

WRITING YOUR OWN LETTERS

Instructions for teacher

We live in troubled times. Many communities are characterized by social, economic and political inequality and conflict. Meanwhile, the struggle for human rights continues, everywhere and all the time. We call those at the forefront of this struggle human rights defenders. In this exercise students will write letters in support of land rights and freedom of speech. By doing this they will improve their ability to express themselves on ethical issues, in writing, and to convey their feelings and opinions.

The focus of the exercise is on Tep Vanny, human rights defender and activist in the struggle for land rights and against forced evictions in Cambodia. She was sentenced, in February 2017, to two and a half years in prison for allegedly committing crimes during a peaceful protest in 2013.

There are two versions of the exercise. In the first version the students will write what is known as a **solidarity letter** to Tep Vanny herself. In the second version they write an **appeal letter** – addressed directly to the Prime Minister of Cambodia H. E. Samdech Hun Sen, demanding that Tep Vanny be released. The two letters differ in form, but the actual process is similar in both exercises.

METHOD

Letter writing has for for 55 years been an effective method for changing the situation of thousands of people whose human rights are violated. People are encouraged to write letters to the government of Cambodia, since the authorities previously have shown a willingness to listen to criticism and release prisoners or reduce prison sentences. The letter should demand the immediate and unconditional release of Tep Vanny and other imprisoned human rights defenders.

The students' letters to Tep Vanny should be sent to Amnesty International in London, who will forward them to the prison where Tep is held. The letters to the Prime Minister of Cambodia should be sent directly to his office.

STEP-BY-STEP

The exercise is divided into six steps.

STEP 1. A good starting point when writing a letter to Tep Vanny and Prime Minister H. E. Samdech Hun Sen is to together watch two films, about the story of Tep Vanny – 4:50 and 1:08 minutes long, respectively.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders document, expose and protest against discrimination, human rights violations, corruption, abuse of power and other violations. They demand respect and protection for their rights and the rights of others, and they hold authorities accountable for what they do – and for what they fail to do. The work done by human rights defenders is an absolute necessity for ensuring respect for and protection of all our rights.



During the period 2017-2019 Amnesty Sweden will take part in the global campaign BRAVE. The aim of this campaign is to change the situation for human rights defenders and contribute to strengthening their position so that they can work in a safe environment.

- <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/tep-vanny-jailed-defending-her-home>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEA8QtjhJfw>

If it's not possible for you to watch the films you can go straight to step 2.

STEP 2. Present the case study, included in the exercise along with the instructions, to the students.

STEP 3. In this step the students learn more about human rights defenders. The student instruction may form the basis, but the students can find out more by reading:

- Information about Cambodia on Amnesty International's site: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/cambodia/report-cambodia/>
- A news article from Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/cambodia-courts-of-injustice/>
- An article by a delegation from Amnesty International, visiting Cambodia in July 2017: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/07/even-when-she-was-beaten-in-protests-she-would-join-the-next-day/>

STEP 4. The students can now choose to write either a solidarity letter directly to Tep Vanny, or an appeal letter to Prime Minister H. E. Samdech Hun Sen of Cambodia. They may of course do both assignments, depending on how much time is available. The appeal letter does, however, demand a higher level of formal correctness.

There are two different student instructions; one concerning the solidarity letter, the other concerning the appeal letter.

The solidarity letter

There is no template or structure for solidarity letters; their purpose is primarily to communicate support and solidarity. How the students choose to do this is up to them, and there is wide scope for creativity.

The exercise entails that the students acquaint themselves with a particular case and form an opinion on the person's situation. When they have done this, they must communicate their solidarity with them in an appropriate way. Since Amnesty International coordinates the letter writing the person will be overwhelmed by thousands of positive letters.

The purpose of the exercise is partly to let the students practise how to communicate feelings in writing, and partly to make them aware of the importance of solidarity letters in the life of a prisoner of conscience.

The letters will be sent by the school directly to Amnesty International's London office.

The appeal letter

Appeal letters are written directly to authorities and governments. They are sent by the school to the relevant address, with no direct involvement by Amnesty International. Appeal letters should have a different structure and demand a higher level of formal correctness than solidarity letters. We therefore recommend that you do this primarily in English 6 or 7. In the student instructions there are a number of points to consider when composing an appeal letter.

STEP 5. When the students have finished writing their letter they can swap with someone else and give each other feedback. The main point of this step is to stress that the letter is meant to be sent to an actual person. Is it written in an appropriate manner, considering who the recipient is? Is it a letter you would want to receive? Is there anything in it that may be inappropriate?

Let the students modify their letters in response to the feedback.

STEP 6. The exercise may end with the students reading to each other in small groups.

SENDING THE LETTERS

The finished letters should be collected by you, the teacher, and sent by you to the correct address. Bear in mind that it is important that you, as an English teacher, go through the letters first and decide which letters it would be appropriate to send. If any of the letters are inappropriate the students may be given the opportunity to make relevant changes; unsuitable letters must otherwise be rejected. Also, no student must be compelled to send his or her letter; this must be a matter of choice.

Amnesty International must know how many letters are being sent. Count them and write the number of solidarity letters and appeal letters in an email to martin.rydehn@amnesty.se, Project Manager, School for human rights.

Addresses

Send solidarity letters to:

Tep Vanny
Amnesty International
Individuals at Risk Team
1 Easton Street
London
WC1X 0DW

The staff at Amnesty International will forward the letters to Tep Vanny.

Send appeal letters to:

Prime Minister
H.E. Samdech Hun Sen
Office of the Prime Minister
Jok Dimitrov Boulevard
Phnom Penh
Cambodia

The cost of sending 30 letters (A4) to the UK is 56 kr. The cost of sending the same number of letters to Cambodia is 85 kr.

Curriculum for the upper secondary school – fundamental values and tasks of the school

- "Education should impart and establish respect for human rights"
- "The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart."

Central content of English 5

- Students should be given opportunities to discuss subject areas related to among other things "thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; relationships and ethical issues."
- "Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, as well as social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used."
- "Oral and written production and interaction of various kinds, also in more formal settings, where students instruct, narrate, summarise, explain, comment, assess, give reasons for their opinions, discuss and argue."

Central content of English 6

- Students should be given opportunities to discuss subject areas related to among other things "current issues; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; ethical and existential issues."

- "Living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used."
- "Oral and written production and interaction in different situations and for different purposes where students argue, report, apply, reason, summarise, comment on, assess and give reasons for their views."
- "Texts of different kinds and for different purposes, such as formal letters"

APPENDIX

Suggestion for an appeal letter:

Sweden October 2017

Your Excellency,

Allow me to draw Your Excellency's attention to the case of Tep Vanny. She has been sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment for her peaceful activities defending housing rights.

Tep Vanny is a human rights defender and prisoner of conscience, detained on baseless charges for her peaceful activism defending the right to housing and freedom of expression, and I call for her immediate and unconditional release, that all charges be dropped and the end of all criminal investigations against her.

I urge the authorities to publicly condemn and order an end to harassment and violence against human rights defenders, including unwarranted legal action and imprisonment. Defending human rights is not a crime.

Respectfully,