

Children's Letters to Mrs. Roosevelt
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Grade 11 American History

Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1-9). Some of these documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise. This question is designed to test your ability to work with historic documents. As you analyze these documents, take into account both the sources of the document and the author's point of view.

Historic Content: Both Eleanor Roosevelt and her husband received unprecedented amounts of mail from Americans. The public sent FDR more than three times the mail of any previous president. In her first year in the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt received more than 300,000 pieces of mail, far more than any previous First Lady. And it was not merely the number of letters that was unique, but also their origins and character. Unlike in prior administrations, the majority of letter writers were from the working class and wrote to seek aid rather than merely voice an opinion. The First Lady in particular attracted letters from the poor because both in print and on the radio she repeatedly indicated her interest in hearing from ordinary Americans about their problems – and discussed their correspondence sympathetically in the national media.

Many of the letter writers were America's youth – both children and teens. By analyzing the requests for material assistance that young Americans between the ages of five and nineteen sent to the First Lady, it becomes possible to understand the concerns and problems, the idealism, desires, and despair which linked needy youths in Depression America. The youth letters came from children (mostly daughters) of the working poor, of one-horse (or two-horse) farmers and tenant farmers, of the unemployed, and of newly poor members of the declining middle class.

The economic crisis that sparked this letter writing provoked pain in more than just the young, but it hit the young with special force. Children and teens were among the most economically, educationally, and psychologically vulnerable to the ravages of the Depression. The needy youths who wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt often displayed a striking degree of trust in the First Lady and the president, and love for them. Often the teens confided to Mrs. Roosevelt about feelings of deprivation that they were keeping from their parents (so as not to make their mothers and fathers feel guilty about being unable to provide for them.) Poor teens and children opened up to Mrs. Roosevelt in this way because most felt that she was on their side – that she cared deeply and personally about their plight.

Beyond her advocacy for the poor, Mrs. Roosevelt's connection with youth work gave the young an additional reason for seeing her as a friend. The First Lady was a former schoolteacher and settlement house worker who was especially familiar with and outspoken on youth problems. No resident of the White House has ever approached the level of concern, activism, and empathy that Eleanor Roosevelt displayed for American youth.

It is through the study of these letters that it is possible in this day and time to be instructed by the youth of Depression America as to what it was like to be young and poor during the worst economic crisis in our nation's history.

Source: *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression*, Robert Cohen: University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 2002.

Question: What was it like to be young and poor during the Great Depression and why would a young person want to write to Mrs. Roosevelt for help?

Part A: Short Answer

Directions: Analyze the following documents and answer each question(s) accompanying each document.

Document 1

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Granette, Ark.
Nov. 6, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am writing to you for some of your old soiled dresses if you have any. As I am a poor girl who has to stay out of school. On account of dresses & slips and a coat. I am in the seventh grade but I have to stay out of school because I have no books or clothes to ware. I am in need of dresses & slips and a coat very bad. If you have any soiled clothes that you don't want to ware I would be very glad to get them. But please do not let the news paper reporters get hold of this in any way and I will keep it from geting out here so there will be no one else to get hold of it. But do not let my name get out in the paper. I am thirteen years old.

Yours Truly,
Miss L. H.
Gravette, Ark.
R #3
c/o A. H.

Question 1: What does this girl want from Mrs. Roosevelt?

Question 2: Why doesn't she want her name in the paper?

Document 2

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

March 29 - 1935

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt. I am writing you a little letter this morning. Are you glad it is spring I am. For so many poor people can raise some more to eat. You no what I am writing this letter for. Mother said Mrs. Roosevelt is a God mother to the world and I though mabe you had some old clothes You no Mother is a good sewer and all the little girls are getting Easter dresses. And I though you had some you no. papa could wear Mr. Roosevelt shirts and cloth I no. My papa like Mr. Roosevelt and Mother said Mr. Roosevelt carry his worries with a smile You no he is always happy. You no we are not living on the relief we live on a little farm. papa did have a job And got laid on 5 yrs ago so we save and got two horses and 2 cows and a hog so we can all the food stuff we can ever thing to eat some time we don't have eni thing but we live. But you no it so hard to get cloth. So I though mabe you had some. You no what you though was no good Mother can make over for me I am 11 yr old. I have 2 brother and a sister 14 yr old. I wish I could see you. I no I would like you both. And shoes Mother wears 6 or 6 1/2. And papa wear 9. We have no car or no phone or Radio papa he would like to have a radio but he said there is other thing he need more. papa is worried about his seed oats. And one horse is not very good. But ever one has't to worrie, I am send this letter with the pennie I get to take to Sunday school Mother give me one So it took 3 week. Cause mother would think I better not ask for things from the first Lady. But mother said you was an angle for doing so much for the poor. And I though that would be all rite this is some paper my teacher gave for Xmas. My add is

C.V.B.
Rushsyhanian, Ohio

Question 3: What does this girl want from Mrs. Roosevelt?

Question 4: What terms does her mother use to describe Mrs. Roosevelt?

Document 3

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Nov. 30, 1937
Springfield, Mass

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am a girl sixteen years old. Last May I beg my father to buy an electric refrigerator for mother on Mother's day. We had talked about buying one with her. She thought it was not a very wise thing to do, because we could not afford to pay cash. I wanted it so very bad that my father bought it. He agreed to pay monthly payments of seven dollars and twenty two cents. What mother had said proved to be right. For two weeks after we bought the refrigerator I took sick with a serious kidney ailment which confined me to my bed from May twenty until Nov. twenty-second. I am just recovering from a delicate operation. I came home from the hospital Nov. eighth and my father was layed off after working for the railroad fifteen years. Many a girl of my age is hoping that on Christmas morn they will find a wrist watch, a handbag, or even a fur coat. But my one and only wish is to have father and mother spend a happy Christmas. Mrs. Roosevelt I am asking of you a favor which can make this wish come true. I am asking you to keep up our payments until my father gets back to work as a Christmas gift to me. Though father worked part time for quite a while we never lost anything for the lack of payments. If the refrigerator was taken away from us father and mother would think it a disgrace.

I close hoping with all my heart that my letter will be consider. Mrs. Roosevelt you may rest assure that I have learnt my lesson.

I am respectfully yours
J.B.
Springfield, Mass

Question 5: What does this girl want from Mrs. Roosevelt?

Question 6: What does she say will make her mother and father disgraced?

Question 7: What does she mean when she says, "I have learnt my lesson."

Document 4

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Centerdale R.I
April 17, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am writing to you to ask a big favor, the biggest favor anybody can ask. I would like to know if you would pay my way to Hollywood. You may think me crazy but I not. I mean every word I say. I know you may write back and say, lots of people ask you to pay their way to Hollywood or for some other reason, but this is different honest it is you've just got to believe in me your the only one that can help. Or you may say what can I do child. Well you could tell them that you sent me and you know I can act, I'm sure they would believe you, because you tell no fibes. Just think wouldn't you be proud if I became a great movie Star and you would say to your friends, She's the little girl who wrote to me and asked if she could go to Hollywood. And I've helped to make her a great Star. I would like to tell you all this in person and then you could see me, but I have no money for carfare and I don't want you to bother to give it to me. My Little mother is a sickly lady, she is lovely so small and sweet I love my little mother dearly and I want to help her all I can so this is why I am writing to you, It will also give me a future and bring proudness to my relatives. My Little mother has something wrong with her heart which these small Doctors dont know although they do try their best. So I thought if I went to Hollywood and earned enough money I would be able to give my Little mother the best Doctors and proper care. I am not writing this letter to Mr. Roosevelt because men don't understand things like us laides do, so I am writing to you because I know you understand. I have read and heard so many nice [missing text]

I know I can act because I make little plays which I get out of story books and act them out. Please tell Mr. Roosevelt that I'm terribly sorry he lost that Bill. I think Mr. Roosevelt is doing wonders. Please be sure and tell him this, it will make him feel much better. I told some of my friends about my Idea but they only laugh at me, and I get discouraged but when I look at my Little mother I run upstairs in my room and cry. I have Mr. Roosevelt's picture in my room and his name in big read and blue letters. And when I looked at his picture it gave me an Idea and my Idea was writing to you. Please Mrs. Roosevelt answer my letter, and please oh please say yes that you'll try your hardest. God will never forget you in the next world. And what you do for your father and mother will never be forgotton. My father is also a sickly man, he had two nervous breakdowns but never got over the second one. But I am a healthy child. I am fourteen years old. blue eyes, about sixty in. tall, weigh 105 1/2 pds, hair is long and curly sort of natural the color is light brown my complexion is very white. I have big eyes. Please trust in me with all your heart and I will trust in you with all my heart. Please just for my Little mother. (That's what I call her because she is so small.)

If you the Secretary should open this letter Before Mrs. Roosevelt please give it to her. Thank you.

A Little Girl who is still Unknown and Just Became Your Friend J. I. A.

Question 8: How is this girl's letter different from the previous letters?

Question 9: How is it the same as the previous letters?

Document 5

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

[Note: Words in italics were underlined in the original.]

Old Saybrook, Conn.
July 27, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am a poor *colored* girl who thinks quite a lot of you and your family, and I know you have done a lot for my race and we appreciate it immensely.

Now I am going to ask you two personal favors which I hope you can do. The first is: *will you find my daddy a job* as caretaker and gardener on an estate or as a janitor of a club or theater? He can't find one and we can't afford to put an advertisement in the papers. He has sixteen years experience.

The second thing I want to ask you to do for me is a *big* favor but I do hope and pray you will do it. My situation is as follows: I am a girl who lives in this small town called Old Saybrook. I was born here and have lived here all of my life. In June of 1935, I was graduated from the Old Saybrook High School and in June of 1936, I was post graduated from the same high school. Now I desire to continue my education by studying "theology" at the "Moody Theological College" in Chicago. Upon graduation from Moody College I would like to become a foreign Missionary or professional choir singer or teacher.

I am ambitious and determined to succeed, and because I am determined to succeed and ambitious I am writing to ask you if *you will* and *could* please finance my expenses for me. You don't know what it would mean to me if you would do it for me. You see, I couldn't bring my self to ask just any body to do this. I had to ask some one who has money and some one who is good and kind to *colored* people and does not *hate* them. You know as well as I do that a lot of the white people hate the colored people, so I couldn't ask just anybody like a white girl could. Therefore I was doomed until I thought if you. I hope you won't think I am bold in asking you to do this for me.

I would try to complete my course in about 2 1/2 years. There is no charge for tuition. But I must pay for my room and board which would be about seven (7) dollars a week. Then I must pay for incidentals etc. I figure that if you would allow me ten (10) dollars a week I could make my ends meet. We go to school from setember to the first week in August. Negros are not allowed to stay at the dormitories so I would have to room and boad outside. The superintendent said that he would find me a suitable place to stay. Then I would need about eight dollars (\$8) extra to have four of my teeth fixed before I can get my doctors certificate in and checked by Moody College.

I would like to go this fall in September so I wish you would let me hear from you right away. I have been out of school 2 years already and would not like to keep waiting. I tried to get a job but none of the people wanted me because I have no experience in house work. Now it is too late for me to get a job because August is here and it will soon be September. I don't feel smart enough to work my way through and keep up with my studies at the same time. Therefore, now that it's so late I am asking you for help. I want you to understand that I would be willing and glad to pay you back after I had been graduated and received a position. I would like to pay you so much at a time until I had it all paid up.

I *beg* and *implore* you please do not give my name to the newspapermen and please do not give them this letter to print. I would be very hurt and embarrassed; this is a personal matter between you and me. I do not want my name in the papers because I live in a small town and everyone knows me, and they would make fun of me, I know. So, once again I beg you do not let the newspapermen hear of this. *Thank you very much.*

Hoping you will get my daddy a job so that he can pay his bills and hoping that you will lend me the money for my schooling so that I may go in September, I am,

Yours affectionately,
W. B.

Question 10: What makes this letter writer different from the previous writers?

Question 11: Why does she feel comfortable writing to Mrs. Roosevelt?

Question 12: What type of jobs does she want for her father? Why is this worth noting?

Document 6

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Sikeston, Missouri
January 20, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am writing this letter in hopes that you will answer in my favor.

My father H. C. has been in bed from a stroke for almost a year. We have no money and my brother works but makes \$3.00 a week and there are eight in our family.

My step-mother is very good to me and I try to help her. She takes in washings and I have to walk for six or eight blocks and then carry the washings home. I have to go of a morning before school and it has been very cold here. If you could send me a bicycle to ride when I go after washings for her I shall appreciate it. I am in eighth grade at school and work very hard to make passing grades. The Principal of the school bought two of my sisters and me a pair of slippers so we would not have to stay at home. If you would do this for me I shall be able to help my step-mother more. If you send me one I would like a girls bicycle. I am about 4 feet 3 inches tall so if you send me one you can judge as to what size.

Loving and appreciating-
A. L. C.

Question 12: Who has made it possible for these children to stay in school? How?

Document 7

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Mason, Wisconsin
January 9, 1934

Dear Mrs. F. Roosevelt,

I suppose you'll be kind of surprised to hear from a poor little girl. I am ten years old. On Christmas eve I had wished for Santa Clause to come but my mama said the chimney was blocked & he couldn't come, so I had a poor Christmas. I was expecting Santa to bring me some things.

I lost my daddy when I was two years old.

I have read in the papers how good you are to the poor and thought maybe you can help me some. I will appreciate it all my life.

To-day we have started school from our Christmas vacation & all the children talk about how many presants Santa has brought them & I felt so bad cause I had nothing to say. I guess that is all. My address is

R#2, Box 7
Mason, Wisconsin

Yours truly,
M. A.

Question 13: What does this girl want from Mrs. Roosevelt?

Question 14: Why do you think she wrote to her?

Document 8

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

42-06 159 Street
Flushing, New York
Mar. 22, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Please excuse the paper. I have never asked anybody for anything before and I feel kind of awkward writing this so please excuse any mistakes.

I am in the second term in Flushing High School and have managed to buy notebooks and pad so far. This being the spring term spring football is in session. This being my favorite sport I am trying out for the team. I managed to loan from a boy friend shoulder pad, helmet, and football pants but he didn't have any luck in securing a pair of football shoes. Practise started yesterday. I wore snickers and had my ankle cut by a fellow with shoe's on. I came home last night and spoke to my parents about getting a pair of shoes.

I'm sure they would like me to have these but my father, who works three days a week makes only \$13.44 on the Long Island State Park Commission said we could not afford them.

I thought one of your sons may have an old pair of football shoes they do not use now. I

wear size eight.

Please answer even if you can't do anything for me.

Thanking you in advance,

C. K.

Question 15: What makes this letter writer different from the previous writers?

Question 16: Why do you think most of the letters were written by girls?

Document 9

Source: <http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

Kismet, Kansas
Nov. 3, 1937

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am 13 years old and will be 14 the 27 of this month. I am a victim of a shut in. I have been sick ever since the 12 of July. And have a very lonely place to stay. My parence's are very poor people. I cant even go to school yet with the other kids. And doubt if I can this year. I have nothing I can do but set around and I get so lonely I don't know what to do. And if you want to cheer me up and make me one of the happies boys in the world just send me some money to get a cheap raido. I have got proof by the neighbors that I am sick and have nothing to do. My parence names is Mr. + Mrs. A. J. M. My name is F. M. I live at Kismet. Many, many thanks if you would cheer me up that way I wouldn't spend it for nothing but a radio. It would pass my lonely time a way so much faster. I only ask for a cheep one.

F. M.
Kismet, Kansas

P.S. If I had any thing to do I wouldent ask you of it. It will be highly appreachd.

I am in the dust bowl. We didn't raise any crop this year. And we have to live off of the releif and theres no injoyment out of that. But were thankful for it. My mother is sick and under the doctor's care most of the time and my Grandma that lives with me is very poorly. And that keeps my heart broken all the time. And nothing to amuse myself with.

thanks alot

Question 17: Why can't this boy go to school?

Question 18: Why might where he lives contribute to his family's problems?

Part B: Essay Response

Directions: Write a 5-paragraph essay that answers the question:

Question: What was it like to be young and poor during the Great Depression and why would a young person want to write to Mrs. Roosevelt for help?

Your essay should be well organized with an introductory paragraph that states your opinion on the question. Develop your opinion in the next paragraphs and write a conclusion. Your essay should include specific historical details and refer to the specific documents you analyzed in Part A. Your essay needs to also consist of a significant amount of outside information.

General Rubric

	Excellent 100 - 90 A+, A	Very Good 90-80 B+, B	Good 80-70 C+, C	Satisfactory 70-65 D	Unsatisfactory 64 and under F
Accuracy	No mistakes, scholarly and accurate. Excellent knowledge of the topic shown	Few if any mistakes, any mistakes must be minor in nature, very good knowledge of the topic shown.	Some, but not many, mistakes made, good knowledge shown.	Several mistakes made, fair knowledge of the topic shown.	Many mistakes made. Does not show an adequate knowledge of the topic.
Use of historical details	Used many details in a thorough and expert manner.	Used many details to illustrate topic.	Used some details to illustrate topic	Used one or two details, alluded to details vaguely.	Used no historical details. Made factual errors.
Demonstrated learning and understanding	Applied integrated concepts; made connections between facts and ideas.	Clearly understood topic well.	Understood topic.	Followed directions, had a basic knowledge of the topic.	Thinking not justified; no evidence that knowledge was acquired.
Mechanics (Grammar or Art)	Grammar and/or art work were without flaws and professional in nature.	Grammar and/or art work are quality in nature.	Occasional errors but not enough to distract.	Distracting errors, difficult to read.	Fragmented sentences and grammar. Art completed in a haphazard manner. Very difficult to understand
Neat and orderly	Professional appearance	Quality appearance	Neat and orderly, easy to follow.	Moderately neat, almost distracting.	Lacks neatness and orderliness. Hard to understand
Word Usage	Word choice and usage are professional.	Word choice makes piece interesting.	Word choice simple but acceptable.	Some mistakes in word choice and usage. Could be	Word choice is inadequate or inappropriate.

				clearer.	
Message	Message flows and is passionate.	Message is clear and easy to understand.	Message can be understood.	Message not easily understood.	Very hard to understand message.
Creativity	Very clever; creatively designed	Displays creative thinking	Shows some creative thinking	Lacks creativity	Copied from another source.

Source: <http://www.socialstudieshelp.com/rubric.htm>

(Optional)

Student who wrote essay:

Student scoring essay:

Signature: