

**Letters of Pliny****Student Activities****Activity 1: Letter summaries**

Create a table detailing the main contents of each of Pliny's letters, including the letters to be read in English (*italicised*). The first one has been done for you as an example.

Letter	Addressee	Summary of Content
1.9	Fundanus	Pliny writes about the busyness of city life and the types of duties which consume his time; he compares this to the quiet rest of his country estate, as he writes to encourage his friend to hand himself over to similar leisure and literary pursuits.
<i>1.12</i>		
<i>2.6</i>		
<i>2.20</i>		
<i>3.14</i>		
<i>3.16</i>		
<i>4.2</i>		
<i>4.19</i>		
<i>5.8</i>		
<i>7.5</i>		
<i>8.8</i>		



8.16		
8.17		
9.6		
9.12		



Activity 2: Examining Pliny's opinions

Many letters appear to contain expressions and viewpoints which reveal some of Pliny's opinions. Reading letters together and comparing them can help build a picture of this author and provide some insight into his way of thinking.

Pliny's views on his wife, Calpurnia

Read 4.19 and 7.5 together.

How genuine do Pliny's feelings for his wife seem? Are such feelings normal for elite Roman males? What are the main qualities in his wife which he appears to like in particular?

Pliny's opinions on grief

Read 1.12 and 8.16 – and compare with 4.2.

How does Pliny think about the concept of grief and feelings of loss?

Pliny's criticisms of individuals and society

Read 2.6, 2.20, 4.2, 9.6 and 9.12 together.

What does Pliny think of those he writes about in these letters and what are his main criticisms of those around him?

Pliny's thoughts on the purpose of life

Read 1.9, 1.12, 3.16 and 5.8.

What do Pliny's reflections on life, leisure, death and studying suggest about him?

Pliny on nature

Read 1.9, 8.8 and 8.17 together.

How does Pliny seem to think about the importance and power of nature?

To gain a fuller appreciation of Pliny, read the entry on him and listen to the episode of BBC's *In Our Time* linked below:

[Pliny the Younger - World History Encyclopedia](#)

[BBC Radio 4 - In Our Time, Pliny the Younger](#)



Additionally, read the Introduction and use the Further Reading provided in the Commentary, explore the Timeline and look at the document on the Comum inscription (both on the Companion Website).

**Activity 3: Types of letters, form and formality**

Pliny writes letters of various types and has many different correspondents, varying the way he writes to different addressees.

Read through the letters in the selection and try to identify features in the texts which reflect the type of letter Pliny is writing. The first one has been done in part as an example.

Do you find that letters about certain subjects or to certain individuals vary in the way they are written and in their tone? What groupings of letters can you create to show this?

Letter	Type of Letter	Level of formality	Formal/Informal features
1.9	Giving advice	Quite informal – written to a friend	Made-up speech Exclamations Light subject matter Familiar reference to Atilius
<i>1.12</i>			
2.6			
2.20			
<i>3.14</i>			
3.16			
4.2			
4.19			
5.8			
7.5			



8.8			
8.16			
8.17			
9.6			
9.12			



Activity 4: Ancient thoughts on slavery

Pliny was not the first ancient author to reflect on slavery, but his views in the context of the ancient world are worth exploring.

Start by learning a little about the context of slavery in Roman times, gathering information from reliable sources such as:

[Slavery in ancient Rome | British Museum](#)

[Misconceptions of Roman Slavery – Lucius'€™Romans \(kent.ac.uk\)](#)

[Life of a Slave in Ancient Rome: Part 1 – Lucius'€™Romans \(kent.ac.uk\)](#)

[Life of a Slave in Ancient Rome: Part 2 – Lucius'€™Romans \(kent.ac.uk\)](#)

[Slavery in the Roman World - World History Encyclopedia](#)

[The Roman Empire: in the First Century. The Roman Empire. Social Order. Slaves & Freemen | PBS](#)

Now read the two Pliny letters in the selection which discuss aspects of slavery:

3.14 on the danger which slaves can present

8.16 on Pliny's feelings about illnesses and deaths among his own slaves

Now compare these to the famous letter on slavery by the Roman philosopher and letter-writer Seneca below.

Seneca, *Letter 47 – On Master and Slave*

(taken from: [Moral letters to Lucilius/Letter 47 - Wikisource, the free online library](#))

1. I am glad to learn, through those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. This befits a sensible and well-educated man like yourself. "They are slaves," people declare. Nay, rather they are men. "Slaves!" No, comrades. "Slaves!" No, they are unpretentious friends. "Slaves!" No, they are our fellow-slaves, if one reflects that Fortune has equal rights over slaves and free men alike.

2. That is why I smile at those who think it degrading for a man to dine with his slave. But why should they think it degrading? It is only because purse-proud etiquette surrounds a householder at his dinner with a mob of standing slaves. The master eats more than he can hold, and with monstrous greed loads his belly until it is stretched and at length ceases to do



the work of a belly; so that he is at greater pains to discharge all the food than he was to stuff it down. 3. All this time the poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound, – a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup, – is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.

4. The result of it all is that these slaves, who may not talk in their master's presence, talk about their master. But the slaves of former days, who were permitted to converse not only in their master's presence, but actually with him, whose mouths were not stitched up tight, were ready to bare their necks for their master, to bring upon their own heads any danger that threatened him; they spoke at the feast, but kept silence during torture. 5. Finally, the saying, in allusion to this same high-handed treatment, becomes current: "As many enemies as you have slaves." They are not enemies when we acquire them; we make them enemies.

I shall pass over other cruel and inhuman conduct towards them; for we maltreat them, not as if they were men, but as if they were beasts of burden. When we recline at a banquet, one slave mops up the disgorged food, another crouches beneath the table and gathers up the leftovers of the tipsy guests. 6. Another carves the priceless game birds; with unerring strokes and skilled hand he cuts choice morsels along the breast or the rump. Hapless fellow, to live only for the purpose of cutting fat capons correctly, – unless, indeed, the other man is still more unhappy than he, who teaches this art for pleasure's sake, rather than he who learns it because he must. 7. Another, who serves the wine, must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; he cannot get away from his boyhood; he is dragged back to it; and though he has already acquired a soldier's figure, he is kept beardless by having his hair smoothed away or plucked out by the roots, and he must remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's drunkenness and his lust; in the chamber he must be a man, at the feast a boy. 8. Another, whose duty it is to put a valuation on the guests, must stick to his task, poor fellow, and watch to see whose flattery and whose immodesty, whether of appetite or of language, is to get them an invitation for to-morrow. Think also of the poor purveyors of food, who note their masters' tastes with delicate skill, who know what special flavours will sharpen their appetite, what will please their eyes, what new combinations will rouse their cloyed stomachs, what food will excite their loathing through sheer satiety, and what will stir them to hunger on that particular day. With slaves like these the master cannot



bear to dine; he would think it beneath his dignity to associate with his slave at the same table! Heaven forbid!

But how many masters is he creating in these very men! 9. I have seen standing in the line, before the door of Callistus, the former master, of Callistus; I have seen the master himself shut out while others were welcomed, – the master who once fastened the "For Sale" ticket on Callistus and put him in the market along with the good-for-nothing slaves. But he has been paid off by that slave who was shuffled into the first lot of those on whom the crier practises his lungs; the slave, too, in his turn has cut his name from the list and in his turn has adjudged him unfit to enter his house. The master sold Callistus, but how much has Callistus made his master pay for!

10. Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave. As a result of the massacres in Marius's day, many a man of distinguished birth, who was taking the first steps toward senatorial rank by service in the army, was humbled by fortune, one becoming a shepherd, another a caretaker of a country cottage. Despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend, even when you are despising them.

11. I do not wish to involve myself in too large a question, and to discuss the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting. But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters. And as often as you reflect how much power you have over a slave, remember that your master has just as much power over you. 12. "But I have no master," you say. You are still young; perhaps you will have one. Do you not know at what age Hecuba entered captivity, or Croesus, or the mother of Darius, or Plato, or Diogenes?

13. Associate with your slave on kindly, even on affable, terms; let him talk with you, plan with you, live with you. I know that at this point all the exquisites will cry out against me in a body; they will say: "There is nothing more debasing, more disgraceful, than this." But these are the very persons whom I sometimes surprise kissing the hands of other men's slaves. 14. Do you not see even this, – how our ancestors removed from masters everything invidious,



and from slaves everything insulting? They called the master "father of the household," and the slaves "members of the household," a custom which still holds in the mime. They established a holiday on which masters and slaves should eat together, – not as the only day for this custom, but as obligatory on that day in any case. They allowed the slaves to attain honours in the household and to pronounce judgment; they held that a household was a miniature commonwealth.

15. "Do you mean to say," comes the retort, "that I must seat all my slaves at my own table?" No, not any more than that you should invite all free men to it. You are mistaken if you think that I would bar from my table certain slaves whose duties are more humble, as, for example, yonder muleteer or yonder herdsman; I propose to value them according to their character, and not according to their duties. Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties. Invite some to your table because they deserve the honour, and others that they may come to deserve it. For if there is any slavish quality in them as the result of their low associations, it will be shaken off by intercourse with men of gentler breeding. 16. You need not, my dear Lucilius, hunt for friends only in the forum or in the Senate-house; if you are careful and attentive, you will find them at home also. Good material often stands idle for want of an artist; make the experiment, and you will find it so. As he is a fool who, when purchasing a horse, does not consider the animal's points, but merely his saddle and bridle; so he is doubly a fool who values a man from his clothes or from his rank, which indeed is only a robe that clothes us.

17. "He is a slave." His soul, however, may be that of a freeman. "He is a slave." But shall that stand in his way? Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all men are slaves to fear. I will name you an ex-consul who is slave to an old hag, a millionaire who is slave to a serving-maid; I will show you youths of the noblest birth in serfdom to pantomime players! No servitude is more disgraceful than that which is self-imposed.

You should therefore not be deterred by these finicky persons from showing yourself to your slaves as an affable person and not proudly superior to them; they ought to respect you rather than fear you. 18. Some may maintain that I am now offering the liberty-cap to slaves in general and toppling down lords from their high estate, because I bid slaves respect their



masters instead of fearing them. They say: "This is what he plainly means: slaves are to pay respect as if they were clients or early-morning callers!" Anyone who holds this opinion forgets that what is enough for a god cannot be too little for a master. Respect means love, and love and fear cannot be mingled. 19. So I hold that you are entirely right in not wishing to be feared by your slaves, and in lashing them merely with the tongue; only dumb animals need the thong.

That which annoys us does not necessarily injure us; but we are driven into wild rage by our luxurious lives, so that whatever does not answer our whims arouses our anger. 20. We don't have the temper of kings. For they, too, forgetful alike of their own strength and of other men's weakness, grow white-hot with rage, as if they had received an injury, when they are entirely protected from danger of such injury by their exalted station. They are not unaware that this is true, but by finding fault they seize upon opportunities to do harm; they insist that they have received injuries, in order that they may inflict them.

21. I do not wish to delay you longer; for you need no exhortation. This, among other things, is a mark of good character: it forms its own judgments and abides by them; but badness is fickle and frequently changing, not for the better, but for something different. Farewell.

Questions to consider:

What is the central tenet of this letter by Seneca?

How similar/different are Pliny's views on slaves and slavery to Seneca's?



Activity 5: Pliny and letter-writing in context

The letters of Pliny are examples of Roman epistles which exist in a continuum of letter-writing in the Roman world.

Read the Companion Website resource on ‘Literary models: predecessors’ for an introduction to the context of letter-writing before Pliny.

For further information, read the following:

[Letters & Post in the Ancient World - World History Encyclopedia](#)

To get a taste for letter-writing in the Roman world, read through some of the following:

Cicero

Cicero’s output of letters is great, but for a short sample of the different types of letters he wrote, here is one to his great friend Atticus (these letters are collected in *Ad Atticum*), one to his brother Quintus, one to his wife Terentia and one to Pompey the Great (letters to and from individuals other than Atticus are usually contained in the collection *Ad Familiares*). Note the different tone of letters depending on the addressee.

A letter to Atticus containing family news as well as political matters:

[II. To Atticus \(At Athens\). Rome, July. Cicero. 1909-14. Letters. The Harvard Classics. \(bartleby.com\)](#)

A letter to his brother Quintus who is in Britain:

[M. Tullius Cicero, Letters to his brother Quintus, CXLVI \(Q FR II, 15\) \(tufts.edu\)](#)

A letter to his wife Terentia about their daughter Tullia’s ill-health:

Fam 14. 19 - TO TERENTIA (AT ROME)

BRUNDISIUM (27 NOVEMBER)

In the midst of my terrible sorrows Tullia's ill-health causes me acute agony. But about that I need not write to you at any greater length; for you, I know well, are no less anxious than myself. You wish me to come nearer the city, and I see that I must do so. I would have done it even before, but many difficulties prevented me, which are not even now removed.



However, I am expecting a letter from Pomponius: please see that it is conveyed to me as soon as possible. Be sure you take care of your health.

A letter to Pompey the Great:

Fam.5.7 - TO CN. POMPEIUS MAGNUS, ROME

M. Tullius Cicero, son of Marcus, greets Cn. Pompeius, son of Cneius, Imperator. If you and the army are well I shall be glad. From your official despatch I have, in common with everyone else, received the liveliest satisfaction; for you have given us that strong hope of peace, of which, in sole reliance on you, I was assuring everyone. But I must inform you that your old enemies — now posing as your friends — have received a stunning blow by this despatch, and, being disappointed in the high hopes they were entertaining, are thoroughly depressed. Though your private letter to me contained a somewhat slight expression of your affection, yet I can assure you it gave me pleasure: for there is nothing in which I habitually find greater satisfaction than in the consciousness of serving my friends; and if on any occasion I do not meet with an adequate return, I am not at all sorry to have the balance of kindness in my favour. Of this I feel no doubt — even if my extraordinary zeal in your behalf has failed to unite you to me — that the interests of the state will certainly effect a mutual attachment and coalition between us. To let you know, however, what I missed in your letter I will write with the candour which my own disposition and our common friendship demand. I did expect some congratulation in your letter on my achievements, for the sake at once of the ties between us and of the Republic. This I presume to have been omitted by you from a fear of hurting anyone's feelings. But let me tell you that what I did for the salvation of the country is approved by the judgment and testimony of the whole world. You are a much greater man than Africanus, but I am not much inferior to Laelius either; and when you come home you will recognize that I have acted with such prudence and spirit, that you will not be ashamed of being coupled with me in politics as well as in private friendship.

Horace

Horace's *Sermones* are verse letters, often of a moral nature.

For his selection, see: [Horace \(65 BC–8 BC\) - The Odes, Epodes, Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica and Carmen Saeculare \(poetryintranslation.com\)](#)

perhaps starting with his famous meditation on town vs country living (Letter 10):



[Horace \(65 BC–8 BC\) - The Epistles: Book I Epistle X \(poetryintranslation.com\)](https://poetryintranslation.com/horace-65-bc-8-bc-the-epistles-book-i-epistle-x)

Seneca

Seneca wrote over one hundred letters, usually on philosophical themes. They have moral connotations and are literary letters, ostensibly written to a man call Lucilius. Seneca's Letter 47 is supplied in full in Activity 4, to be compared with Pliny's letters on slavery.

Another letter of Seneca's worth reading, especially in comparison with Pliny's letter 9.6 on the public's love of chariot-racing, is his letter on crowds, Letter 7:

[Moral letters to Lucilius/Letter 7 - Wikisource, the free online library](https://www.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_7)

Ovid

Ovid wrote a number of 'letters' in verse, including his *Heroides* – 21 fictional letters from women in myth, writing to men connected to them.

[Ovid \(43 BC–17\) - The Heroides: I to VII \(poetryintranslation.com\)](https://poetryintranslation.com/ovid-43-bc-17-the-heroides-i-to-vii)

A good starting place might be the seventh poem, which Dido writes to Aeneas:

[Ovid \(43 BC–17\) - The Heroides: I to VII \(poetryintranslation.com\)](https://poetryintranslation.com/ovid-43-bc-17-the-heroides-i-to-vii)

These are just a very few examples of Roman letters written before Pliny's works.

Questions to consider:

Do letters change in tone/form depending on the addressee and the subject-matter of the letter?

Are 'verse letters' actually letters? Do letters have to be written in prose?

Does Pliny seem to want to follow the letters of Cicero and Seneca, or does he try to create his own style?

Can we discern anything of the individual author if letters are just an art form?

Further exploration: Pliny was certainly not the last person to write literary letters. For a later Roman letter writer, look into Fronto ([Letters of Fronto: links to translations \(attalus.org\)](https://attalus.org/letters-of-fronto)), while there are plenty of letter collections from more modern times – look up the letters of Sylvia Plath with her mother, the letters of Truman Capote or those of Franz Kafka to his translator, Milena Jesenska.

**Activity 6: Pliny as a literary artist**

Closely read through the eight letters to be read in Latin and make a list of the main literary devices which Pliny employs in each letter.

After completing the table, consider the questions underneath.

Letter	Literary/Stylistic devices
1.9	
3.16	
4.2	
4.19	
8.8	
8.16	
8.17	
9.6	

What are the **main** techniques deployed by Pliny to make his letters artistic?

Are some letters more ‘literary’ than others? If so, is there an explanation for why this is the case?

Do you find Pliny pleasant to read? Do his attempts to make his letters ‘stylish’ make them more enjoyable to read for you or do the letters mostly seem the same?

Pliny was also an amateur poet, was trained in rhetoric and was part of a literary circle.

Comparing his letters to the verse literature you have read, do you find any similarities?