

**SOLOMON G. BROWN: LETTER WRITING**

**Objectives:** Students will learn what a primary source is, how to find information in primary sources, and why primary sources are valuable in the study of history. They will practice reading and proofreading skills. They will also learn the format for a personal letter, and write one themselves.

**Time:** 1 hour 15 minutes (*Adjust Time As Needed*)

- introduction, (*suggested: 15 minutes*)
- reading and proofreading of letter, (*suggested: 15 minutes*)
- answering questions about letter, (*suggested: 10 minutes*)
- large discussion, (*suggested: 10 minutes*)
- writing letters, (*suggested: 15 minutes*)
- exchanging letter with partner, (*suggested: 10 minutes*)

**Skills:** Reading, Proofreading, Writing

**Content Area:** Language Arts, US History

**Materials:** (contained below)

- student worksheet
- letter format sheet
- blank letter sheet
- Solomon Brown letter and transcript

**Grade Level:** Grades 4–6

**Historical Overview:**

Solomon G. Brown (c. 1829-1906) was the first African American employee of the Smithsonian Institution. He was hired in 1852, just four years after the establishment of the Institution, and worked at the Institution for fifty-four years. During his time at the Smithsonian, he held many titles and performed many duties in service to the Institution. He served under the first three Secretaries, Joseph Henry, Spencer Fullerton Baird, and Samuel P. Langley. Brown formed a deep personal friendship with Baird, which is evident in the letters featured in this lesson and activity. Though he did not receive a formal education, he studied natural



history while he worked amongst the Smithsonian's natural history specimens and delivered lectures on many topics. He also served his community in Anacostia, a neighborhood in Washington, DC, and was a prominent writer, poet, and advocate of African American progress.

### **Letter Writing:**

Before the internet, telephones, or even telegraphs, people used handwritten letters to communicate. A written letter sent through the mail system could carry personal news or information about current events to one's friends and family. Letters written in years past are often difficult to decipher since words were spelled and used differently from today. In the mid-19th century, Solomon G. Brown sent letters to his friend and boss Spencer F. Baird to inform him of his work, life, events in Washington, DC, and daily occurrences at the Smithsonian Institution.

Letters have a standardized format so that important information is always in the same place and easy to find. There are different formats for different kinds of letters: friendly letters, business letters, cover letters, and more. While Solomon G. Brown was writing to his boss, and sometimes included information about their work, Spencer F. Baird was also a close friend, so Brown wrote him informal friendly letters.

### **Primary and Secondary Sources:**

A **primary source** is any original source of information that provides a direct or first-person connection to a historical event. Examples may include: documents such as letters, diaries, birth certificates, receipts, and notebooks; photographs and drawings; objects, such as clothing or furnishings; oral history interviews, and home movies. Primary sources were created by a person who witnessed an event first-hand.

**Secondary sources** are summaries, second-hand accounts, and analyses of events. They were created by someone who did not witness the event, but may have read or heard about it. Examples may include: books or articles written on a topic,

artworks depicting an event, letters or diaries recounting a version of events told to the author by another source.

One source can contain both primary and secondary information. For example, a diary entry that contains a version of events the author read in the newspaper (**secondary**) and the author's feelings about the event (**primary**). Whether a source is primary or secondary can depend on the question you ask. If you are looking for information on how an event occurred, the diary entry written from a newspaper article would be a secondary source (the newspaper article may be a primary source). But if you are asking how the author learned about an event, the diary entry written from a newspaper article would be a primary source.

Primary sources provide valuable information that we cannot find elsewhere. They speak to us in a first-person voice and bring history alive. They provide an individual's view of historic events and times, and they tell stories about how people lived and coped in the past. These letters, diaries, and photographs create engaging stories for students to learn about and relate to. By comparing conflicting primary sources, students learn to carefully examine actual documents, as well as the words they contain, evaluate evidence and point of view, and develop critical thinking skills about the past and also about their world today.

**Instructions for Teachers:**

Explain the definition of a primary source to your students. Ask them to think of examples of primary sources. Ask why they think primary sources are a valuable way to study history.

Describe the purposes and uses of letter writing to the students. Ask whether any of them have written letters, or if there is another, similar, form of communication that they use to exchange information with their friends. Compare and contrast their answers, (i.e.: email, texts, Facebook posts, twitter feeds), to hand-written letters.

Give each student copies of Solomon Brown's letter and transcript and the accompanying worksheet. Tell them to first examine the original document and then proofread it for any spelling or grammar mistakes. Then have students analyze the letter to answer the question on the worksheet. Encourage the students to use

the transcript only when necessary. When the students have finished, go through the mistakes and answers they found as a class.

Give each student a copy of the letter writing forms, both the one that includes the labels and the one that is blank. Discuss the different parts of a letter and their placements. Ask them to identify each section listed on the form in Solomon Brown's letter. Have each student choose a partner and tell them to write a letter describing the day's events. When the letters are finished, tell them to exchange letters with their classmate and read it. Ask them to compare each other's descriptions of the day, and find any discrepancies.

*Please note that all Smithsonian Institution primary and secondary source materials can be used and reproduced for educational purposes without further permission.*

**Instructions for Students:**

Analyze and read Solomon Brown's Letter. Proofread it to find any spelling or grammar mistakes, or places where words are spelled or used differently than they are used today. Answer the questions listed on your worksheet, using evidence from the documents to support your answers.

Use the letter form worksheet and identify the different parts of Solomon Brown's letter. Then, in the blank letter form, write your own letter to a classmate describing the events in school that day. Follow the correct letter writing format. Trade letters with your partner, and compare your descriptions of the day.

**Solomon G. Brown: Letter Writing**

**Names:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions:**

1. Who wrote this letter?
2. When and where was this letter written?
3. What is this letter about?
4. Why was this letter written?
5. Who was the intended audience?
6. What was the point of view of the letter writer?
7. What does the letter tell you about life in Washington, DC, during Brown's era?
8. How does the grammar/spelling and word use differ from today's writing style?
9. Is this letter a primary source or secondary source, or both?
10. Are any/all parts of it a primary source, explain why or why not?
11. How could you check the accuracy of the information in the letter?
12. How does the information in the letter compare to what you have learned in your textbooks?

**Letter Format:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Address of recipient \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Greeting: Dear Recipient's Name,

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Body of the Letter - Your Message to the Recipient \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Sign-off: Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_ Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Sources in the Classroom  
Solomon G. Brown  
Letter Writing

Smithsonian Institution Archives  
Institutional History Division  
[siarchives.si.edu](http://siarchives.si.edu)

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Letter Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862:

Smithsonian Institution.

Augt 12<sup>th</sup> 1862.

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

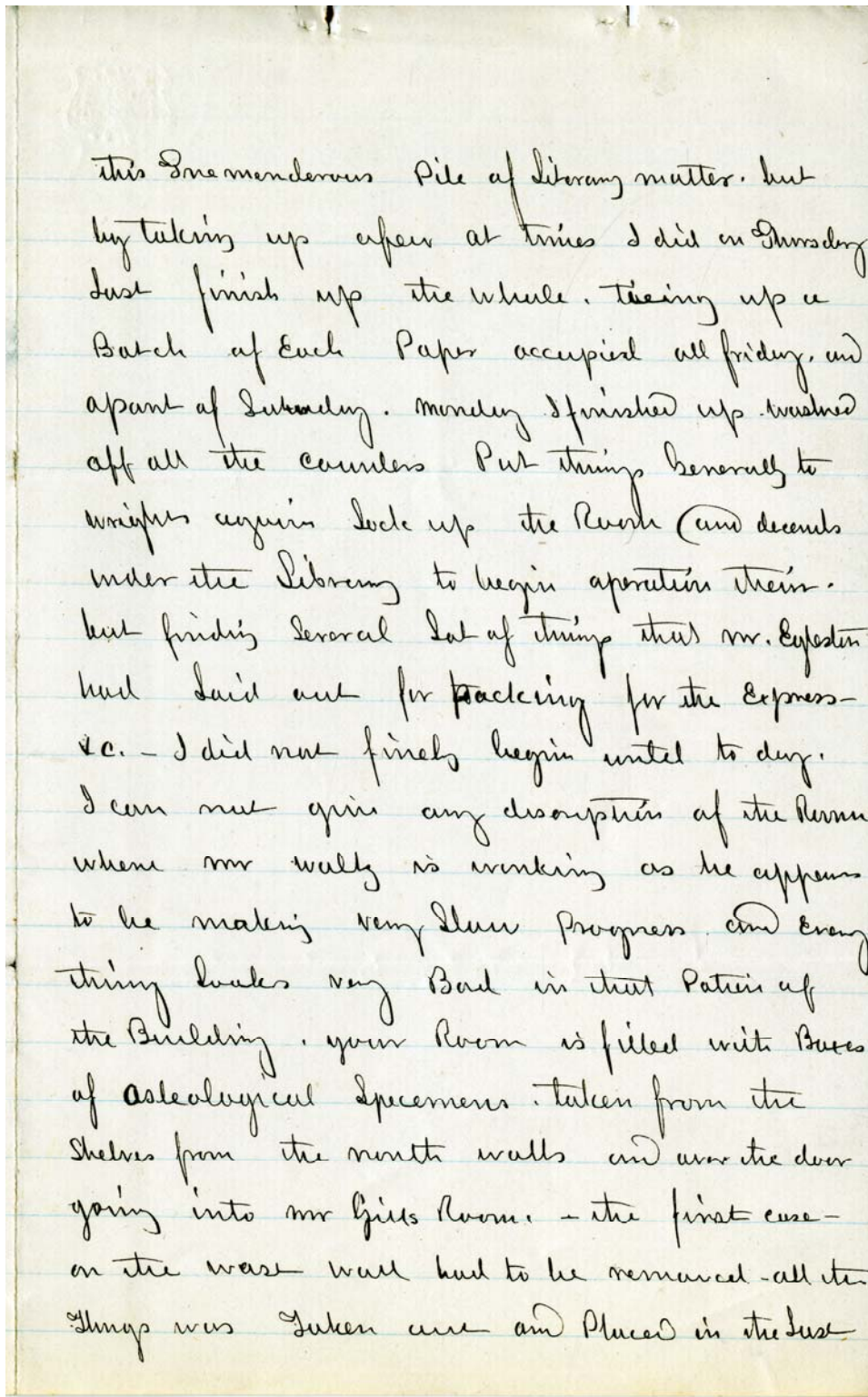
I have receivd all your letter and been faithful to execute all the orders contained in them, except the one relative my writing you. I have nothing of interest to say I concluded that I would not write until I could say that I had finished up some one pattern ~~to~~ of your orders left with me to fulfill.

I have this day finished up the Packing Room - and have made a beginning in the Packing Room under the Library, and indeed feel almost puzzled. to know how I shall truly begin. for there is but little of this work that I can do alone. (and every man is busy, about other Repairs - about the building. Except Fuller who is doing his usual part of Skulking - & hiding away, I have engaged in almost every Branch of

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862, page 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

work that is usual (and unusual about  
the 8th. Mr Thomas Egerton applied to Prof Henry  
for my assistance in the Mineralogical Department  
And I was engaged at different times well.  
in two weeks mounting numbers on 2400 pieces  
of broken ~~at~~ Building Stone. — — —  
the next. unusual job was after I had finished  
filling up all the numbers in the recent  
shelves of Distributionary case against the East wall  
in the Document Room. Mr Howard  
complained to Mr Aheer of the great inconvenience in  
him having to come down to Doct Room with written  
orders for S. Publications. — finally an order came  
down from Prof Joseph Henry By Mr Aheer ordering  
all the Papers contained in the cases above named  
to be brought up in Mr Howard Room.  
(formerly Mr Hump) to be systematically arranged &c  
this order. kept me busy almost one week  
as James & Rudys ~~was~~ and indeed I was at times  
assisting Mr Debeal in the Apparatus then going  
on in Mr Sill's (and the Apparatus Room. So I could  
get but little chance or assistance to carry up

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862, page 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat slanted. The paper has some faint markings at the top, possibly from a previous page or a stamp. The text describes the process of organizing a library and the state of a room.

this tremendous pile of library matter. but  
by taking up papers at times I did on Thursday  
last finish up the whole. taking up a  
Batch of Each Paper occupied all Friday, and  
a part of Saturday. Monday I finished up. washed  
off all the counters Put things generally to  
rights again took up the Books (and records  
under the Library to begin operations there.  
but finding several lot of things that Mr. Egleston  
had said out for packing for the Express-  
&c. - I did not finally begin until to day.  
I can not give any description of the Room  
where Mr. Wally is working as he appears  
to be making very slow progress and every  
thing looks very bad in that part of  
the Building. your Room is filled with Boxes  
of osteological specimens. taken from the  
shelves from the north walls and over the door  
going into Mr. Gills Room. - the first case-  
on the west wall had to be removed - all the  
things was taken care and placed in the last

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862, page 3, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

case on the same side I takes down the  
Boxes and emptied the case my self so  
that all was safely and carefully removed  
together with Mr Stimpson's case. —  
I made some nighting up in the Fish  
Room, But I went down to day and it  
was frightful — Mr. Bell have got every  
place filled with fans of fishes and  
only calculated not saying anything about  
Old Rays. This can keep &c floor all  
slashed, Pale ripping, Indeed near  
since the Agassizian Party was here here  
I seen such a room — But in due  
time I hope to have everything in  
a shape more congenial to my feelings  
I shall not shock your nerves with any  
description of the small abate Room —  
next to your office. But a change will  
come over this apartment if Mr Bell  
gives month. Prof Henry have orders  
for the Balwin cases of Small Birds that  
in Mr B. Room to be removed to the Museum  
floor. Will Mr Nason tell you. I have not checked the

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862, page 4, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

yet. But will try and hold on until I -  
hear from you -- on the subject  
I hope Mr Baird is now very well and also  
Mrs Churchill (and Miss Lucy. I called by  
the house on Saturday evening all was well  
(and every thing in order. Girls seemed to be  
remembered. Kindly to all.  
Please give my Best Regards to Mrs  
Baird. Miss Lucy. Mr & Mrs Churchill & Daniel.  
I should have mentioned before that I have  
been at the Patent office with Clarence  
and his wagen removing some thing from  
there.  
I think of nothing more of Interest to say  
just now.  
I am Sir your obedient Servant  
Solomon G. Brown.

To Prof. S. F. Baird  
Cembale Pa.

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, August 12, 1862, page 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

**Transcript:**

Smithsonian Institution

Augt 12<sup>th</sup> 1862.

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

I have received all your letter and been faithfull to Exicute all the orders contained in them, Except the one relative my [...]itting you. have nothing of Interest to say I concluded that I would not write until I could say that I had finished up some one portion ~~to~~ of your orders left with me to fulfill.

I have this day finished up the Packing Room - and have made a beginning in the Packing Room under the library, and indeed feel almost Puzzled to know how I shall Truely begin. for there is But little of this work that I can do alone and Every man is Bussy about other Repairs about the building Except John who is doing his usual Part of skulking & hiding away. I have engaged in almost Every Branch of **[Start Page 2]** work that is usual and unusual about the S.I. Mr Thomas Egleston applied to Prof Henry for my assistence in the Mineralogical Department and I was engage at different times well in to two weeks marking numbers on 2400 pieces of Broken ~~Big~~ Building Stone. -- -- --

the next unusual job was after I had finished filling up all the numbers in the recent shelves of Distributing case against the East Wall in the Document Room. Mr Hinwood complained to Mr Rheese of the great Inconvenience in him having to come down to Doct Room with written order for S. Publication. -- finely an order came over from Prof Joseph Henry By Mr Rheese ordering all the Papers contained in the cases above [?named] to be Brought up in Mr Hinwood Room (formerly Mr Hayes) to be systematically arranged xc. this order puts me back almost one week as James & Rodyen ~~wa~~ and Indeed I was at times assisting Mr Debrist in the Alteration then going on in Mr Gill's and the Apparatus Room. So I could git but little chance or assistence to carry up **[Start Page 3]** this Tremendous Pile of Literary matter, but by taking up often at times I did on Thursday last finish up the whole, tieing up a Batch of Each Paper occupied all friday and apart of Saturday. Monday I finished up washed off all the counters Put things generally to wright again lock up the Room and decends under the Library to begin operation there but finding several lot of things that Mr Eglesten had laid out for packing for the Express- xc. - I did not finely begin until to day. I can not give any description of the Room where Mr Waltz is working as he appears to be making very slow Progress and every thing looks very Bad in that Portion of the Building. your Room is filled with Boxes of Osteological Specimens taken from the shelves from the north walls and over the door going into Mr Gills Room. - the first case - on the west wall had to be removed - all the things was

Taken out and Placed in the last [Start Page 4] case on the same side I takes down the Boxes and Emptied the case my self so that all was safely and carefully removed together with Mr Stimpsons case. --

I made some righting up in the Aisle Room, But I went down to day and it was frightfull -- Mr. Gill have got every Place filled with jars of fishes and dirty alcohol not saying anything about old Rags Tin can keys xc floor all slooped, Table dripping, Indeed not sence the Agassizian Party was here have I seen such a room - But in due time I hope to have Everything in a shape more congenial to my feelings I shall not shock your nerves with any discription of the small wate Room -- next to your office. But a change will come over this department if Mr Gill goes north. Prof Henry Gave orders for the Balwin cases of small Birds thus in Mr G. Room to be lowered to the museum floor. Did Mr Varden tell you I have not Tuched them [Start Page 5] yet. But will try and hold on until I -- hear from you -- on the subject

I hope Mrs Baird is now very well and also Mrs Churchill and Miss Lucy. I called by the house on Saturday Evening all was well and Every thing in order. Girls desired to be Remembered kindly to all.

Please give my Best Respects to Mrs Baird, Miss Lucy, Mr & Mrs Churchill & Daniel. I should have mentioned before that I have been at the Patent office with [?Clanlce] and his wagon Removing some thing from there.

I think of nothing more of Interest to say just now.

I am Sir your obedient servent

Solomon G. Brown.

To Prof. S F. Baird

Carlisle Pa.

**Additional Resources:**

*Reliable websites with documents online:*

SI Stories, Smithsonian Institution Archives,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/index.htm>

Smithsonian Institution Archives History Pages,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history>

Smithsonian Institution Archives Home Page,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/>

Historic Pictures of the Smithsonian, Smithsonian Institution Archives,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/historic-pictures-smithsonian>

Smithsonian Institution Education site,  
<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/>

National Postal Museum, Letter Writing in America,  
<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/letterwriting/index.html>