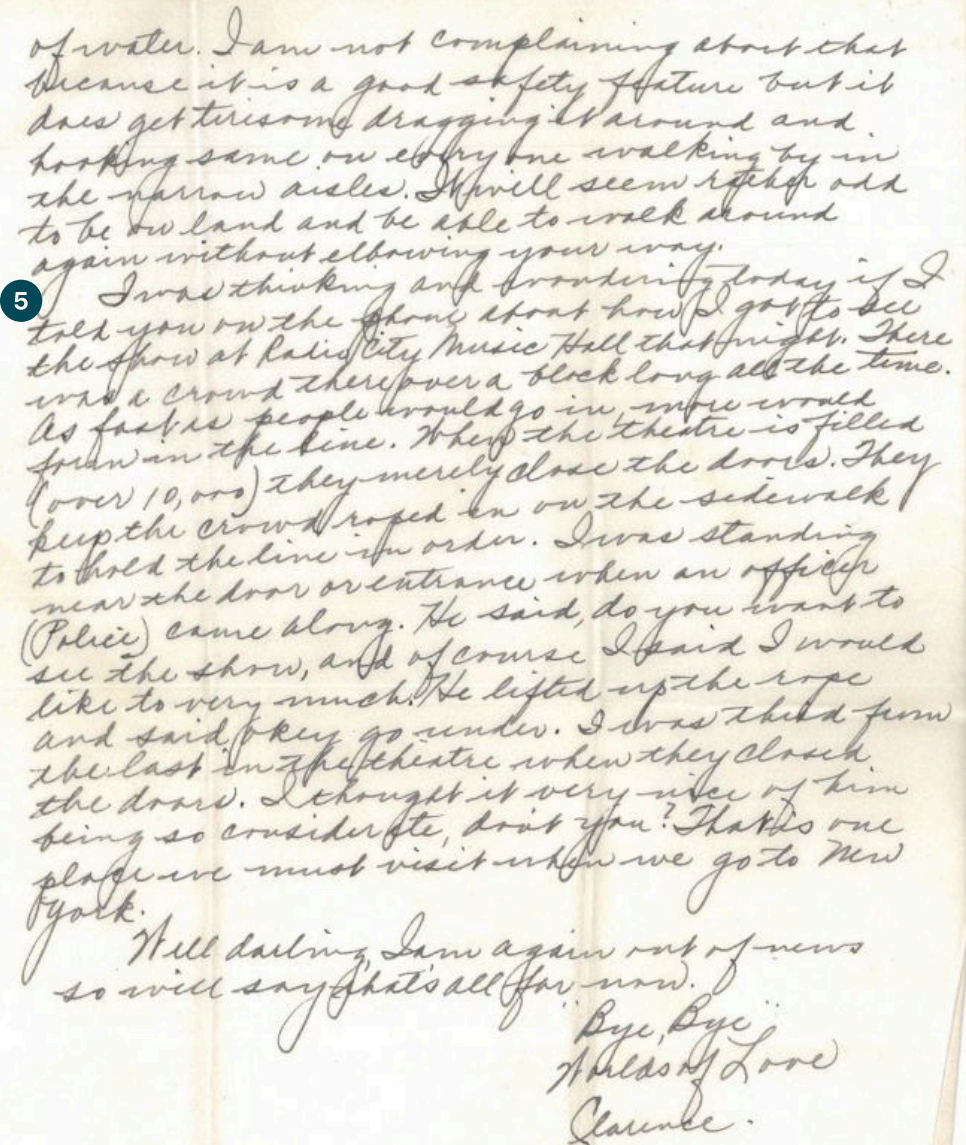
(4) I am not complaining about that because it is a good safety feature but it does get tiresome dragging it around and hooking same on every one walking by in the narrow aisles. It will seem rather odd to be on land and be able to walk around again without elbowing your way.

(5) I was thinking and wondering today if I told you on the phone about how I got to see the show at Radio City Music Hall that night. There was a crowd there over a block long all the time. As fast as people would go in more would follow in the line. When the theatre is filled (over 10,000) they merely close the doors. They keep the crowd roped in on the sidewalk to hold the line in order. I was standing near the door or entrance when an officer (Police) came along. He said, do you want to see the show, and of course I said I would like to very much. He lifted up the rope and said okay go under. I was third from the last in the theatre when they closed the doors. I thought it very nice of him being so considerate, don't you? That's one place we must visit when we go to New York. Well darling, I am again out of news so will say that's all for now.

"Bye, Bye"

Worlds of Love

Clarence.



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Bye, Bye
Worlds of Love
Clarence.

Source: Clarence Williams Collection, Institute for Holocaust Education

Document C: Letter from Clarence Williams, February 22, 1945

22 February 1945.
Thursday

Dearest Gretchen —

I didn't get a chance to write you last night or rather I was so tired that I slept through from shortly after chow until I went on C.Q. ...

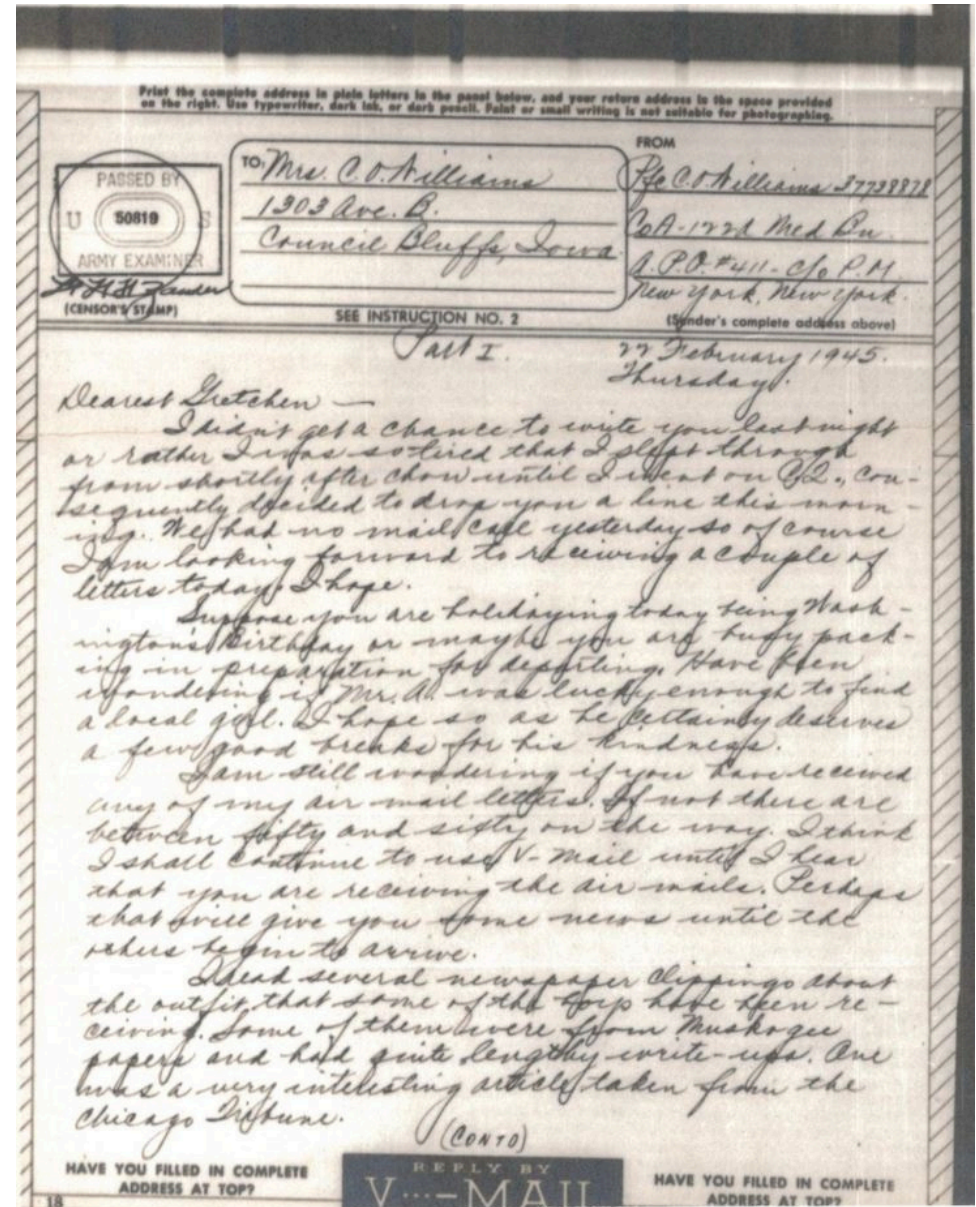
...There has been very little damage to the buildings here but I have seen several small communities with hardly a building left standing. Practically every large bridge either highway or railroad has been destroyed and temporarily rebuilt by our engineers. Many were destroyed by our equipment to halt the retreating Germans. I have also seen scores of railroad locomotion and box cars that were bombed and wrecked. The more of this you see the more you get to feeling that war is so unnecessary and costly...

...I finally received my laundry today, the boys at Personnel picked it up and sent same out to me. It seems good to have all clean clothes again and the French lady did a good job even to pressing my OD's after washing....We have to take them soap with our laundry as they get only four very small bars per month for their usage on rations.

Well darling this is about all my news for today so will close. Will tell you again that I am constantly thinking of you and loving you.

Bye for now
All my

Love
Clarence.



Victory Mail or V-Mail used microfilm to send letters during WWII. Use the QR code to learn more about V-Mail.



Source: Clarence Williams Collection,
Institute for Holocaust Education

Document D: Letter from Clarence Williams, April 30, 1945 (excerpt)

Monday
30 April 45.

My Honey —

Well another month has passed and the war continues but I sincerely believe the end is now in sight and not too far distant...

...Had a new experience today that I will never forget as long as I live. I had read a lot about concentration camps and the brutal treatment given the prisoners but often wondered if it were all true. Now I can vouch for it. The camp covered an area of probably ten square blocks and much of it was surrounded by high cement walls with barbed wire on top and electric wires over those. A railroad runs through the camp and we saw an entire train of box cars with dead human bodies that they had no time to dispose of...

...Inside the camp was one building used as a crematory rather it was built especially for that purpose. It had one room for showers where the prisoners could get wet and open up the pores of their skin then into the gas chamber. Here they were killed, removed and stacked like cardwood until they could be shoved in the ovens. They were stacked in four rooms and the boys estimated around 700 to 800 bodies awaiting cremating.

Those laying in the box cars were nothing but skin and bone and on many, the thighs of their legs weren't as big as my forearm.

Monday
30 April 45.

My Honey —

Well another month has passed and the war continues but I sincerely believe the end is now in sight and not too far distant.

Yesterday we travelled practically all day, of course in Conroy that doesn't mean driving too much distance. Speaking of Sunday afternoon driving, I have never seen so many vehicles and such an assortment. Every road into this town was solid with vehicles for miles in every direction. We are now far enough South that the weather is getting quite bad again in fact it rained and snowed some in the evening. Shortly after arriving here we were having coffee and rations when the German 88's cut loose on us with time fire. They fired between eighty and a hundred shells and every vehicle we have is now peppered with holes from the shrapnel, including a few that are ruined. We also have three people hearts in the company now but not one was seriously injured. Most of us were still in the house when the barrage hit so immediately took off for the cellar. We really had a crowd down there including about ten civilians who hadn't time to drive out of the house as yet. The boys who were injured were caught outside and hit before they could take cover. Believe me that is one Sunday I will never forget. We have been picking up pieces of shrapnel all day and some came through the roof and windows. Capt. Bofardi found one

Source: Clarence Williams Collection, Institute for Holocaust Education

Document D: Letter from Clarence Williams, April 30, 1945 (excerpt)

Inside the camp they had factories, machine shops, hospital, and foundries where they used the slave labor guarded by SS Troops to make the tools of war etc.

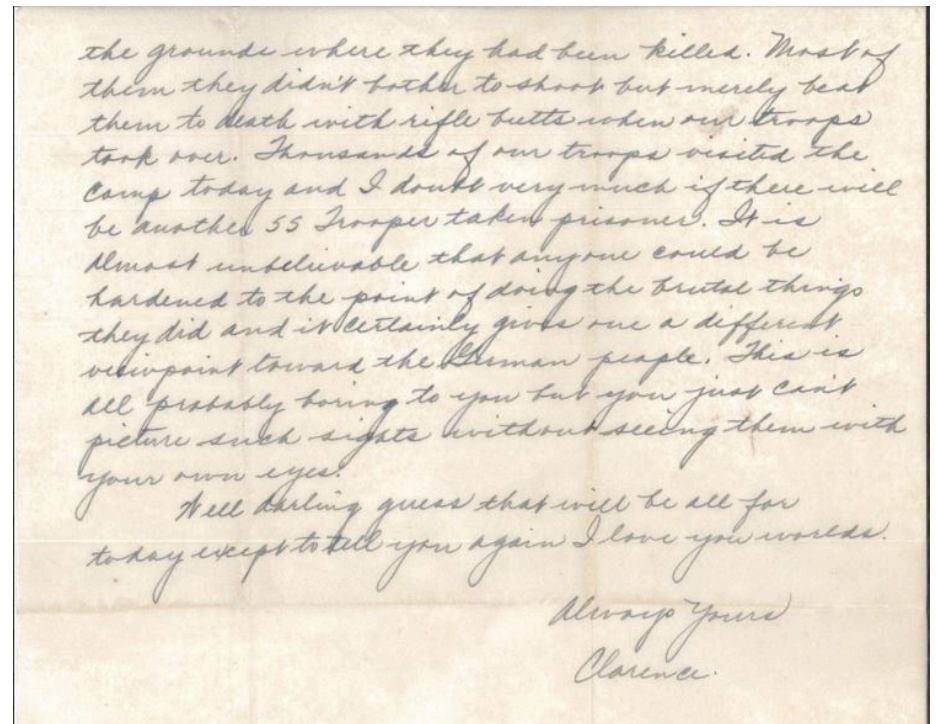
In the largest single section of the camp was several thousand prisoners from every country in Europe and even some Americans. They were now displaying all their national flags and it was very colorful...Around this section was barbed wire entanglements and cement pill boxes for the guards every few yards. There was also a deep ditch surrounding the section inside the wire. Outside there was a moat running around the section. They told us the men on the train had been riding without food for 18 days and the prisoners told us they worked 7 days a week from 5:00 AM until 8:00 PM. There were several guards still laying around the grounds where they had been killed. Most of them they didn't bother to shoot but merely beat them to death with rifle butts when our troops took over.

Thousands of our troops visited the camp today and I doubt very much if there will be another SS Trooper taken prisoner. It is almost unbelievable that any one could be hardened to the point of doing the brutal things they did and it certainly gives one a different viewpoint toward the German people. This is all probably boring to you but you just can't picture such sights without seeing them with your own eyes.

Well darling guess that will be all for today except to tell you again I love you worlds.

Always Yours

Clarence.



Source: Clarence Williams Collection, Institute for Holocaust Education

Letter Analysis Guide



Find an interactive, digital version of these letters at bit.ly/NTFD-Letters

Letter Analysis Process

Observe the letter

Step 1: Observe the letter

Find information about the letter itself.

Make sense of the letter

Step 2: Make sense of the letter

Think about the people writing and reading the letter.

Use the letter as historical evidence.

Step 3: Use the letter as Historical evidence

Connect what is being written in the letter to what is happening in the world at the time.

Observe the letter

Step 1: Observe the letter

1) Who wrote this letter?

3) When was this letter written?

2) Who was the intended audience for this letter?

4) Where was the letter written?

Make sense of the letter

Step 2: Make sense of the letter

1) Why was this letter written?

2) What else was happening at the time this was created? How do those events help you understand why it was created?

Letter Analysis Guide

Make sense of the letter

Step 2: Make sense of the letter

3) What does this letter tell you about the author's experiences?

4) What does this letter teach you about the experiences of American soldiers during WWII?

Use the letter as
historical evidence.

Step 3: Use the letter as historical evidence

1) What evidence does the author present that you should "fact check" (verify as true)?

3) What perspectives do you bring to this topic and source? How does your identity and the time in which you live affect your perspective?

2) This primary source shows one perspective of a historical event. What other perspectives could you examine?