

# Bite-Sized Research: Annotating Civil War Correspondence

an in-archives exercise by Melissa Antinori

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/research-annotations/>

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**Students read, analyze, and transcribe Civil War correspondence and conduct secondary research to create introductions and annotations to their assigned letter.**

## Introduction

In this exercise, students learn to pose questions of primary source documents by reading and analyzing Civil War-era personal correspondence. They conduct research to follow up on these questions and use their findings to create an introduction to and annotations for the letters. My class worked with letters from the [Cranston family papers](#) written by Union soldier Alfred Cranston to his fiancée Elizabeth Petford in Brooklyn.

The larger goal of this exercise is to introduce students to research and its practical applications in a fun and accessible way. The scale of the research required is more manageable for beginning or remedial students than a traditional final paper. While students are not required to formulate an original thesis, they learn to conduct independent research and synthesize primary and secondary sources.

The exercise leverages the intimate stories that often unfold in personal correspondence. Students are captivated by the courtship of Alfred Cranston and Elizabeth Petford. My students were indignant on his behalf, for example, when they read that he had not heard from her for awhile, and they debated whether his descriptions of soldiers' dead bodies would cause her to worry too much.

This engagement with the primary source material motivates students in the next steps of the research project. Students pose questions about unfamiliar concepts or intriguing issues; for example, my students wanted to learn more about the postal system during the Civil War. Next, they find answers in scholarly and popular articles. Ultimately, each student produces about twelve annotations clarifying places, people, and terms mentioned in the letters.

## Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Read and transcribe handwritten documents
- Pose critical research questions about a primary source
- Find and evaluate appropriate secondary sources
- Locate pertinent information in secondary sources
- Create well-researched annotations for places, people, and terms mentioned in a primary source document

## Context

Before the visit to the archives, students are introduced to personal correspondence as a genre. When asked, less than half of my students had written letters. In class, we practice reading and transcribing using photocopies of early twentieth-century letters from my family.

Through lectures and readings, students are provided general historical context about the Civil War and nineteenth-century correspondence and courtship (see Further Reading below). Students also learn about the collection they will encounter at the archives by reading the biographical note excerpted from the [Cranston family papers finding aid](#).

After the visit to the archives, but before the research project is due, librarians at our college introduce students to the following:

- reference databases including specialized encyclopedias and historical atlases
- newspaper databases like the New York Times and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle
- MLA style citations

## Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 1 hour

### Agenda

10 minutes [Standard introduction after a pre-visit](#)

40 minutes Small group work

10 minutes Wrap up

3 students work together to read 1 or more letters (depending on the length). In the archives, they begin to transcribe these letters as a group. They take research photographs to continue the transcriptions as homework.

### Wrap Up

The class reconvenes to discuss first impressions of Alfred Cranston and his relationship with Elizabeth Petford. Students also share observations about the physical appearance of the letters, and reflect on the process of transcribing.

## End Products

Each group collaborates on a proofed transcription of the letter(s) they read in the archives. Each student then compiles a bibliography, writes an introduction to their

letter(s), and produces approximately twelve well-researched annotations. Students also post 3 reflections to the course blog.

### **Group Transcription**

The group's transcription is due 2 class sessions after the visit to the archives.

### **Individual Research Projects**

Students are individually responsible for writing an introduction which analyzes their letter(s), researching and writing at least twelve annotations, and compiling a bibliography.

Students receive the [instructions](#) for this research project in advance of their visit to the archives.

### **Blog Prompts**

The class blog provides a useful way to encourage reflection about the research experience and to check in on the progress of their projects. See prompts relevant to this exercise [here](#).

## **Assessment**

Research projects are assessed using [the rubric](#) provided by my department for this course.

One challenge in grading this assignment is fact checking the annotations. Final products earning an A grade should contain only factually accurate annotations. Because of this, it is a time-consuming project to grade.

## **Archival Material Used**

Letter on stationery depicting the Capitol building, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, circa 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 1; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Transcription of letter on stationery depicting the Capitol building, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, circa 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 2; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

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Letter with drawing of camp, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, circa 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 1; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Transcription of letter with drawing of camp, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, circa 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 2; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, September 23, 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 2; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, September 23, 1861; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 2; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, March 17, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 4; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, March 17, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 4; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, May 27, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 4; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, May 27, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 4; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter with list, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, August 27, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 3; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Transcription of letter with list, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, August 27, 1862; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 4; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, January 17, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, January 17, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, June 24 to July 25, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, June 24 to July 25, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, February 10, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, February 10, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, March 4, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, March 4, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, April 25, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, April 25, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Letter about Gettysburg, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, July 27, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 6; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Transcription of letter about Gettysburg, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Cranston, July 27, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

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Letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, September 11, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Transcription of letter, Alfred Cranston to Elizabeth Petford, September 11, 1863; Cranston family papers, 1994.013, box 1, folder 7; Brooklyn Historical Society.

## Further Reading

Halttunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

Lystra, Karen. *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Silber, Nina and Mary Beth Sievens, eds. *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Homefront*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996.

## This Exercise Was Used In

**English 16: English Composition** Remedial writing class that is part of a learning community. Fulfills first-year composition and Writing Across the Curriculum requirements.

## Adaptability

This exercise works with personal correspondence about any major historical event, including other wars. It can be adapted to history and American studies courses at the high school and college level.

## Course Materials (included)

Research Project Instructions

Blog Prompts

Course Rubric

## Cite This Exercise

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# Research Project Instructions

by Melissa Antinori



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/research-annotations/>

Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) has a wonderful collection of letters written during the Civil War from Alfred Cranston to his fiancée Elizabeth Petford. Imagine that BHS wants to make these letters available to students—like yourselves—who are interested in researching the Civil War, particularly as it was experienced by Brooklynites.

Now, think about your audience. They're college students writing papers. How much do they know about the Civil War? Probably not a whole lot. Have they ever heard of Alfred Cranston? Definitely not.

Your task, then, is to make these letters accessible to your fellow students by writing an introduction which analyzes the letter(s), researching and writing at least 12 annotations, and compiling a bibliography.

## You are responsible for:

1. **Transcriptions of assigned letter(s).** During our required visit to BHS, you will work in a group to transcribe 1 - 3 letter(s). The group transcription will be due two class sessions after our visit to the archives.
2. **Library instruction session.** You are required to attend both library instruction sessions.
3. **Final annotated transcript.** This will include:
  - a. **An introduction.** One page providing historical context, a brief summary, and a short analysis of what you can learn about Alfred and Lizzie's relationship. Consider:
    - i. What was their relationship like, and what does that tell us about 19th century courtship?
    - ii. Why did Alfred include some details and not others?
    - iii. What kinds of things seemed to concern Lizzie, and how did he respond to them?
    - iv. What kinds of historical details can we learn from correspondence that we could not otherwise? What are the limits of using correspondence as primary sources?
    - v. Is there anything of visual or physical interest in your letter(s)?
  - b. **Twelve annotations** formatted as footnotes. These should provide more information about places, names, events, and other unfamiliar terms. Each footnote should be as long as it needs to be, usually 1 - 3 sentences.
  - c. **Bibliography** in MLA format.

# Blog Prompts

by Melissa Antinori



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/research-annotations/>

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- 1. The Letters.** Describe some physical attributes of the letter(s) your group worked with at the archives. What was it like to transcribe a handwritten document? What difficulties arose? What is the advantage of looking at an original rather than a transcript? What are the benefits of creating a transcript?  
**Due before the next class session after the archives visit.**
- 2. Courtship.** Based on evidence in your letters, what is your impression of Alfred Cranston, Elizabeth Petford, and their relationship?  
**Due one week after the archives visit.**
- 3. Project Reflection.** What did you learn from this project about primary source research and working in an archives? About secondary source research? What kinds of research skills did this project give you? What kinds of writing skills did you develop? What advice would you give students working with these materials next year? **Due the same day as the research project.**

# English 16 Course Rubric

by Melissa Antinori



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/research-annotations/>

	A/A-	B+/B	B-/C+/C	C-	D	F
<b>Focus, Purpose, Thesis (controlling Idea)</b>	Engaging, full development of a clear thesis appropriate to assignment purpose.	Competent and well-developed thesis; thesis represents sound, adequate understanding of the assigned topic.	Mostly intelligible ideas; thesis is weak, unclear, too broad.	Mostly simplistic and unfocused ideas; little or no sense of purpose or control of thesis.	Ideas are extremely simplistic, showing signs of misunderstanding the prompt; thesis is essentially missing or not discernible.	Shows complete confusion about the topic or inability to grasp it; thus conspicuous absence of thesis and lack of purpose.
<b>Content, Support &amp; Development (evidence)</b>	Originality and depth of ideas supported by consistent evidence; ideas work as a unified whole and show ability to integrate texts; points supported; support is valid and specific.	Ideas supported sufficiently and work together to demonstrate ability to integrate texts; support is sound, valid, and logical.	Main points and ideas are only indirectly supported; fair integration of texts; support isn't sufficient or specific, but is loosely relevant to main points.	Insufficient, non-specific and/or irrelevant support with little or poor interaction with texts.	Lack of support for main points; frequent and illogical generalizations without support and poor or no interaction with texts.	Clear absence of support of main points and poor or no interaction with texts.
<b>Structure, Organization</b>	Organization is sequential and appropriate to assignment; paragraphs are well developed and divided; ideas are linked with smooth, effective transitions.	Competent organization without sophistication, competent paragraph structure; satisfactory transitions.	Limited attempts to organize around a thesis; paragraphs are mostly stand-alones with weak or non-evident transitions.	Organization, while attempted, is unsuccessful. Paragraphs are simple, disconnected and formulaic. Poor transitions and sequence.	Organization, if evident at all, is confusing and disjointed; paragraph structure is weak; transitions are missing and/or illogical.	Paragraph structure does not exist, or is a single rambling paragraph or series of isolated paragraphs.
<b>Audience, Tone, Point-of-View</b>	Clear discernment of distinctive audience; tone and point-of-view are appropriate to the assignment.	Effective and accurate awareness of general audience; tone and point-of-view satisfactory.	Little or inconsistent sense of audience related to assignment/purpose; tone and point-of-view not refined or consistent.	Shows little awareness of a particular audience; reveals no grasp of appropriate tone and/or point-of-view for given assignment.	Lacks awareness of a particular audience for assignment; tone and point-of-view inappropriate or inconsistent.	No apparent awareness of audience as appropriate to assignment; tone completely inappropriate to assignment.
<b>Sentence Structure (Grammar)</b>	Each sentence is structured effectively, powerfully; rich, well-chosen variety of sentence styles and length.	Effective and varied sentences; shows infrequent, if any, errors.	Formulaic or tedious sentence patterns; shows some errors in sentence construction; some non-standard syntax.	Contains many errors of grammar and sentence structure that interfere with meaning.	Simple sentences used excessively or exclusively; frequent errors of sentence structure.	Contains multiple and serious errors of sentence structure, e.g., fragments, run-ons; lack of control over simple sentences.
<b>Mechanics &amp; Presentation</b>	Virtually free of punctuation, spelling, capitalization errors; appropriate format and presentation for assignment.	Contains only occasional punctuation, spelling, and/or capitalization errors. Few formatting errors. Most errors careless.	Contains several punctuation, spelling, and/or capitalization errors; several errors in formatting or formatting is inconsistent.	Contains many errors of punctuation, spelling, and/or capitalization; formatting is mostly incorrect and inconsistent.	Contains many, serious errors of punctuation spelling, and/or capitalization; errors severely interfere with meaning; formatting is weak.	Frequent errors in spelling and capitalization; intrusive and/or inaccurate punctuation; no formatting appropriate to assignment.
<b>Vocabulary &amp; Usage</b>	Exceptional vocabulary range; accurate, correct and effective word usage.	Good vocabulary range and accurate usage.	Ordinary vocabulary range, mostly accurate; some errors of diction and usage.	More limited vocabulary; errors of diction and usage, while evident, don't interfere with readability.	Extremely limited vocabulary choices; poor grasp of diction; usage inaccurate.	Diction and syntax make communication meaningless or very confusing at best.