

Greetings from Sunny New Mexico

In this classroom activity, students practice speaking, writing, and reading or listening while they learn about the state of New Mexico and climate and energy issues in that state. This lesson plan begins with preparation activities (numbers 1–2 below) and continues with comprehension and response activities (numbers 3–5 below) and optional extension activities. The combined time required for these activities is approximately 115 to 160 minutes.

This activity may be adapted for listening or reading practice. To use it for reading practice, give your students copies of the letter, or write it on the board. To use it for listening practice, read the letter aloud. You may need to read portions of the letter again during group activities.

Skill focus: listening, reading, speaking, writing

Content focus: description of New Mexico’s landscape, climate, energy, and water issues

Language focus:

- Vocabulary: numbers
 adjectives and nouns to describe the weather (e.g., *sunlight, air, clouds, cold*)
 adjectives and nouns to describe geography and scenery (e.g., *flat, rivers, forests, mesa*)
 nouns related to energy (e.g., *sunlight, power, energy potential*)
 nouns related to water issues (e.g., *farming, irrigation*)
- Grammar: conjunctions (*because, so*)
 passive voice (*houses can be designed, more and more new homes are being built*)
 relative clauses (*places that take my breath away, there are things that are wonderful and others that are difficult about living in New Mexico*)
 other possible areas of focus: tenses, prepositions, articles

1. Pre-reading/listening (15 minutes)

Tell students that they are going to read or listen to a letter from someone named Anna, who lives in New Mexico. Ask the class this question:

- a. What do you know about New Mexico? (Possible answers: it’s in the United States; it’s near Mexico)

Have students work in pairs to answer the following question:

- b. What do you want to know about New Mexico? (Possible answers: the weather, people, culture, history, landscapes)

Write on the board a list of things the students want to know about New Mexico (answers to question b).

Tell students to read or listen to Anna’s letter and try to find the information they want to know about New Mexico.

2. Finding the Main Ideas (20–30 minutes)

Read, or allow students to read, the letter below. Elicit unfamiliar words from students, write them on the board, and explain them to students as necessary; see the vocabulary list on page 50 for examples.

As you read, pause after each paragraph and ask students whether the paragraph contains the information that they wanted to know about New Mexico. If the information was covered in the paragraph, check it off. If the information was not covered, ask students what information is in the paragraph, and write the paragraph topics on the board. The complete list of topics should look something like this:

nature (or *geography*, or *landscape*)

weather (or *climate*)

solar energy

water

A Letter from New Mexico

Dear _____ [put teacher's or a student's name here],

You asked me why I like living in New Mexico. I like it here because the landscape is so beautiful. We have mountains, mesas, rivers, and forests. Mesas are common in the southwest United States; mesa is the Spanish word for a broad, flat-topped mountain. For 12 years, I have hiked and explored several days a week, and I still find new places that take my breath away.

What else do I like about living in New Mexico? I like the sunshine. We have over 300 sunny days a year, with deep blue skies. Because we are 7,000 feet above sea level and because the weather is very dry, the air is very clear. Since our elevation is so high and there aren't any clouds, the nights here are much colder than the days.

The many days of sunshine we have are a very good thing for our state. Did you know that New Mexico receives more than 3,200 hours of sunlight per year? With that much sunlight, we are one of the sunniest states in the United States and have a lot of solar energy potential. Some people say that if we could use the energy from all of the sunlight New Mexico receives, we could provide more than enough power for the whole United States!

In fact, I've been reading a lot about solar energy lately. Solar energy is a good source of power because most of the world receives sunlight, because sunlight will not run out, and because solar energy causes less pollution than other forms of energy. There are many simple ways to use the sun's energy. For example, houses can be designed to let a lot of sunlight in (to keep the house warmer) or to shut out most sunlight (to keep the house cooler). Also, special pieces of glass can be placed into the roofs of houses to let natural sunlight in. These are called skylights.

The weather in New Mexico is good for making energy out of sunlight, but sometimes the lack of rain is a problem for people living here. Most of the state is desert, and there isn't enough water for drinking, growing food, and other uses. Farming is very difficult here because of the water shortage. There are many laws about water use in New Mexico so that everybody uses just enough. The need for water increases as more and more new homes are built.

So, as with all states, there are things that are wonderful and others that are difficult about living in New Mexico. How about you? Do you like living where you are?

Yours,

Anna

Vocabulary

landscape (n): the physical features of a place, including mountains or water, plants, etc.

elevation (n): the height of a place compared to sea level

feet (n): plural form of *foot*, a measuring unit. One foot is 12 inches, or about 0.3 meters. Seven thousand feet, the elevation of New Mexico, is about 2.1 kilometers.

solar (adj): of the sun, e.g., *the solar system*

solar energy: energy made from sunlight to provide electricity

potential (n): possibility or capability that is not yet used (In the letter, *solar energy potential* means the energy that can be made from sunlight but is not used yet.)

pollution (n): impurities; dirty or dangerous substances in water or air

explore (v): (in the letter) to go and see a place that has not yet been visited

take (one's) breath away: an expression used to describe something so beautiful or important that one feels as if one can't breathe for a moment

3. Comprehension Check (15–20 minutes)

- a. After students have read or listened to the letter, break the class into groups of three to five students and assign each group a topic from the letter (New Mexico's weather, nature, solar energy, and so on). At this time, you may want to review by having groups read their portion of the letter again, or by reading it to them. Ask each group to write two to four questions about their topic that could be answered by reading the letter. Tell students that later they will ask these questions to their classmates in the other groups. Possible questions include:

- (Geography) What is the Spanish word for a broad, flat-topped mountain?
- (Weather) How many days of sunlight does New Mexico receive each year?
- (Solar energy) Why is solar energy a good source of power?
- (Water issues) Why is a lack of water a problem for people in New Mexico?

- b. Have each group write one question that goes beyond the information provided in the letter. Possible questions include:

- (Geography) What activities might be popular in a place with a landscape like New Mexico's?
- (Weather) What are some of the benefits of living in a place with a lot of sunshine?
- (Solar energy) What are some ways of collecting and using solar energy?
- (Water issues) What activities might be difficult in a place that doesn't receive much rain?

- c. Ask the groups to save their questions for later in the activity.

4. Group Presentation (40–60 minutes)

Have each group present their topic to the class using the information they learned in their portion of the letter. You may choose to have the students take notes on other groups' presentations. At the end of the presentations, all students should be familiar with all of the topics in the letter.

5. Group Question Exchange (15–20 minutes)

Have each group combine with another group and ask each other the comprehension questions they wrote in step 3. At this time, you may choose to circulate among the groups, checking that students understand the information they gathered from the letter and from the presentations.

6. Synthesis Questions (10–15 minutes)

After students have finished quizzing each other in groups, bring the class back together. Then, as a class, discuss students' answers to the following questions:

- a. Nature/landscape/geography
 - Do you think New Mexico is higher in elevation than your home town? Why do you think so? (Answers will vary.)
 - What outdoor activities would you do if you lived in New Mexico? (Possible answers: mountain climbing, hiking, fishing, boating, camping)
- b. Weather/climate
 - If you lived in New Mexico, what would you wear during the day? What would you wear at night? (Possible answers: During the day: a sun hat, sunglasses, light clothes. At night: warm clothes, blankets)
 - If you prefer blue skies over cloudy skies, would you enjoy living in New Mexico? Why? (Possible answer: Yes, because the weather in New Mexico is sunny 300 days each year.)
- c. Solar Energy
 - Do you think that New Mexico gets more hours of sunshine per year than your home town does? Why do you think so? (Answers will vary.)
 - Imagine that you work for a company in the United States that makes electricity from solar energy. Should your company work in New Mexico? Why or why not? (Possible answer: Yes, because New Mexico has a lot of solar energy potential.)
- d. Water
 - After hearing about New Mexico's water problems, would you want to move there? Why or why not? (Answers will vary.)
 - If you lived in New Mexico, what could you do to help with some of its water problems? (Answers will vary.)

Optional Extensions

Written Response (40 minutes)

Have students write a brief letter to Anna commenting on their assigned topic as it relates to their own location. To prepare students, you may want to go over standard letter formatting (greeting, separate paragraph for each topic, closing) and remind students that Anna is their primary audience. Depending on your class, you may want to have groups exchange letters and offer feedback to one another, checking for clarity, correct vocabulary, and the like. Students may then use the input of their peers to write an improved draft of the letter. This activity could also be done as homework.

Solar Energy Class Survey (90 minutes)

This expansion activity may be used with intermediate to advanced students. Tell students that in this activity they will survey the class members on their energy use habits—how much energy each person uses at home and what each person is doing to save energy.

1. Have students work in groups to come up with survey questions. Circulate among the groups to guide students and help them brainstorm questions, such as:
 - How many lights do you have in your house or room?
 - How many hours is each light on each day?
 - How many hours in total are your lights on every day?
 - How many hours in total are your lights on in a year?
 - Do you have a fan or air conditioner or heater?
 - How many hours are these appliances on each year?
 - (The questions can go on to cover other electric appliances such as kitchen stove, TV, radio, refrigerator, and computer, if appropriate)
 - What do you do to save energy?
2. When the groups are finished brainstorming questions, ask each group to create a survey form using the five most important questions they wrote. The survey form should have the list of questions on the left and blank columns on the right for answers. You may choose to keep survey results anonymous.
3. When all groups are ready with their survey forms (groups may have the same questions or slightly different questions), ask them to answer the survey questions themselves. Then put two groups together and ask them to take turns surveying the students in the other group.
4. After the survey is completed, ask the groups to compare their results.

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