

LEVEL: Grades 6-12

SUBJECTS: Language Arts, Consumer Education, Environmental Education, English, History, Government, Communication, Debate.

PROCESS: After conducting research, students express their opinions about a controversial issue by writing a letter.

- OBJECTIVES:** The student will:
1. Identify a controversial issue.
 2. Collect information about the identified controversial issue.
 3. Define, identify, and collect examples of facts, opinions, and opinions stated as facts.
 4. Analyze the collected information to form an opinion.
 5. Write and mail a letter of opinion to an individual, group, or organization.

TIMEFRAME: Seven 30 to 45-minute sessions.

SKILLS: Analyzing, applying, classifying, comparing similarities and differences, comprehending, discussing, empathizing, evaluating, identifying, inferring, interpreting, listening, reading, recording, researching, synthesizing, taking responsibility, valuing, working in small groups, writing.

MATERIALS: Writing materials, current issues of newspapers, magazines, newsletters, etc., phone book, envelopes, postage stamps, "Issue Investigation," "Issue Facts and Opinions," "Their Point of View," and "My Point of View" sheets (attached).

VOCABULARY: Constituents, controversy/controversial, emotional appeal, fact, opinion, sidestepping.



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

OVERVIEW: Being a responsible citizen requires knowledge, involvement, and the ability to take action. Being well informed is important for a citizen in order to take effective action. Citizens have a voice that can be exercised and is heard when elected officials receive letters from constituents. Public opinion is also important to most businesses and organizations.

Controversial issues are rarely simple or limited to two sides. When issues involve the interrelationships of ecosystems and human populations, they can become very complex and often emotional. (Please see the activity "The Blind Men and the Ecosystem" for more information on seeing many sides of an issue.) In examining a controversial issue, it is critical that students are able to identify factual information, opinionated information, and information that is opinionated, but stated as if it is factual. Facts are neutral statements and can be proven to be true. Opin-

ions, on the other hand, are points of view, judgements, or conclusions. Generally, opinions are drawn from facts, but that does not make them facts.

When gathering information and researching issues, it is also important for students to understand that different techniques are used in the discussion of controversial subjects. Issues can be sidestepped rather than directly addressed. Sometimes, responses are designed to have a certain emotional appeal that may make it difficult to find resolutions based on factual information.

Letter writing is an effective tool for expressing an opinion and making an individual's voice heard. Letters from constituents do have an impact on elected officials and their voting. Most government offices at the local level, businesses and organizations are concerned about the opinions of their customers and members as well.

Some suggestions for effective letter writing include:

- Write a personal letter in your own words rather than using a form letter.
- State the issue early in the letter.
- Be constructive and polite, not insulting or sarcastic.
- Say what needs to be said in one page.
- Limit your letter to one topic.
- Send letters about different issues in separate envelopes.
- Ask for a response and to be informed of possible action regarding the issue.

Some important addresses include:

1. Dear President _____, The White House, Washington, D.C. 20501.
2. Dear Senator _____, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510.
3. Dear Representative _____, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515.

Other addresses can be found in the phone book or at your local library. The United Nations, United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017 can help you find the address of a world leader. Write to the person's embassy in care of the above address.

PROCEDURE:

PRE-ACTIVITY:

Photocopy the "Issue Investigation," "Issue Facts and Opinions," "Their Point of View," and "My Point of View" sheets (attached) for each student or pairs of students.

ACTIVITY:

SESSION ONE: Issue Investigation

1. Survey the class to discover which current issues involving ecosystems, people, and/or their interrelationships students are aware of. Brainstorm some issues and list them on the

board. Have students classify these issues according to whether they are local, statewide, national, or international issues. Some issues may fit in all the categories.

2. Ask students to rank the issues according to *HOW MUCH* they personally know about an issue. In a separate ranking, ask them to list the issues according to their *OWN LEVEL OF CONCERN* or interest about each one.

3. Compile the ranking information for both categories using the top three issues from each student's list. Decide as a class which issue(s) to investigate for a class action project. Explain that students will be conducting research and gathering information to better understand an issue. Ultimately, they each will form their own opinion about the issue and write a letter expressing it.

In choosing, an issue, take into account which issues are the best understood by students, easiest to research, and generate the most interest. For older students, each student can choose an issue and work individually. Another option is to have students work in pairs or have those who share an interest in the same issue work together in small groups.

4. Have students begin collecting and reading sources of information about the issue(s) for session three. Discuss possible sources of information (newspapers, radio, magazines, interviews, council meetings, newsletters, brochures, television, etc.). Distribute the "Issues Investigation" sheet to students to complete during their research. Explain your expectations for completeness.

SESSION TWO: Issue Facts and Opinions

1. Discuss briefly with students the information they have gathered on their "Issue Investigation" sheet. They can continually add to this sheet as they collect information about their issue.

2. Assess students' knowledge of facts and opinions. Define and discuss the differences. Facts are neutral statements that can be proven. Opinions are points of view, judgments, or conclusions. Opinions are sometimes stated as facts, but that does not make them

facts. For example:

Fact: Many groups use fresh water.

Opinion: I think agricultural producers (farmers) should be able to use as much water as they need.

Opinion stated as fact: It is more important for urban areas to have priority in water use decisions.

3. With older students, discuss the use of the techniques of sidestepping and emotional appeal. An example of sidestepping is talking about increased pollution levels of water in general, when the issue is prioritizing who will get the use of a state's fresh water.

An example of emotional appeal is presenting an agricultural producer who had a mental breakdown when he lost his great-grandfather's farm due to receiving no water. The issue is prioritization in the distribution of water.

4. Distribute the "Issue Facts and Opinions" sheet to students to complete. Have them give personal examples of a fact, opinion, and opinion stated as a fact about their issue. As homework, students can gather and record more examples. Explain your expectations for completeness.

SESSION THREE: Points of View 1

1. Discuss briefly with students the information recorded on their "Issue Facts and Opinions" sheets.

2. Help students understand that there are often many sides or positions about an issue. Have them use their "Issue Investigation" sheets and ask:

-Are there more than two sides to your issue? How many positions are there?

-What are some of the different positions of your issue?

-What areas of agreement exist between the different positions of your issue?

-Exactly what are the differences about which individuals or groups find it hard to

reach an agreement?

3. Students may need assistance identifying individuals, groups, and organizations involved in their issue. It may not be critical for them to identify all the parties involved in the issue, however at least two parties are essential. Make sure students take the necessary time to do their research and understand the history leading up to the controversy.

SESSION FOUR: Points of View 2

1. Distribute the "Their Point of View" and "My Point of View" sheets to students. Have them use their "issue" and "fact and opinion" sheets to assist in identifying and stating at least two different positions held by others about the issue for the "Their Point of View" sheet. Explain to students that it is important for them to understand, as fully as possible, other points of view to better be able to form their opinion about the issue. Explain your expectations for completeness.

2. Encourage students to begin forming their own opinion about the issue, if not already formed, for the "My Point of View" sheet.

SESSION FIVE: Points of View 3

1. Discuss briefly with students the information recorded on their "Their Point of View" sheets.

2. Have students complete their "My Point of View" sheets in preparation for writing their letter. Students' opinions may be similar to or a combination of another point of view. Students' opinions may be original, however. Explain your expectations for completeness.

SESSION SIX: Letter Writing

1. Have students compose a draft letter expressing their opinion about the issue. The letter can be addressed to a public official, group, or organization holding a similar or opposing point of view. The letter may also be addressed to an uninvolved public official, group, or organization in order to bring the issue to their attention and/or to ask what their position is on the issue. Ask students what they think effective letter writing techniques are and introduce any important points they didn't cover. (See Overview.) You may want to record the

techniques in a visible place for easy reference.

2. Have students peer edit the draft letters first for clear understanding, a statement of opinion or resolution, good letter writing techniques, punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, etc.

SESSION SEVEN: Summarize

1. When the editing process is complete, have students write the final drafts of their letters. Mail the letters and wait for a response. Encourage students to share letter responses with the rest of the class and continue to track the progress of their issues.

2. Ask:

-What is the most useful thing you learned researching your issue? Least useful?

-What is the most interesting thing you learned conducting your research? Least interesting?

-What surprised you the most?

-How can what you learned conducting your research help you get involved in other issues?

-What other issues interest you?

-In what other ways can you get involved in issues besides writing letters?

-Is writing letters an effective way to get involved in issues? Why or why not?

ASSESSMENT:

1. Evaluate students' four activity sheets for understanding and completeness. Note students' level of participation during the discussions.

2. Evaluate the students' letters. Establish predetermined criteria for students such as: being concise, polite, position identified and clearly stated, explanation of personal concern, demonstration of research and understanding of issue, resolution offered, etc.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Make a bulletin board **DISPLAY** by posting all the gathered research information. Also, post copies of the students' letters and the responses they receive.

2. Have students write letters every quarter about issues that concern them.

3. Have students gather the names and addresses of public officials at the local, county, state, and national levels. Publish a directory for any future letter writing to be completed by the students, their families, other students. Put a copy of the directory in the school library.

4. Invite an elected official or his or her representative to speak to the students about the importance and influence of citizen voices in the public decision-making process.

5. Videotape a debate of students representing various sides of a controversial issue. Based on assigned roles, students research, clearly state their positions, and offer a resolution.

6. Give students some basic information about a real or imaginary controversy. Have them write two newspaper articles, one factual and one slanted or opinionated. Discuss the differences.

7. Research an issue in history that was decided based on the influence of a vocal, mobilized, and informed citizenry.

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THEIR POINT OF VIEW

Date: _____

Name: _____

Issue I am researching: _____

The position of _____
is:

The position of _____
is:

The position of _____
is:

Issue Investigation

Name: _____ Date: _____
Issue I am researching: _____

What I personally know about this issue:	My sources of information for research:	Individuals and groups involved in this issue:	Who or what this issue affects:	History of this issue:

MY POINT OF VIEW

Date: _____

Name: _____

Issue I am researching: _____

My opinions about this issue are:

My opinions are based on the following facts:

Issue Facts and Opinions

Name: _____ Date: _____

Issue I am researching: _____

Facts about this issue: (neutral statements that can be proven)	Opinions about this issue: (points of view, judgements, conclusions, etc.)	Opinions stated as facts about this issue:

Ghost towns' revival haunting

A "Sample" Controversial Issue Involving Ecosystem Management: Development of Abandoned Platted Townships in Gunnison County, Colorado.

By Ian Olgeirson

Special to The Denver Post

CRESTED BUTTE - A century after it was carved into a wooded hillside in the rarefied air above Crested Butte, the town of Irwin is gearing up for a second boom.

It's one of several Gunnison County ghost towns, vanquished to disrepair and decay after the mining boom of the 1890s, that is coming back to life.

And the towns are haunting government officials in the process.

Irwin - which once boasted 5,000 residents, two dozen saloons, the county's busiest post office and a red-light district - was almost wiped out when the silver market crashed nearly 100 years ago.

The brothels and hotels probably won't be returning, but the people are.

Platted in dense blocks

Virtually empty town sites such as Irwin, Schofield and Floresta were platted during the silver rush in dense city blocks and were home to thousands of people.

A century later, the development rush and subsequent housing crisis is making the remote sites attractive to owners of second homes, as well as the local workforce.

Irwin poses the most immediate problem.

Gunnison businessman Jim Stratman is behind plans to revive the high-mountain spread, much to the dismay of environmentalists and county officials who are horrified by the prospects of uncontrolled growth in the fragile alpine area.

"There are a number of areas in the county where land has been platted into towns. While they are no longer incorporated, you still have a township platted into little lots," said County Manager Gary Tomsic.

Stratman recently bought 180 lots and plans to squeeze in as many as 50 home sites, all using septic systems and pit toilets.

His project has spurred county officials to begin developing a strategy to deal with the resurgence of abandoned towns. But they have come up with few solutions, County Planner Joanne Williams said.

Three years ago, nobody lived in Irwin year-round. But with the population boom of the 1990s and the exhaustive search for affordable housing, as many as 30 people now live up the unplowed road, commuting by snowmobile.

Potential 'pseudo-town'

"Its potential for turning into a whole new pseudo-town is a possibility," Williams said.

The more isolated but equally beautiful Schofield is also ripe for development. Two men recently bought 13 full blocks and six partial blocks, or more than 500 lots, in the ghost town between Crested Butte and Carbondale on the Crystal River.

Hans Peter Hansen, of Carbondale, and Christopher Smith, of Aspen, plan to sell 20 lots for summer cabins on nearly 60 acres.

Hansen said the cabins won't have running water but will use outhouses and vaults.

They plan to begin selling lots this summer, regardless of county approval.

"We don't need it," he said. "This isn't a subdivision. These lots are already platted town lots."

Floresta, vacated shortly after the coal mine of the same name closed, is owned by the Wilson Margaret Scarbrough Trust of Austin, Texas.

A gate blocks entrance to the town, but its potential for development still poses a problem, Williams said, because it has easier access than the other ghost towns.

The crux of the county's dilemma is lack of control over these developers.

"They have to be treated differently than someone who comes in with a brand new subdivision proposal because the property is already divided," Tomsic said.

The problems in Irwin are exacerbated by its prominence in Crested Butte's watershed and the effluent that can be expected with a new population.

"In the worst of my dreams, I see it all running downhill into whatever," Williams said.

The town of Crested Butte also has been watching the project and is working on contingency plans to protect its water supply.

New subdivisions in Gunnison County must be either tied to a central septic system or provide lots larger than an acre.

But the tightly platted abandoned townships threaten to put individual septic systems on lots much smaller than an acre.

(Reprinted with permission: The Denver Post, article first printed Monday, May 30, 1994 in The Denver Post)

Issue Investigation

Name: _____

Date: _____

Issue I am researching: Development of abandoned plotted townships in Colorado

<p>What I personally know about this issue:</p> <p>Because of a current housing shortage and lack of affordable housing, there are plans to put homes on townships of former ghost towns. Three towns in Colorado were mentioned: Irwin, Schofield, and Floresta. They were towns during the silver rush. The old townships are not subject to the same development rules as new townships. Environmentalists and county officials are worried about the effects on the watershed and the environment.</p>	<p>My sources of information for research:</p> <p>The Denver Post article: I can contact the developers and county officials mentioned in the article for more information. I can contact the existing towns of Crested Butte and Carbondale and see if they have published articles in their local paper.</p>	<p>Individuals and groups involved in this issue:</p> <p>County officials: County Manager Gary Tomasic County Planner Joanne Williams Environmentalists Developers: -Gunnison Businessman Jim Strahman -Hans Peter Hansen of Carbondale -Christopher Smith of Aspen Existing towns: Crested Butte Carbondale People needing affordable housing</p>	<p>Who or what this issue affects:</p> <p>-People who work in this county who need affordable housing. -Crested Butte, a town that needs to maintain a clean water supply. -Businessmen seeking to make a profit. -Ecosystems that will be harmed by uncontrolled growth.</p>	<p>History of this issue:</p> <p>A century ago, the ghost towns were thriving during the silver boom. They were tightly packed with people. The towns were abandoned but the town lots are still on record as already plotted. Anyone who has the money to develop these sites can do so without the interference of current development rules. Most of these new developments will not have adequate sewage treatment, which can harm the watershed and affect the water supply of existing towns.</p>
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Issue Facts and Opinions

Name: _____

Date: _____

Issue I am researching: Development of abandoned plotted townships in Colorado

<p>Facts about this issue: (neutral statements that can be proven)</p>	<p>Opinions about this issue: (points of view, judgements, conclusions, etc.)</p>	<p>Opinions stated as facts about this issue are:</p>
<p>Virtually empty town sites such as Irwin, Schofield, and Floresta were plotted during the silver rush in dense city blocks and were homes to thousands of people. Gunnison Businessman Jim Stratman plans to revive Irwin.</p>	<p>"In the worst of my dreams, I see it (sewage) all running downhill into whatever," Williams said.</p>	<p>The tightly plotted abandoned townships threaten to put individual septic systems on lots much smaller than an acre.</p>

THEIR POINT OF VIEW

Name: _____

Issue I am researching: *Development of abandoned platted townships in Colorado*

The position of *county officials* is: they lack control over the developers. They are worried about the effects on the watershed and the fragile alpine area. They believe the septic systems and outhouses at the new development will be inadequate to deal with the waste.

The position of *the developers* is: they do not need county approval to begin selling lots and developing the subdivision. They will proceed with their plans because people desire housing that they can provide and on which they (developers) will make a profit.

The position of *local workforce* is: affordable housing is hard to find.

The position of *town of Crested Butte* is: they are worried about keeping their water supply clean.