

Further Information for Teachers
Letters to a President

American Studies Programme
University of Manchester
Manchester

January 20, 2021

Dear Teachers,

We are delighted you are interested in this competition. This guide is intended to offer more information for teachers, including some suggestions for incorporating the competition into your lessons, and to help you support your students in developing their submissions.

The competition is aimed at any UK school student in years 9-13. We have developed it mindful of current specification guides, particular in subjects such as in government and politics, English literature and language, and (American) history.

Of course none of your students will have determined—through their votes—the outcome of the US presidential election. And as UK residents, they may express understandable distance from the reach of US politicians. But US presidential elections are now global affairs: not only because of the media coverage they attract, but also because their outcomes are assumed to have global consequences. This seems especially true at a moment when so many issues demand collective international responses. Those teaching politics or civic courses, might want to start here: to discuss the global and international issues that confront us, or are likely to do so, and think about the role and possibilities of the US president in responding.

We very much intend for the competition to engage students to think about the political realm beyond the act of voting, and to show them that creative acts—of imagining, expressing, and recognizing—also have an important role to play. Teachers of history might want to introduce this theme by drawing students' attention to the ways in which some American creative artists have worked to create a 'visual democracy', a set of images and texts whose aim has been to recognize those on the margins of society, and to encourage more active democratic citizenship.* Letters can of course do something similar, calling attention to an issue, placing it at the forefront of debate, and framing in a certain light.

Teachers of English Language might want to have students explore the form of the letter, to think about its conventions, or to consider through it the language of politics at this

moment—both in the US and UK. By writing letters to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, we hope to engage students to understand the political realm as exceeding the work of elections, and to imagine, through their own acts of letter writing, that they too can contribute to shaping a public language for addressing contemporary issues—issues often global in their reach and magnitude. Throughout the spring, colleagues in American Studies will also be offering some brief online reflections of well-known examples of letters sent to the US, or by notable Americans, and teachers of English Literature in particular might find this stock helpful for offering a range of comparative examples and models.

We are of course interested to read about the issues that students identify as being priorities for the new administration. What expectations, hopes, and ambitions do they have for America's new political leaders? The competition will close on the eve of the Biden/ Harris Administration's first 'One Hundred Days', which is a mythical marker, developed in the 1930s to measure the achievements of President Roosevelt's New Deal, and which has endured among American political commentators since.** The letters students write are therefore letters to the future—helping us to imagine what place the world can be in late April 2021. Students may want to draw on historical patterns, and our website includes several such examples of letters written by British citizens, including that which Manchester's cotton-workers wrote in December 1862.

To help you develop students' responses, we are organizing a series of online events. With help from our colleagues at the Centre for New Writing, we will put on two workshops, in late February (aimed at students in years 9-11) and late March (aimed at students in years 12-13).

We are very much looking forward to reading your students' letters in one hundred days' time!

With very best wishes,

UoM American Studies Programme

* On 'visual democracy' see Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (2010)

* A history of the coinage of 'one hundred days' is found in Anthony J. Badger, *FDR: The First Hundred Days* (2009)