

LESSON: Ransom Letter

TIME: Estimated 3-4 periods to complete assignment (50-minute periods)

CLASS LEVEL: 7th and 8th grade Language Arts

TEKS LANGUAGE ARTS GOAL: In this lesson, students engage in reading a short story and compose a written text with a clear controlling idea, coherent organization, and sufficient detail.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS: Why do some authors incorporate special writing techniques, such as irony in their works? What might the impact be if they did not use these?

STUDENTS (In Class Studies):

- read ["The Ransom of Red Chief: The Tale of a Reformed Kidnaper"](#) by O. Henry
- identify the overall plot, characters and irony of O. Henry's story
- discuss, in particular, the ransom note/letters showcased in the story
- create a ransom letter using poetic and humorous writing techniques
- create a drawing of the kidnapped object

TEKS: 7th and 8th grade Language Arts: Reading/Fluency, Reading/Vocabulary Development, and Writing/Expository Texts

Reading: (1) (2) (3) (6A) (6B) (6C) Writing: (14A) (14B) (14C) (14D) (14E) (17A)

7th and 8th grade Art: Creative expression/performance. The student is expected to create artworks based on direct observations, personal experience, and imagination. (7.2 and 8.2 A)

VOCABULARY:

Irony: A subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance. There are different forms of irony, such as structural, tragic, and verbal.

Plot: The pattern of events and situations in a narrative or dramatic work, as selected and arranged both to emphasize relationships—usually of cause and effect—between incidents and to elicit a particular kind of interest in the reader or audience, such as surprise or suspense.

Step 1

Read aloud "The Ransom of Red Chief" by O. Henry. As the more difficult/unknown words are read, write them on the board (Examples: "somnolent," "depredation," and "philoprogenitiveness") and discuss their meanings.

Step 2

Go back and re-read the ransom note (provide copy as handout), paying special attention to the unusual words/mispronunciation, punctuation, and primary messages conveyed in the letter. Discuss the use of irony—how it was used to create the humor in the story. Prompt discussion with questions, such as, "Can you find examples of irony in this story?" "What made that ironic approach humorous for you?"

Step 3

Tell the students they will now write their own ransom letter, emphasizing this is a pretend kidnapping of an object from someone. Stress that humor is the point of this writing exercise—you want to make the readers laugh!

Step 4

Using the ransom letter assignment handout, provide the students with the requirements for producing a quality ransom letter, along with the sample poem.

Step 5

Provide due date for a draft of the writing assignment. Explain the peer revision process at which time students will receive feedback from a classmate. They will make their final edits by a designated time.

Step 6

Have the students share (publish) their final draft of the ransom letter/poem:

- In the shape of the object “kidnapped”
- Using cut-out letters as shown in the example
- Once completed, read ransom letter in class

EXTENSIONS:

Find out more about O. Henry at <http://www.austinlibrary.com/a/c/ohbiography.htm>.

For Museum Tours: Offered at three sites within Brush Square—the Susanna Dickinson Museum, the O. Henry Museum, and the Austin Fire Museum. Open Wednesday-Friday, noon to 5 p.m. The museums are small historic spaces and can only accommodate a maximum of 15 students at a time. Large groups will be broken into sub-groups that will rotate through each of the museums. All tours require two weeks advance notification.

To make a tour reservation, or for more information, contact [Bao Nguyen](#).