

MAKING
CARING
COMMON
PROJECT



Strategy and Lesson Plans Virtual Everyday Gratitude

Grades 6 - 12

Making Caring Common

Caring Schools Network 2019 - 2020

Updated March 2020

Overview

Students explore the concept of gratitude through self-reflection and writing thank-you notes to people in their lives (in their school, community, and beyond). In the process, students are encouraged to consider the intentions and costs behind people’s giving and to express gratitude to those who positively contribute to their lives.

Recommended time

- 15-20 mins per lesson (use the pacing suggestions and timestamps to adjust, depending on time available)
- Five lessons in total (we suggest one lesson per week)

Materials and advance prep

- Virtual meeting link
- Student journal
- Slide deck to record student reflections (see Lessons 1 & 2)

Objectives

- Recognize and express gratitude to others in school and beyond
- Consider the intentions and costs behind people’s giving, and in turn practice giving back to those for whom one feels gratitude

Why this matters

Research shows that gratitude is both psychologically and academically beneficial for youth and can be regarded as a moral emotion related to recognizing the feelings and intentions of others. In turn, gratitude can lead to increased motivation to reciprocate and extend generosity to others. Many students might not experience, express, or even receive gratitude in their lives, even though it is shown to foster positive relationships and also to mitigate the effects of depression and anxiety. By providing students with intentional and varied opportunities to practice gratitude— for instance, through writing thank-you notes and considering positive events in their daily lives— students will come to notice and appreciate others, and ideally be inspired to think and act more generously.

Other considerations

Feel free to adapt the lessons in ways that meet your students' needs, but also try to maintain the integrity of the content or concepts throughout the lessons. Encourage students to more actively and respectfully respond to each other by modeling positive responses, setting clear expectations, and providing sufficient scaffolding. Reaffirm class norms, or if you haven't yet set class norms, see [Appendix 1](#) for ideas on how to do so. Tips and suggestions are provided throughout the lessons, but do not hesitate to check in with other staff as they may have additional ideas that can be helpful to you.

Extending this strategy

- Create an online “thank-you board” or “gratitude blog” where students can regularly express their gratitude via online sticky notes or a blog series.
- Use YouTube or another online video platform to share and discuss videos students create about things for which they're grateful.

Lesson 1: Understanding Gratitude (20 - 30 minutes)

Introduce the strategy (1 minute)

Introduce the project to students by saying the following: *“This is the first activity of several that we are going to do as a class. Each activity that we do over the next few weeks will develop our understanding of gratitude and encourage us to feel and show gratitude in our everyday lives.”*

MCC Tip: *You can start an online gratitude board via a website or blogging platform, and ask students to type in their gratitude notes. In future lessons, or at other times, students can add additional notes and posts to the board.*

Also, share with students the definition of gratitude (see below) in a place they can easily reference it throughout the lessons, or write it atop the gratitude board, if you opt to have one.

Chalk Talk (2-4 minutes)

Screen share your slide deck. On the first slide, display the word “Gratitude” with a circle around it.

Ask students to reflect on or journal about the word gratitude silently for no more than one minute, thinking about what the word means to them and how they *experience or express* gratitude, if at all. Then, prompt students to share or type into the chat box an example of how they *experience or express* gratitude. Model this for your students first. You can also have students respond in an online anonymous form to maintain confidentiality in case students feel embarrassed. If you decide to use a platform that enables students to post anonymously, be sure to review the posts before all students are able to see each other’s responses.

Reading others' notes (3-5 minutes)

Once students have considered or written about gratitude, allow them to silently read what others have written. If you are using a third party form, display the data by sharing your screen. Students can then respond to each other's contributions with additional examples or thoughts. Encourage students to return to the online gratitude board, especially if they have a better idea of what it means to experience gratitude (e.g., to feel warmth, appreciation and goodwill for someone or something) or express gratitude (e.g., to show that you are grateful through action, verbal or otherwise).

Discussion (7-10 minutes)

Note: Bolded questions are strongly recommended.

Lead students through a discussion about the Chalk Talk. Ask the following, prioritizing the bolded questions if you're short on time.

- Why do you think silence was a part of the exercise (e.g., to reflect and be honest with oneself; to get inspired from the gratitude of others)?
- **What kinds of things or people are we grateful for?**
- **What seems to be our class definition of gratitude?**
- **What's the difference between experiencing and expressing gratitude?**
- How can we experience or *feel* gratitude more often? How can we express or *show it* more often? What obstacles get in the way of experiencing gratitude? How can we overcome some obstacles or things that get in the way of experiencing or expressing gratitude?

***Prompting Tip:** Prepare and present the question prompts and directions on a PowerPoint presentation to accommodate a variety of learners.*

Finally, offer a definition of gratitude: ***feeling appreciative and fortunate for what one has, and showing that appreciation toward the people and things for which one is grateful.***

Close the lesson by asking students to spend the next week reflecting on who they might feel gratitude for and why. Tell them when you think the next lesson might take place.

***MCC Tip:** In addition to the gratitude board, you can also encourage students to start a gratitude journal so that they can continuously reflect on the things and people for whom they're grateful (especially by [Lesson 3](#)). Of course, do what makes the most sense for your students.*

Lesson 2: Expressing Gratitude Through Letter Writing (20 minutes)

Introduce the lesson (2 minutes)

Start by saying, “During our first activity we thought about the word ‘gratitude’ and reflected on those people in our lives for whom we feel gratitude. Today we’re going to start a simple routine that helps us show gratitude to others.”

Discussion (5 minutes)

Begin by asking students how often they express gratitude to others. Push students to think about *why* they do or do not express gratitude toward others. Encourage students to answer honestly and use examples. Acknowledge that typically we don’t express gratitude as much as we feel it. You might have students either digitally or literally raise their hands and share verbally or discuss in a small group via a virtual breakout room. Either way, have students answer the following questions:

***Prompting Tip:** It may be beneficial to have students write in a journal before sharing with the whole group. You may also want to give students time to think about the questions in pairs before beginning a whole-group discussion.*

- **Have you expressed gratitude to others in the last week?**
 - If yes, how? For what or whom?
 - How did it make you feel? How do you think it made the other person feel?
 - What did they give up or sacrifice to help you?

- **Has another person expressed their gratitude for you in some way in the last week or month?**

- If yes, what did they do or say? If not, consider the many ways we express gratitude, and see if others may have expressed their gratitude by showing you rather than telling you how grateful to you they are.
- How do you think it made them feel? How did it make you feel?
- What did you give up or sacrifice to help them?

MCC Tip: *Open up to students by honestly sharing about your strengths and weaknesses with regard to showing gratitude. You want students to be honest during this discussion, and modeling in this way can demonstrate that your classroom is an environment in which honesty and vulnerability are the norm.*

Letter writing (15 minutes)

Next, go over the basics of how to write a thank-you letter, including how to format it in an email. Students will write a thank-you note to someone in their life whom they appreciate. They can then type it up and send it using whatever format makes the most sense for the recipient of the note, but let students know that handwritten thank you notes often carry a lot of meaning for others. You can display the following prompt to help guide students:

“You will be writing a thank-you note to someone in your life. Why are you grateful for that person? What do you appreciate and value in them? What nice thing(s) have they done for you? You might appreciate the little things this person does, like telling you they love you or calling you to check up on you if you haven’t been feeling well. Or, it can be bigger things like getting you something you really wanted or helping you with a difficult class assignment. If you’re having trouble thinking of someone, it could be someone from a while ago or someone that has passed away. It could also be someone that you don’t know that well but who affects your life or maybe needs some recognition or kind words. Try to consider those who are different from you as well as those whose daily experience might differ from your own.”

Tell students they will write a thank-you note or two. Let them know they will actually be sending the notes, and encourage them to be authentic and speak from the heart. Be sure to tell students they'll be reporting back on the experience in the next lesson.

Identify the features of a thank-you note:

- Introduction
- A specific action or quality you are grateful for
- Acknowledge the person's intentions or what they may have given up to do what they did for you
- Share what their actions mean to you and why
- Kind closing

Make sure students know that thank-you notes can be written to honor small acts and not just big birthday presents or holiday gifts. They can express gratitude for things that seem ordinary (like taking a walk with someone, in the example below) or might seem expected (like asking questions about an assignment, in the example below). Present the following examples to students and ask them to identify the features mentioned above.

Example of a thank-you note from a teacher to a student:

Dear Skyler,

Thank you for coming to find me after class to ask questions about the assignment. I know how busy you are, and I'm glad you chose to invest your time in doing better in our class.

I appreciate how much you care about your studies and am always happy to chat with you further to clarify your ideas. Your investment in your academic success and growth does not go unnoticed.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jenkins

Example of a thank-you note from a student to a teacher:

Dear Ms. Olson,

Thank you for taking a minute to speak with me after class the other day. You noticed that I'd been feeling down, and your concern really improved my day. I know you have a lot of students to teach and care about, and I appreciate that you chose to spend time talking with me.

When you volunteered your time to have a short conversation about my life, that made me think and feel differently. I hope you have a great weekend, and thanks again.

Sincerely,

Jackson

MCC Tip: *These examples are also in [Appendix 2](#) if you'd like to use them in other ways.*

Have students write a thank-you note or two. Remind them they will actually be giving these letters to the people they're grateful for, and encourage students to be authentic and speak from the heart. Close [Lesson 2](#) by reminding the class they'll report back on sending their note, and let them know when [Lesson 3](#) will take place.

MCC Tip: *Research shows that timing and surprise are both important for bringing attention to an activity. Encourage students to think about when to share their thank-you note and also to consider making it a surprise (e.g., to give it when the person might least expect it).*

It is possible that some students will have never received a letter in the mail before. Depending on your class dynamic and available time, you may want to talk about what it feels like to receive a letter of gratitude and why the practice of sending letters is less popular now (e.g., technology, time, other modes of communication).

For younger students, you may want to hype up the process of writing thank-you notes, sealing envelopes, and making/applying stamps to bring joy and enthusiasm to the activity, too.

Lesson 3: Getting Deeper with Gratitude (15 - 20 minutes)

Introduce the lesson (1 minute)

Introduce the lesson by saying, “*today we are going to report back on our thank-you notes and the responses we may have received from the people to whom we gave our first notes. Then, we will begin a slightly new challenge.*”

Student experiences (10 minutes)

Ask students to share their thank-you note experience. If students are hesitant to share their experience, you may have them speak in pairs before taking comments from the class. The bolded questions are most recommended if you have limited time:

- **To whom did you write?**
 - Why did you choose that person?
 - What was your note about?
- How did you send the note (e.g., mail, hand-deliver, hide it where the person would find it)?
- **Did you get a response?**
 - What was it?
 - **Could you tell how the person felt?**
- **How did it make *you* feel– the writing part and the giving/response part?**
- **What do you think is the larger impact of showing gratitude for others?** (Make sure to ask this as it will come up again.)
- What would you do differently?

Reflections (6-8 minutes)

Next, tell students they can choose to mix it up by expressing gratitude to different people during the week, by writing additional thank-you notes for those who already

received a note, or by doing something kind for others. Ask students to brainstorm in their journals a list of people they don't often appreciate, including people they know and don't know very well. The list doesn't have to be exhaustive— even just two people would be sufficient if students are thinking honestly about what others would want.

Remind students that gratitude is ***feeling appreciative and fortunate for what one has, and showing that appreciation toward the people and things for which one is grateful.***

Once students have their list, ask them to think of one specific way they can show gratitude to each person, and allow them to start writing one letter in class. The rest of the week they will be responsible for writing or expressing gratitude on their own. Share out if time allows.

Close [Lesson 3](#) by telling students when you think the next lesson will take place and tell students the following: *“Next time, I’ll be excited to hear how your thank-you notes went, if you were able to show gratitude in other ways, and how that made others feel.”*

MCC Tip: *Make sure students know that if they need help meeting their goal for the rest of the week, you are there to help brainstorm.*

You may notice that some students find less to be grateful for than others, may have felt sad or disappointed if they didn't get to share their thank-you note(s), or been disappointed if they didn't get a positive response. Depending on your group's responses in general, you may want to address those students separately, after class, or make a teaching moment out of it by explaining that we don't always get the responses we want from people— but that doesn't mean we lose hope or change who we are. You may also want to ask everyone for ideas for coping with negative feelings or responses (e.g., talk to a friend or try a different note for a different person).

Lesson 4: Considering Gratitude

Introduction (1 minute)

Introduce the lesson by saying, *“This past week I tried to pay attention to how I felt while writing letters and doing nice things for those I’m grateful towards. I also paid close attention to how those people felt. Did anyone else notice these feelings?”* After you get a sense of whether or not students noticed these feelings, say the following: *“Today we are going to build on our previous work and really dig into how powerful gratitude can be.”*

Student experiences (10 minutes)

Ask students to share their experiences as a whole group. Ask the same questions as in [Lesson 3](#) (which are copied below, in addition to a few questions focused on feelings and other expressions of gratitude). This time, prepare students to listen for any **patterns** or **themes** in their classmates’ responses. Prioritize the bolded questions if you are short on time.

***Prompting Tip:** It may be beneficial to have students write in a journal before sharing with the whole group. You may also want to give students time to chat about some of the questions in pairs before holding a whole-group discussion.*

Questions:

- To whom did you write? Did you express gratitude to someone in a different way other than letter writing?
- How did you send the note (e.g., mail, hand-deliver, hide it where the person would find it)?
- **Did you get a response (either from the letter or other expression of gratitude)? What was it? Could you tell how the person felt?**
- How did it make **you** feel – the writing part and the giving and response part?

- **Were there any exceptional, surprising, or especially moving notes or acts of gratitude that you received? What feelings did they evoke?**
- **What do you think is the larger impact of showing gratitude for others?** (Make sure to ask this as it will come up again)

***MCC Tip:** If students notice that they mostly show appreciation for people like them or individuals they know well, challenge them to think about those who are different from them or those they don't know yet.*

Ask for a student to describe why and how they expressed gratitude to someone they didn't really know or someone that might go unnoticed and how that person felt. If students have good variety in their responses, acknowledge this and express your own gratitude for their openness to trying new things.

Journaling (5 minutes)

***MCC Tip:** To practice this activity, ask students to journal in class about three things that went well this past week, and ask them to explain what contributed to these successes. Ask for volunteers to share-out.*

Next, tell students you'd like them to continue writing thank-you notes but that you'd also like them to really think about the positive things in their lives. For the next week, encourage students to write down at least one thing that went well **each day**, and also have students provide a causal explanation for each positive occurrence.

Example: I asked my parents if I could stay out later than usual on Friday, and they said yes.

Cause: I shared with my parents how much I appreciated their love and support and asked politely if I could attend a gathering at a friend's house.

Close [Lesson 4](#) by reminding students of their task for the week: to write at least one more thank-you note and record what went well each day), and tell them when you think

the next gratitude activity will take place.

MCC Tip: Remember that whole-group discussions can be long and tiresome for some students. Consider the needs of your students and your norms and routines as a class to inform the way you structure the discussion prompts. While the questions are essential to this process, the group size and discussion dynamic should be whatever is best for your students.

Lesson 5: Wrapping Up (20 minutes)

Introduction (2 minutes)

Tell students the following: “Today we will wrap-up our lessons on gratitude and think about how the things we have learned over these exercises might impact us in the future. We’re going to summarize our takeaways from the past week and we’ll have some fun.”

Turn and talks (10 minutes)

For a few minutes, have students pair up and then share with the class their takeaways from the week.

***MCC Tip:** It might be better to allow students to match up as they’d like, given the personal nature of the sharing. But consider assigning pairs or small groups if there are some students who might be left out.*

Students can summarize each day and see if their partner notices a pattern, or they can summarize for their partner what things seemed to go well and why. Then, bring everyone together for a whole-group or class discussion:

- **Were you able to write down at least one thing that went well each day?**
 - If no, are some days better than others, or did you just forget?
 - If yes, how did that feel?
- **Do you notice any patterns or themes in what goes well?** For instance, are the positives mostly individual (e.g., I did well on my science test), or do they involve other people as well (e.g., My mom said she was proud of me)? If the former, how can you start appreciating others more often?
- **Did you write a thank-you note to someone because of your journaling every night? Who or what contributes to the good things in your life?**

- **What do you think is the larger impact of feeling and showing gratitude for others?**

MCC Tip: Depending on the grade level of your students and what you deem appropriate, you can also encourage students to write a text or share their gratitude through social media instead of writing a letter or thank-you note.

Reflection and discussion (5-10 minutes)

Finally, have students think about a time in the last week or so when they noticed someone who was going through a rough time or might have been feeling down. Ask students to silently think about a way they could have, or still might, make that person feel appreciated. **Encourage students to commit to at least one act of gratitude or kindness in the next week.** If you have time, tell them to write a thank you letter or a letter of appreciation to that person. This also serves as a nice way to tie in and close the lessons!

If time permits, conclude the lesson by asking students to brainstorm and discuss as a class ways to incorporate gratitude and kindness in their lives. For example, they might keep a gratitude journal in their own time, say “thank you” more often, or simply continue a thank-you note-writing practice of their own. Whatever they decide, encourage students to anchor their ideas on paper (or write their ideas on the gratitude board) and provide students with a space to share as the rest of the year continues!

Extension ideas

While these five lessons provide students with a better understanding and application of gratitude, the experience must continue for a real, lasting impact. Check out our Everyday Gratitude Routines for ways to make these ideas permanent fixtures in your classroom and beyond!

Appendix 1: Class Norms

Before you dive into meaningful discussions, it is important to generate or reaffirm your class norms. When we establish norms together we create buy-in and trust. Doing this also provides explicit, shared codes of conduct that remind students how to engage in constructive discussions. Norms are also a great strategy for diffusing heated conversations and prompting students to return to agreed-upon norms when things get too uncomfortable within the group.

If you have norms already, great! You also may want to incorporate some of the following ideas, particularly the first norm prompting students to listen authentically. Listening is a cornerstone of empathy and is vital to a productive and respectful discussion.

Listen authentically. Try to really listen to what each speaker is saying, without the need to interrupt, rebut, or argue back. Have a true dialogue. Try practicing these three skills:

- Control your body language. Make eye contact, face the speaker.
- Maintain focus. Minimize distractions, nod or vocalize in some way to show that you are paying attention.
- Express empathy. Paraphrase what’s been said, ask thoughtful clarification questions, validate feelings or thoughts by saying things like, “I could sense that you felt...is that right?”

Show respect. Give undivided attention to the person speaking.

Be open but thoughtful about what you share. We will be open and honest without disclosing others’ information unnecessarily. For example, we won’t say, “My older brother did [something bad]...” Instead we will say, “I know someone who...”

Be non-judgmental. We can disagree with or dislike another person’s point of view without putting that person down.

Claim our opinions. We will share our opinions using the first person. For example, “I think that kindness is important.” Not, “You are mean.”

Be sensitive to diversity. We will remember that people in the group may differ in cultural background, sexual orientation, or gender identity, among other things, and we will be careful to avoid insensitive remarks.

Acknowledge discomfort. It is okay to feel uncomfortable; adults sometimes feel uncomfortable when they talk about sensitive and personal topics as well. Let's accept that things might be uncomfortable and talk through it!

Appendix 2: Sample Thank-you Notes

Example of a thank-you note from a teacher to a student:

Dear Skyler,

Thank you for coming to find me after class to ask questions about the assignment. I know how busy you are, and I'm glad you chose to invest your time in doing better in our class.

I appreciate how much you care about your studies and am always happy to chat with you further to clarify your ideas. Your investment in your academic success and growth does not go unnoticed.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jenkins

Example of a thank-you note from a student to a teacher:

Dear Ms. Olson,

Thanks for speaking with me after class the other day. You noticed that I'd been feeling down, and your concern really improved my day. I know you have a lot of students to teach and care about, and I appreciate that you chose to spend time talking with me.

When you volunteered your time to have a short conversation about my life, that made me think and feel differently. I hope you have a great weekend, and thanks again.

Sincerely,

Jackson