

# Sharing Your Vacation— Send a Postcard!

**W**hat does someone write to family during a vacation? What would a typical vacation postcard say? How can reading and writing postcards, even imaginary ones, help your students gain valuable vocabulary and literacy skills? This lesson plan will allow you to add fun experiences to your literacy lessons. Reading the feature article about Chicago that appears in this issue will help you, the teacher, draw on new vocabulary and experiences to provide you with authentic material to present this lesson.

The goal of this lesson is to help your students gain study skills and literacy strategies that are useful for becoming better readers and writers of English.

## Objectives:

- To learn how to write well about travel experiences.
- To understand that writing to an audience and with a purpose are the basic components of writing well.
- To enhance reading comprehension through understanding of the author's intention.
- To enhance comprehension through questioning and to learn that asking questions is a reading strategy that can be used with different kinds of texts.

**Level:** Intermediate

**Materials:** Bring sample postcards to the class. Try to gather postcards that have actually been sent, with messages already on them. Postcards written in English are excellent examples of authentic teaching materials. If you don't have any postcards, you can create them by cutting stiff paper into the size of postcards and drawing or pasting a picture of a famous place on one side of each card and on the other side writing a note about a vacation from that place.

## Group Work:

For this lesson, having students work in groups to accomplish tasks is an important part of the learning. Many researchers now agree that the learning that takes place socially is just as important as the learning that takes place individually. Placing students into effective learning groups can be an art, and just as there are various styles of art, there are various ways to create good groups.

1. You can create different groups for different activities. Depending on the task, you will want to have students of different skill levels working together or students with the same skill level working together. For example, a harder task might lead you to mix skill levels. However, a task where outcome is not an important goal, the instructions are not difficult, and the process easy to follow, could lead to homogeneous grouping.
2. You can also create groups by having students who are friends work in different groups and strategize on which personalities in the class might work well together.
3. You might try to have quiet and talkative students together in one group with a rule that each student contribute orally to the production of the task.
4. You can arrange the students randomly in groups. There are several ways to do this. One way is if you have a class of 40 students, and you decide you want small groups of five, have the students count off in eights and then group all the "ones" in the class into

a group, all the “twos” into a group, and so forth until you get eight sets of five students that have been randomly assigned.

In this lesson there are several tasks. Think about for which tasks you will keep the same group together and which tasks will necessitate that you create different groups. How did you decide this? What factors about individual students and specific tasks will you need to think about?

## **Warm up: Bringing students into the activity (30–40 minutes)**

Remind students that all over the world, people go on vacation and while on vacation, they buy, write, and send postcards. Sending postcards is a way that people share new experiences with others when apart.

On the blackboard, write the following questions, read them aloud, and have the students answer them.

- Have you ever sent a postcard?
- Who did you send it to?
- Where were you when you sent it?
- What did you write on it?

As students answer the questions, provide them with the vocabulary they need to express their thoughts. Write any new vocabulary items on the blackboard and explain them.

Next, take out your bag of postcards and show one or two to the class and ask the students:

1. What is the picture on this postcard?
2. What do you think is written on this postcard? [Elicit for names, date, place, activity, opinion, etc.]

Then read aloud two or three postcards to the students in English or in your native language. Ask the students:

1. What kind of information was written on the postcard?
2. How does the picture on the card relate to the postcard’s written message?

## **The Lesson**

### **Part 1 (45–50 minutes)**

Write the following postcard message on the board. Read it aloud to the class, or ask a student to read it aloud.

Dear Mom,  
I am in Chicago. This city is a fabulous place. On St. Patrick’s Day the Chicago River was dyed green!  
Love, Mary

### **Exercise 1: What’s missing?**

Tell the students that when Mary’s mother got that postcard, she was disappointed that the message was so short. She wanted to know more about what Mary was doing and seeing. She felt that a lot of information was missing from the postcard.

1. Divide your students into groups of four, and ask them to think about what kinds of questions Mary’s mother had when she read the postcard. Tell them to imagine that they are Mary’s mother and to remember that mothers always want to know everything their children are doing.
2. Ask students to work together in their groups to create the kinds of questions Mary’s mother was thinking. To enhance the effectiveness of group work, give each student in

the group a task. For example, one student can be “the leader” who makes sure each student in the group speaks; two students can be “recorders” who write down the questions created by the group; one student can be the timekeeper; one student can be the “reporter” who reports the group’s questions to the whole class (10 minutes).

3. After students have brainstormed in their small groups, ask groups to share the questions with the whole class and write them on the board (10 minutes).

Sample questions that could be generated by students:

- Who was Mary with?
- When did Mary write the card?
- Why is Chicago fabulous?
- Why was the river dyed green on St. Patrick’s day?
- How was the river dyed green?
- What was the weather like in Chicago?
- Where was Mary staying in Chicago?

4. Ask the students to go back to their groups and try to answer the questions the class generated, pretending they were Mary. (10 minutes)
5. Bring the whole class together again and list the answers to the questions on the board. For any questions that are not answered, or need modification, work together as a class to answer them. (10 minutes)

Please note: You might need to explain that St. Patrick’s Day is March 17 and that even though it is an Irish holiday, in the United States many non-Irish also celebrate that day. Explain that green is the color associated with being Irish and that it is a tradition to dye the Chicago River green on St. Patrick’s Day to commemorate the holiday.

### Final Metacognitive Discussion (5–10 minutes)

1. Show the students that they have created who, what, when, where, why (and how) questions, or what we generally call “the 5 W’s” (and 1 “H”).
2. Tell students that using this questioning strategy when they write will allow them to have complete descriptive and detailed writing.

### Exercise 2: Reading a postcard – Writing a postcard (90 minutes)

#### Reading (40 minutes)

Below is a sample postcard that provides more details about Mary’s vacation. Write the text of the postcard on the board to share with students. Read it aloud.

March 18, 2008

Dear Mom,

I’m having a fabulous time in Chicago walking around this beautiful city with a lake, interesting architecture, good food, and world-class art and anthropology museums. I am staying with my friend’s family in a cute house about 3 miles from downtown Chicago. Even though it is cold and windy this time of the year, I am enjoying being here, especially this month because of a strange custom they have in this city. Yesterday was St. Patrick’s Day and the Chicago River was dyed green! The streets were full of people enjoying the holiday.

I am having a good time and wish you were here.

Love, Mary

Begin to work on “question-answer relationship” (QAR) reading strategies by telling your students that reading is not just understanding the meaning of words; it is understanding a text and using a reader’s own ideas and experiences to better understand the text.

Four types of QAR questions can build comprehension and critical thinking.

- “right there” questions—these are also known as literal questions, as the answers can be found “right there in the text.” For example, a “right there” question about the preceding sentence might be: “What does literal question mean?”
- “think and search” questions—here the student is again asked to use the text to find the answer, but in this case, the student needs to put together several ideas from the whole text to come up with an answer. A favorite “think and search” question is: “What is the main idea of this passage?” Here the student is asked to “search” through the text and put together different pieces of textual information to come up with the meaning of the text.
- “author and you” questions—these are also known as inferential questions, as they require students to think about answers using the text. One such question might be “What does the author suggest about...?” Here the student needs to have read the text and put together ideas in the text with ideas the author has about the text to come up with an answer.
- “on my own” questions—these do not require that students use the text. An example might be: “What would you write in a postcard if you took a vacation in a famous city in your country?” In this case, students can create questions that are related to the text but do not require direct information from the text as an answer. The answer comes from the student’s own ideas.

After going over the strategies and reading the text, give the students sample QAR questions to answer. Here are some examples:

- “right there” question: What city is Mary in?
- “think and search” question: Why did Mary say she was having a good time?
- “author and you” question: What does Mary imply by using the term “strange custom”?
- “on my own”: For you, what are the components of a good vacation?

Once students have answered the questions you give them, ask them to come up with their own QAR questions for each category and to try to answer those.

At the end of this activity, have students copy the expanded postcard to use for the next lesson.

### **Activity: Writing your own postcard (50 minutes)**

Divide your students into groups of four.

1. Have students take out the postcard that they copied in their notebooks. Ask the students if it is complete, or if they would have added anything more to Mary’s card.
2. Remind students to look for ideas they gathered in this lesson that teaches them to create detailed descriptive writing by considering the audience and writing that has a purpose (such as describing a place, explaining a custom, describing emotions related to experiences). Ask students to review their notes from previous exercises, including the information they gathered through the questions (the “5W’s”) and answers they worked on in groups.
3. Put students into groups and have each group decide on a city or area that they have visited during a vacation that they would like to write about. Each group should try to pick a different area or city.

### **Assignment**

1. Ask students to work in groups to write a postcard to their parents or a close friend or relative about a vacation to the city or area they chose. (If students do not know enough about

another city, you can have them write about their own city, but remind them to write as if they were tourists in that city.) As they are in groups, students can come up with ideas together about what might be interesting and unique aspects of the area/city to write about. Have each group write one postcard together.

2. Remind students that their postcards need to be detailed enough to answer all the questions that their parents or friend would have about the vacation place.
3. Have students illustrate the front of the postcard with a drawing or an image from a magazine or newspaper.
4. After the postcards are finished, have each group read their postcard to the class.
5. Ask the class if there are any questions for the authors of the postcards.
6. Have the students vote on which group wrote the postcard that had the best description and the most detail.

### Follow-on lesson: Review reading strategies (30–45 minutes)

Students like to know what the teacher thinks about everyday life. Reading things that the teacher has actually written can motivate some students. In this activity, you, as the teacher and as a writer, get to voice your opinion about a vacation that you took.

1. Bring a “postcard” that you have written about a place you have visited.
2. Write the message of your postcard on the board. Read the message and clarify any new vocabulary and ideas.
3. Write the names of the question-answer relationship (QAR) reading strategies on the board and review them with the class.
4. Divide the class into groups and assign one strategy to each group. Ask each group to create a question for its assigned reading strategy.
5. After the students have created their questions and answered them, bring the class together and have each group ask their questions to the class. You can create a competition to see which group can answer the questions the quickest. The group with the most correct answers wins the competition.

### Final reflective survey (20 minutes)

Write the following on the board:

- 1) Reading a text and asking questions about a reading passage is helpful for comprehension.  
Sometimes                      All the time                      Never
- 2) There are different levels of understanding a reading passage.  
Yes                                      No
- 3) Using details results in better writing.  
Yes                                      No

Ask the students to tell you their answers. Tally them up on the board. Are there any disagreements? Ask students what they can conclude from their answers.

### Last Thoughts

- In subsequent lessons, remind students to use questioning techniques to help their comprehension of the texts.
- Display the “postcards” students created in this lesson around the classroom to enhance student motivation for studying English.

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## Fact Sheet: Chicago

**State:** Illinois

**Official Website:** [www.cityofchicago.org](http://www.cityofchicago.org)

**Population (2006):** 2,833,321

**Area:** 234 square miles (377 sq. km.)

**Elevation:** 579 feet (176 m)

### Average temperatures

#### January:

Low 30°F (-1°C)

High 36°F (2°C)

#### July:

Low 67°F (19°C)

High 77°F (25°C)

**Average annual rainfall:** 42 inches (1070 mm)

**Nicknames:** The Windy City

### History and Industry

In the late 1700s, fur trader Jean Baptiste du Sable established a settlement on the shore of Lake Michigan that was incorporated as the Town of Chicago in 1833. The town grew quickly, and in 1837 Chicago was incorporated as a city. Since then the population has increased to nearly 3 million (9 million in the greater metropolitan area). At present, Chicago ranks as the third largest city in the United States.

Chicago's centralized geographical position makes it a hub for transportation, commerce, distribution, and culture. Once known for stockyards, steel mills, and railroads, Chicago is now home to about 30 Fortune 500 companies, some of the finest universities in the world, and one of the world's largest and busiest airports, O'Hare International.

### Landmarks

Chicago boasts one of the tallest skylines in the world. At 110 stories tall, the Sears Tower is Chicago's tallest building. On a clear day, visitors to this building can see 40 to 50 miles from the observation deck on the 103rd floor.

Visitors are attracted by several noteworthy museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Science and Industry, and the Shedd Aquarium.

Millennium Park, completed in 2004, is now one of Chicago's most popular destinations. The 24.5-acre park, located in the heart of the city, features a theater, a band shell for outdoor concerts, a large garden, a space for outdoor art exhibits, and an ice skating rink in the winter.

### Arts and Entertainment

Besides being an international hub for business and transportation, Chicago offers a wide assortment of leisure activities. Music lovers enjoy the Chicago Symphony, which is recognized as one of the finest orchestras in the world. Chicago also has several ballet companies, dozens of theaters, and many nightclubs featuring distinctive jazz and blues music.

For sports lovers, Chicago has two professional baseball teams, a football team, a hockey team, and a basketball team—the Chicago Bulls, made famous in the 1990s when superstar Michael Jordan led the team to six national championships.