

A Classroom Guide to *Dear Mr. Dickens*

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Ages 4-8 // Grades PreK-3

This classroom guide is designed for students in first through third grade. It is assumed that teachers will adapt each activity to fit the needs and abilities of their own students.

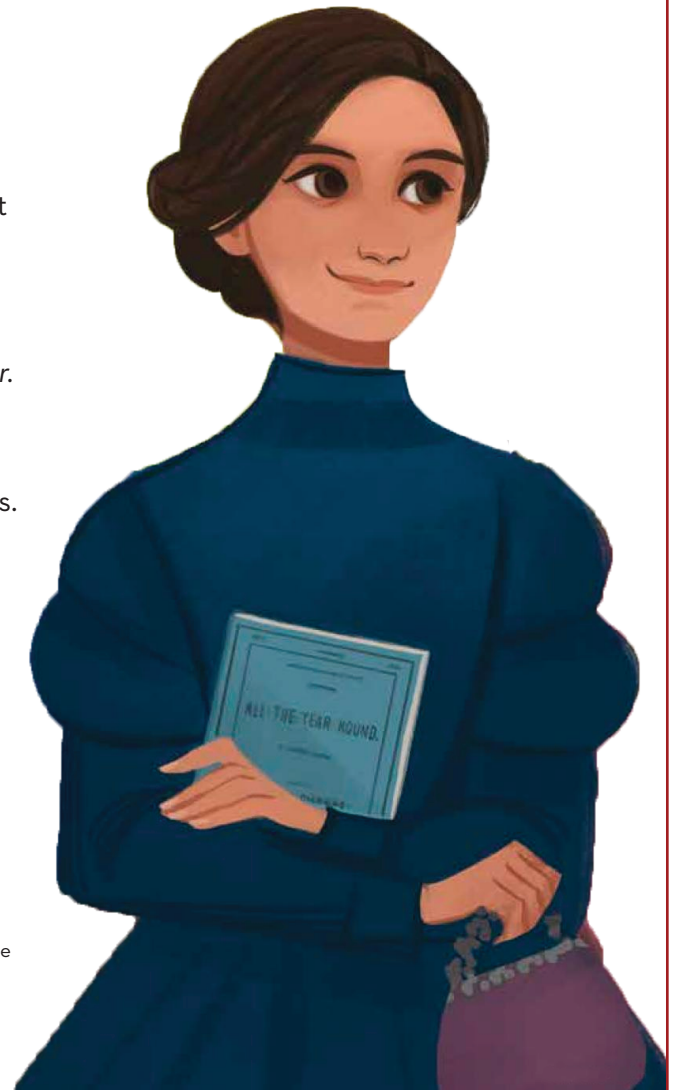
It offers activities to help teachers integrate *Dear Mr. Dickens* into the curricula.

All activities were created in conjunction with the Common Core and other relevant content standards.

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Before You Read...

Before reading Dear Mr. Dickens...

Look closely at the Front Cover ~

- Describe in detail what you see.
- Who do you think the woman is? What is she doing?
- Who do you think the man is? What is he doing?
- Imagine you are the woman in the illustration. How does this pose make you feel?
- Imagine you are the man in the illustration. How does this pose make you feel?
- When do you think this story takes place? Today or a long time ago? What clues on the cover tell you this?
- Can you guess what the story might be about? What are some clues that tell you the setting?

The Back Cover~

- Read the text on the back cover. What more do you learn about the characters on the front cover?
- Read the quote on the back cover. Does this quote make you want to read the book? Why or why not?
- Who is the quote from? Why do you think this person's thoughts were included on the back cover? What makes their words important?
- What do you learn about the book from the back cover? Make a list of all the words that stand out to you.

English Language Arts

Reading Comprehension

Now read or listen to the book.

Help students summarize in their own words what the book is about.

- The book opens with a question for the reader. What are your answers to these questions? What would you do if someone famous you admired said something or wrote something unfair?
 - Would you speak up even if it made that person angry?
- Who was Charles Dickens? Why was he famous?
- What do you think Eliza means when she says that a hero is someone who "uses the power of his pen to help others?"
 - How can writing help other people? Can you think of any examples?
- What upset Eliza about Chapter Eight of *Oliver Twist*?
- Why did Eliza feel like someone should speak up?
- What was life like for Jewish people in Victorian England?
- How does Charles Dickens respond to Eliza's first letter? How does Eliza react to his response?
- How do the three spirits from *A Christmas Carol* inspire Eliza's second letter?
- Explain in your own words, the following statement: "while some of his non-Jewish characters were criminals, *all* of his Jewish characters were criminals."
- How did Charles Dickens make up for his past poor use of the word Jewish?
- Why were both Charles Dickens and Eliza glad she spoke up?

Let's talk about the people who made *Dear Mr. Dickens*.

- Who is the author?
- Who is the illustrator?
- What kind of work did each person do to make the book?

Now, let's look closely at the illustrations.

- Look closely at how people are dressed in *Dear Mr. Dickens*.
- Print out photos from the Internet of clothing styles of Victorian England.
- Draw your own character wearing clothing from this time period.
- Display the finished drawings in the classroom.

Reading Nonfiction

While reading *Dear Mr. Dickens* aloud to the class, have students take notes in two columns:

- *Things We Learned*
- *Questions We Have*

Pause before each page turn to add notes to the columns. These columns can either be individual or hung on the board and worked on as a class.

Things We Learned (Facts)	Questions We Have	Answers We Found

- Once the story is read, discuss the *Questions We Have* column.
 - Were any of these questions answered as the story went along?
 - If so, ask students to find the answer within the text.
 - Record the answer next to the question in a third column labeled *Answers We Found*.
- For all remaining questions in the *Questions We Have column*, that have yet to be answered, students will need to take the steps to find answers, either through Internet or book research.
 - Discuss how to find answers to questions through research.
 - Assign students to specific questions to help them focus.
 - Record all answers in the *Answers We Found* column.
- After the answers have been shared with the class, engage in a discussion on research practices.
 - What was the most difficult about finding answers?
 - Was it easier to find answers on the Internet or in a book?
 - Which source is more reliable, the Internet or a printed book? Why?
 - How can you determine whether to trust a source?
 - What tips would you give someone who is about to do research?

- Read the Author's Note at the back of the book.
 - Create an additional chart to document what information in the Author's Note was included in the story and what information was not included.
 - Why do you think Churnin chose to include certain information and leave other information to the Author's Note?
 - Choose three facts from the Author's Note and explain why you think each was not included in the story.

Extension: Design and illustrate posters representing each Fact, Question, and researched Answer based on *Dear Mr. Dickens* and display them within the classroom.

Dear Mr. Dickens: Writing a Persuasive Essay

Eliza Davis knew that Charles Dickens was a very famous man and that his poor, inconsiderate way of labeling Fagin as a Jewish man in *Oliver Twist* could lead to more prejudice against Jewish people. Therefore, Eliza Davis wrote a letter to Charles Dickens to persuade him to make a change.

Ask your students if they know what "persuade" means. If not, can they make any guesses?

Discuss:

- What it means to persuade
- Times you might want to persuade someone (e.g., persuade your parents to let you stay up late, persuade your teacher to not give a test)

Writing to persuade tells the reader what you believe, gives the reader at least three reasons why you believe it, and has a good ending sentence. You want to try and convince the reader to agree with you.

Have students write their own persuasive essay to someone of influence who has the power to right a wrong and ask that person to do the right thing.

Use the following TREE structure:

T = Topic sentences

The topic sentence tells the reader what you think or believe. Example:
I am writing to you because I believe you are a person of influence and was hoping you would be willing to right this wrong.

R = Reasons

The reasons why you believe that this person needs to use their power to right a wrong. Write at least two to four sentences supporting three reasons. Use evidence directly from the text.

E = Ending

Wrap it up with a conclusive sentence.

E = Examine

Look closely. Do you have all of your parts?

Share your essays with the class. Which is the most persuasive? Why do you think so?

BONUS: Visit the "Dear..." page on author Nancy Churnin's website, nancychurnin.com, and share your letter and responses!

Speaking and Listening Extension: Create a TV commercial or PowerPoint presentation to encourage people to read *Dear Mr. Dickens*. Be sure to incorporate the TREE structure!

New Vocabulary: Courage

What is courage?

Look up 'courage' in the dictionary. (Depending on the level of your students, a student volunteer can do this or the teacher can.)

- Read the definition.
- Then, define 'courage' in your own words.

After better understanding courage, discuss whether the following examples are 'courageous' or not.

- Trying a food that you've never tried before.
- Engaging in a new experience.
- Standing up for someone who is being picked on.
- Asking for help.
- Helping out a person or animal in need, even if it might put you in a little bit of danger.
- Taking a stand against an unfair social or economic practice.

Discuss:

- Can you think of a time when you were courageous?
- Something that you can do today to be courageous.
- Was Eliza Davis courageous? How so? Explain.
- Was Charles Dickens courageous? How so? Explain.

Quotable Dickens

Nancy Churnin included several of Charles Dickens's quotes throughout *Dear Mr. Dickens*.

Have students choose one of these quotes and write a four-paragraph essay about what this quote means to them.

Social Studies

Making Your Voice Heard

What are some injustices that you see in the world that you believe someone should speak up about, like Eliza?

The Project:

- Have each student lay down on a large piece of paper while someone traces their body with a pencil.
- Once the student has the silhouette of their body, they can decorate the inside of the outline with their inner thoughts and feelings about injustices that they see in the world.
- Outside the silhouette they can draft up action plans to make their voice heard in regard to this injustice.
- Photos can be added to create a collage.

Display the silhouettes with title "Better Than Our Word."

Finding Commonalities/Uniqueness

Charles Dickens and Eliza Davis lived very different lives, but they had things in common, too. For one, the both had "a pen, paper, and something to say."

Finding things you have in common with other people is a good way to start a meaningful relationship. It is also a way to see ourselves in others so that we treat them with the love and respect they deserve.

Here is a way to learn what you have in common with your classmates, while also celebrating what makes each of you unique.

Materials: A pen and two pieces of paper.

- This activity can be done as a whole class or in pairs.
- On one sheet of paper, you will have twenty minutes to come up with a list of things in common. Completely obvious answers such as “we both have hair” or “we are both in _____ class” are not allowed!
- After twenty minutes, switch to the other paper. You now have twenty minutes to come up with a list of things that are unique to only one person.
- Share both lists with the class when finished.

Further Activity: To further connect to Eliza’s story and that of the Jewish people of Victorian England, separate the class into groups based on these commonalities and uniquenesses, treating one group different from the other. For example, everyone who is a certain height or taller receives a toy to play with while the others are excluded. Then discuss how this discrimination felt and how to make sure to promote inclusion in and out of the classroom.

Inclusion, Exclusion, and Building Empathy

How were the Jewish people in Victorian England treated differently?

On top of the anti-Semitism discrimination which was prevalent, there were also lots of microaggressions.

Microaggressions are defined as the everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.

The difference between microaggressions and overt discrimination or macroaggressions, is that people who commit microaggressions might not even be aware of them. For example, Charles Dickens calling Fagin a “shriveled, old Jew” and making all of his criminals Jewish.

Here are some other examples of microaggressions commonly found today:

Microaggression Example 1: “You don’t act like a ...”

This is often meant to be a compliment but succeeds only in being mean: “You don’t act like a normal Black person.” Other variations include, “Wow! You speak like you’re White,” “You’re not like other [insert group here]!” and “I don’t think of you as [X group].”

Why is this offensive? It is effectively insulting a whole set of people by positioning whiteness (or another hegemonic group) as the norm, and the group of the “other” as lesser-than.

This “compliment” is basically saying that the person is **different** from “their group,” and praiseworthy only because of similarity to the dominant group, yet not fully fitting in with that dominant group because it was noteworthy that the similarity existed in the first place.

Microaggression Example 2: “I assume you speak ...”

Language is tightly intertwined with **identity**. By presuming to know what language someone speaks based on their physical features, we make incorrect assumptions about who they are and what their background is.

Why is this offensive? Assuming someone’s language or place of origin based on physical features is rooted in stereotypes about a particular group of people.

Stereotypes: A mistaken idea or belief many people have about a thing or group that is based upon how they look on the outside, which may be untrue or only partly true. Stereotyping people is a type of prejudice because what is on the outside is a small part of who a person is.

Thinking about your own life, the languages you do and don’t speak are probably full of stories which themselves can be bursting with emotions, choices, and history. No one can know someone’s language based on outward appearances.

Learning about someone's language requests thoughtful, respectful, and appropriate discussions and relationship building.

Microaggression Example 3: Bundling Giant Groups.

There are 4.5 BILLION people living in Asia right now, and that doesn't even begin to count people of Asian descent living in other parts of the world.

Not only does someone from China have a totally different cultural and linguistic background than someone from India, but someone from one city in Vietnam could very well have a totally different story and situation than someone who is from three miles away.

Many other microaggressions stem from over-clumping giant groups. For example, there are 1.6 BILLION Muslims in the world, and it is highly unlikely that any generalization could cover that many humans accurately!

Wouldn't it bother you if people assumed something about you because of your skin color, cultural background, or religion you are associated with?

Microaggression Example 4: Group = (Dis)ability

Assuming a group of people have certain deficits or abilities (even if those abilities **seem** positive and are meant as a compliment) can be both hurtful and inaccurate.

It is not a compliment to say, "You are really good at math for a Latina!" because it implies the racist expectation that Latinas are bad at math.

This piece also extends to hair. A classic microaggression is people reaching out and touching or squeezing the hair of someone from another group without permission, as if that group's hair is mystical, strange or something from a museum exhibit. The hyper focus on the physical attribute that is different from the dominant group is rooted in the historical stereotypes that exoticized non-white groups.

Microaggression Example 5: Speaking Superpowers.

Assuming one human can speak for their entire group (or groups, given that identity is intersectional) is futile, because humans are not the same, even if they share some characteristics!

Though we want all voices heard that want to speak, asking the one Black student in a class for "the Black opinion" of a Langston Hughes poem or Black Lives Matter protests or asking a Latinx student for their "Latinx opinion" on ICE or any other (seemingly) collective cultural expression or experience indirectly asks them to be the spokesperson for their entire community.

Microaggression Example 6: "Othering"

For people who do not clearly fit in a visually evident category, there's a constant question thrown their way: "What ARE you?" closely followed by, "Where are you REALLY from?"

This implies that the dominant identity of the country is the only identity recognized as a part of the society or a 'native' to the country and anyone else that looks differently from the dominant identity can't possibly be considered a native to the country.

How to Respond to Microaggressions

1. Do and say nothing.

This can force the speaker to think about what they've said, and why it might be offensive.

2. Open up a conversation.

For example, "That's an odd thing to say," or "That makes me feel kind of weird to hear you say that" or, "What do you mean by that?"

Some people on the receiving end of microaggressions choose to clearly explain why the utterance is problematic, which can be a helpful learning moment for the speaker. However, It is important to continue your learning and not place the responsibility on the person that was targeted of teaching and educating you on all things associated with their culture.

For the person on the receiving end of the microaggression, you have the power to decide whether you want to use your energy for a conversation. It is okay to choose not to open up a conversation after receiving a microaggression. You can simply ignore and look for a community that healthily affirms your identity.

3. Be an ally.

If you witness microaggressions, do try to intervene so the target doesn't need to, and/or try to address the issue with the speaker and the institution as well if it occurred within a larger structure.

4. Catch yourself.

If you find a microaggression coming out of your own mouth, identify it, apologize, and continue research and learning about inclusiveness.

History

A Timeline of Anti-Semitism in Europe

Hostility toward Jews or discrimination against them as a group is known as anti-Semitism. The word *Semite* refers to a number of different peoples from southwestern Asia, including both Jews and Arabs. *Anti-Semitism*, however, usually refers only to discrimination against Jews.

Jews have been discriminated against both as a religious group and as a racial group. Anti-Semites have long targeted Jews because they have different religious beliefs.

Most people think of World War II when anti-Semitism is mentioned. However, Jews have been discriminated since B.C. times.

Choose a century and research anti-Semitism at that time. Then make a timeline based on your findings.

Visit the following two sites for a detail timeline of World War II, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism.

The Anne Frank House: <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/the-timeline/>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-and-world-war-ii-key-dates>

Discuss:

- How would you explain anti-Semitism to someone?
- Do you think anti-Semitism is over? Are all people now treated equally? Explain your answer.

Art

Art for Social Change

Throughout history, art has been used for social awareness and change, as well as to transform public spaces into places of beauty and reflection. Additionally, these pieces of public art are used to bring about a tighter community and make those in the community aware of issues.

Research “art for social change.” Look up examples of public art on the Internet: examples in subways, under bridges and in parks. Be sure to find examples of traditional murals painted on walls, but also sculptures and knit-bombing.

What is a social issue that you would like to bring awareness to in your own community?

How can public art be used to further this awareness?

Students can make their own piece of art for social change for the school community!

1. Choose a space within the school that could use some brightening or some inspiration.
2. Brainstorm a mural or other piece of temporary art called “The Power of the Pen” that can be created in this space.
3. Brainstorm how this mural can build community and tell a story of its creators.
4. Involve as many people as possible in the creation.

Resources

Charles Dickens Museum 48 Doughty Street London WC1N 2LX, United Kingdom

Charles Dickens Museum is the house where Charles Dickens once lived and is now a museum that you can visit!
<https://dickensmuseum.com/>