

## Dear Bessie

### Background:

Born in Lamar, Missouri, in 1884, Harry lived on farms until he was six. Then his parents brought him and his sister and brother to Independence. A good-natured, curious child, Harry adored his teachers, music, and books. By fourth grade, he also adored a girl in his Sunday School class who would later become his wife. After graduation, his father risked everything on wheat futures – and lost. Forced to sell their house in Independence, the family moved to Kansas City to find jobs. At age 22, Harry Truman left Kansas City and returned to Grandma Young's six-hundred-acre Grandview Farm.

Future first lady Bess Wallace was born to a wealthy family. She was fashionable and athletic. Elizabeth Wallace, or "Bessie," lived in a large house a few blocks from Truman's childhood home. She was popular and a superb third baseman, fencer, and tennis player. One day in 1910 changed Harry's life. While in Independence visiting cousins Ethel and Nellie Noland, he volunteered to return a cake plate to the wealthy Wallace family across the street. Bess Wallace, whom he'd long admired, invited him in.

Though they met in Sunday School as children, their romance didn't begin until 10 years after high school graduation. Like most Americans in the 1880s, the Trumans wrote letters to communicate with friends and relatives. Harry proposed marriage to Bess in a letter. In it he touches on farming, weather, and his ambitions: "I always had a sneakin' notion that someday maybe I'd amount to something". He concludes with the hope that they can remain friends even if she turns him down. She did, but said in 1913 that if she married anyone, it would be him. So, their friendship blossomed through hundreds of letters. They were soon secretly engaged. When Harry bought a car in 1914, traveling to Independence became easier, and he could be found visiting Bess on many Sundays.

During their courtship, Harry and Bess had to communicate without text messaging, e-mail, or social media. Handwritten letters were their primary way of keeping in touch, and the process could be complicated, especially for Harry. Stationery, envelopes, stamps, pens, and ink all needed to be purchased. His letters share his dreams, devotion, and lively sense of humor. After nine years of courtship, Captain Truman and Bess Wallace finally married, surrounded by family and friends. The ceremony was held on June 28, 1919, at Trinity Episcopal Church in Independence. Bess was intensely private, so she burned most of her letters, but Harry's survived.

**Standard:**

LA:2.1A.3.b Describe the personality traits of characters from their thoughts, words, and actions

SS:3.1E. Describe the character traits and civic attitudes of influential Missourians.

**Materials Needed:**

Copy Cursive Writing Instruction Sheet

Copy and cut (22) sentence strips

Display image of Harry's handwritten letters (2)

Pencil and paper

**Vocabulary:**

Character - the way someone thinks, feels, and behaves: someone's personality

Define: confident, honest, loyal, caring, thoughtful, considerate, passionate, pride, commitment, integrity, accountable, compassionate, empathy, responsible, ambitious, initiative

Leadership -a person who has the personality and skills to make others want to follow their direction.

**Procedure:**

1. Read and discuss background
2. Define vocabulary
3. Activity 1: Read and decipher cursive writing in an excerpt of Harry's letter to Bess and identify character traits.
4. Activity 2: Read letter aloud that President Truman wrote to Bess dated July 14, 1917 before he left for war. Discuss and list his character traits.

**Assessment:** Students will analyze and evaluate Harry Truman's character through his letters to Bess then write a letter naming three of those traits that would make a good president/leader.

**Activity 1:**

Show image of Harry's letter to Bess and ask students if they could read it? Explain that before we had computers, phones, emails and texts people would hand write their letters. It was faster to use cursive writing because all of the letters were connected rather than printing each letter.

1. Give students a copy of the Cursive Writing Instruction Sheet and a sentence strip. Explain Harry wrote these words in cursive and while this is not his writing it is in cursive. Like a historian, they will need to decode the letters in their sentence to see what Harry wrote to Bess.

2. Once finished, students will read aloud their sentence in numerical order. Ask students to think about what Harry is feeling, what he may be thinking and his behavior that would tell you what kind of character traits Harry showed in his letter. Then make a list of those.. (*passionate, afraid, shy, excited, proud, stubborn, kind, honest, caring, compassionate, responsible, accountable, confident, self-aware, pride*).

*November 1, 1913*

1. *I know your last letter word for word and then I read it some forty times a day.*
2. *I'm going to put it in a safety vault to keep from wearing it out.*
3. *You really didn't know I had so much softness and sentimentality in me, did you?*
4. *I'm full of it. But I'd die if I had to talk it.*
5. *I can tell you on paper how much I love you*
6. *and what one grand woman I think you, but to tell it to you I can't.*
7. *I'm always afraid I'd do it so clumsily you'd laugh. Then I'd die really.*

8. *When a person's airing his most sacred thoughts he's very easily distressed.*
9. *No one ever knew I ever had any but you.*
10. *You are the one girl I'd ever want to tell them to.*
11. *I could die happy doing something for you.*
12. *Just imagine a guy with spectacles and a girl mouth doing the Sir Lancelot.*
13. *Since I can't rescue you from any monster*
14. *or carry you from a burning building or save you from a sinking ship*
15. *simply because I'd be afraid of the monsters*
16. *couldn't carry you, and can't swim*

17. *I'll have to go to work and make money enough*

18. *to pay my debts and then get you to take me for what I am:*

19. *just a common everyday man whose instincts are to be ornery,*

20. *who's anxious to be right. You'll not have any trouble getting along with me*

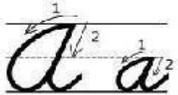
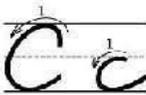
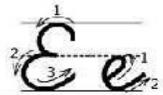
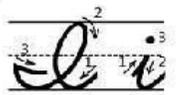
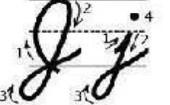
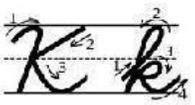
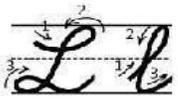
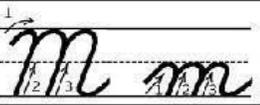
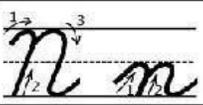
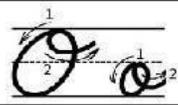
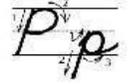
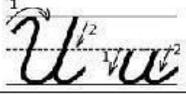
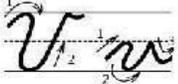
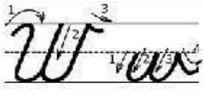
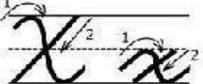
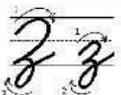
21. *for I'm awful good-natured, and*

22. *I'm sure we'd live happy ever after sure enough.*

<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-1913-postmark-0>

Independence. I know your last letter word for word and then I read it some forty times a day. Oh please send me another like it. I wear it in my left breast pocket. I going to put it in safety vault to keep from wearing it out. You really didn't know I had so much softness and sentimentality in me did you. I'm full of it. But I'd die if I had to talk it. I can't tell you on paper how much I love you and what one grand woman I think you but to tell it to you I can't. I'm always afraid I'd do it so clumsily you'd laugh. Then I'd die really. When a persons airing his most sacred thoughts he's very

## Cursive Writing Guide – Letters

**Activity 2:**

Harry Truman wrote to Bess on July 14, 1917 before he left for war. This letter can be read by the teacher or divided into 5 excerpts for groups to discuss and look for character traits.

- Read aloud and share additional character traits to add to their list.
- Students will write a letter to a local newspaper using 3 traits on their list about what kind of leadership Harry Truman could provide as president.

Excerpt 1:

Densmore Hotel Kansas City, Mo. July 14, 1917

11 P.M., Saturday night

Dear Bess:

I have just finished the Regimental Banquet. It was a very solemn affair. Colonel Klemm made us a speech on our duties to God and country, and Lieutenant Colonel Elliott made one on the duties of an artillery officer. They were both from the shoulder and gave us something to think about. I had thought somewhat on both subjects, but not as far as these gentlemen went. According to them, we have placed ourselves on a position of placing the American Government above everything, even our lives. We are expected to do absolutely as we are told. Evidently, if we are ordered to go to Berlin, go we must--or be buried on the way.

(loyal, courage, fear, thoughtful)

Excerpt 2:

I have felt like a dog all week. It seems that I have caused you to be unhappy by my overenthusiastic action in getting myself sent to war. Two big tears came in Mamma's eyes last night when I started off to Lodge in my soldier clothes. You are the two people in the world that I would rather see smile and that I like to cause to smile, and here I've gone done the opposite to both of you. Perhaps I can make you all happier for it. I'll try my best. Some how I seem to have an ability for getting myself into things by my overzealous conduct or anxiety to see them a success and do not seem to see the consequences to myself or others until the conclusion comes.

(caring, accountable, responsible, ambitious, initiative)

Excerpt 3:

Bess, I'm dead crazy to ask you to marry me before I leave but I'm not going to because I don't think it would be right for me to ask you to tie yourself to a perspective cripple--or a sentiment. You, I know, would love me just as much, perhaps more, with one hand as with two, but I don't think I should cause you to do it. Besides, if the war ends happily and I can steal the Russian or German crown jewels, just think what a grand military wedding you can have, get a major general maybe.

(caring, sense of humor, thoughtful)

Excerpt 4:

If you don't marry me before I go, you may be sure that I'll be just as loyal to you as if you were my wife. I'll not try to exact any promises from you either if you want to go with any other guy, why all right, but I'll be as jealous as the mischief although not begrudging you the good time.

(loyal, honest, considerate)

Excerpt 5:

Bess, this is a crazy letter but I'm crazy about you and I can't say all those nutty things to you without making you weep. When you weep, I want to. If you'd looked right closely the other night, you might have discovered it, and a weeping man is an abomination unto the Lord. All I ask is love me always, and if I have to be shot I'll try and not have it in the back or before a stone wall, because I'm afraid not to do you honor.

(empathy, honor, strength)



## The Densmore Hotel

NINTH AND LOCUST STS.

EUROPEAN

DENSMORE HOTEL CO.,

PROPRIETORS

JAMES KETNER, PRES.

C. H. BROWNSON, MANAGER

KANSAS CITY, MO.

11. P. M.  
Sat. night.

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