

GLOBAL PEN PALS

Interacting with a peer from a different part of the world is one of the best ways for students to learn about experiences, ways of living, and points of view different from their own. Thankfully, today's technology makes it easier than ever before for teachers to set up such interactions.

Matching students with an international pen pal gives them the opportunity to ask questions and learn about the daily life of a student from another country. In this activity, students will also share information about their lives and experiences in order to help their pen pals learn more about what life is like where they live.

LEVEL

High beginner to advanced

SKILLS

Reading and writing

GOALS

During this ongoing activity, students will be able to participate in the following tasks:

- Communicate in English with a peer from another part of the world
- Develop informal reading and writing skills

MATERIALS

- A world map
- Notebooks or paper and pencils
- Chart paper or a chalkboard/whiteboard and writing utensils

- A means of exchanging international letters, such as through e-mail, through file-sharing services (for example, Dropbox or Google Drive), or through a postal service
- If mailing letters, large mailing envelopes (to hold all students' letters) and postage

TIME REQUIRED

Initially, this activity requires 1–3 class periods of 45–60 minutes to explain the relationship, to brainstorm questions, and to write the first letter. The amount of time required after these initial stages will depend on how much support students need when writing letters. After sending the first letter, students should be able to read replies from their pen pals and write a response letter in 1–2 class periods.

PREPARATION

- The first step in this activity is to establish a relationship with an English teacher in a different country. There are many places to look for potential partner teachers, including your own personal network of English teachers, the [American English for Educators Facebook](#) page, [Skype in the Classroom](#), or [PenPal Schools](#). Explain that you would like students to be able to write letters to each other to learn more about each other's countries and lives. Letters can be handwritten and mailed or sent via e-mail if your students have access. Teachers should agree upon how the letters will be exchanged and how often students will write to each other.
- Keep in mind your class size and students' ages when establishing pen pals. Try to find a class that has close to the same number of students as yours and that has students close in age to your students.
 - If there are extra students, you can assign two pen pals to a more advanced student in your class who could manage writing multiple letters.

- Students who are one grade level or year away from each other should still be acceptable for pen pals, but same-age peers may be best because students will most likely relate to each other more.
- Share a list of students' names with the teacher from the other class. (For privacy, you may choose to only share students' first names and last initials; for example, "Sarah B.") Decide how students will be paired. Some teachers prefer to pair students of the same gender and with similar interests, if possible. However, students may gain more from the activity if the pairs are random. The pairing of students will be guided by the framework of your culture and context, as well as that of the other group.
- Discuss the details with the other teacher in advance so that students can begin writing to each other as soon as you introduce the activity in class. For example, decide how students will exchange letters: through e-mail, through file-sharing (such as Google Drive or Dropbox), or through the mail (one option is to mail students' letters in one large envelope to the other school). Also choose the dates to exchange letters, and consider how much class time you can devote to students reading and writing letters.

PROCEDURE

1. Introduce the activity to your students. For example, you could say, "I have been in contact with a teacher from [COUNTRY]. We are going to start writing letters/e-mails with his/her students who are also studying English. This will be an ongoing project, and you will write and receive letters with one of the students from the class in [COUNTRY] several times during our course/school year. By exchanging letters, you will get to learn about how students in [COUNTRY] live, and they will also get to learn more about your life."

2. Explain to students that they will be matched with one student from the partner class to exchange letters with him or her. If there are any students who will have more than one pen pal, you can also let them know at that time.
3. Using a world map or globe, help students to locate the country where their pen pals live. Ask students to write down what they think life is like in the place where their pen pals live. If there is enough time, students can then discuss their ideas in small groups or discuss their ideas as a whole class.
4. Ask students questions about the other place. Here are some possible questions to ask:
 - a. What do you think life is like in _____?
 - b. What is the weather like?
 - c. What do people eat?
 - d. What languages do people speak?
 - e. What do you imagine a classroom might look like in _____?
 - f. What hobbies or activities do you think students your age do for fun?
 - g. What challenges do you think students face?
 - h. What do you think a student your age plans for their future in _____?
5. As students share their ideas, write the ideas on the board or on chart paper. Another option is for students to write down the ideas in their notebooks. This list of students' ideas about life in the other place should be saved in some way so that students can think about these ideas later on when writing to their pen pal.
6. Next, ask students to think of information they would like to learn about their pen pals. Students can discuss their ideas in groups or as a whole class. Make a list of these questions as well, and save this list for future use. For example, the questions can be written on chart paper and displayed in the classroom for students to refer to later, or the questions can be written on the board for students to copy into their notebooks.

7. Remind students that when writing to their pen pals, they should also share information about themselves and their lives. You may want to create a list of things that students could share, such as their age, number of family members, favorite hobbies, favorite subjects, etc. Students can help think of ideas for this list. Again, this list can be posted on chart paper to use later, or students can copy the list from the board.
8. Talk about the structure of the letter students will write. If needed, review the elements of a letter, such as the date, the greeting, the closing, etc. Remind students that in the body of the letter they should share information about themselves as well as ask questions to learn about their pen pal.
 - a. Modeling a letter from start to finish is one option. Or, if your students are more advanced and are familiar with writing letters, you can briefly discuss the structure.
9. Provide students with some time to write their letters. Offer them help as needed depending on their proficiency level. For instance, beginner-level students might benefit from sentence frames such as “My name is _____. I am ____ years old and am from _____. I go to _____ school. I have ____ brothers and ____ sisters.” More advanced students may be able to write independently or even complete their letter as a homework assignment.
10. Students can write letters by hand, or if you plan to share them electronically, they can type them on a computer. However, students should not send the letters or e-mails until you have had a chance to review the content.
11. Once students have had enough time to write their letters, review all of the letters to be sure that they meet the goal of promoting an exchange of information. While you may wish to let students correct errors that might cause misunderstanding, remember that the pen pal activity is also an opportunity for students to practice English, and therefore the letters do not have to be perfect.
12. Once the letters are ready, you can send them to the partner class. Your students should also receive letters around the same time.

13. When your students receive letters, give them time to read the letters and to share information about their pen pal with their classmates. Each time your class gets letters, you can remind them of their list of initial ideas about the partner class and their way of life and then discuss whether their initial ideas were correct or if they have learned something new. If you wish, write down what they have learned on chart paper or on the board. Students can also write down or copy this information in their notebooks.
14. If needed, remind students how to respond to the letters they receive. They can react to something their pen pals have written, share new information, respond directly to their pen pals' questions, or discuss something that is similar or different about their lives.
15. Students should continue to write back and forth as often as you and the partner teacher have agreed upon.
16. Throughout the exchange of pen pal letters, continue to have students reflect on what they are learning about the part of the world where their pen pals live. Encourage them to think carefully about first impressions they may have had that were actually wrong, or to find things in common in the ways they and their pen pals live. One possibility is for students to keep a journal and write about these reflections each time they get a new letter. Students can also participate in small-group or whole-class discussions about these topics, or even make a presentation about what they have learned from the experience.

By interacting directly with students around the same age, learners build a connection with someone outside of their own community. Despite the many differences that may exist in the daily lives of two students, getting to know each other by exchanging letters helps students to see that people often share common experiences, goals, and challenges.