

TELL THE STORY: INTERPRETING LANGUAGE IN CIVIL WAR KENTUCKY

A CIVIL WAR GOVERNORS OF KENTUCKY TEACHING THEME
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CONTEXT

Kentuckians in the nineteenth century spoke differently than today's Kentuckians do. Think about how the evolution of language affects the way we communicate. This lesson looks at the language of the 1860s to see this change over time, unlocking new meaning. How individuals talk, write, and read gives them a unique identity. When signing an email today most people use "sincerely"; however, in the 1860s the most common phrase to end a letter stated, "Your most obedient servant". These individuals wrote to their Governor during the Civil War to advocate for themselves and their neighbors. Consider how the skill of communication opened new doors for nineteenth-century individuals and how it can do the same for you.

BIG-PICTURE QUESTIONS

- How is the language of these individuals different than the way you speak? Think vocabulary, phrases, etc.
- How does this story change your perception of nineteenth-century Kentuckians?
- Who is not speaking? Whose voice is silenced? How is reading and writing essential for advocacy?
- Why would your modern version be different than a classmates?

PRIMARY SOURCES

- [Charles Kirtly et al. to Thomas E. Bramlette](#)
- [W. H. Lusby to Thomas E. Bramlette](#)
- [Leslie Combs to Thomas E. Bramlette](#)
- [Henry Porter to Thomas E. Bramlette](#)
- [Curtis F. Burnam et al. to Thomas E. Bramlette](#)

ACTIVITY: TELL THE STORY

- Read the document. Imagine you're the author. What does it say? Tell the story in your own words. Kentuckians in the nineteenth century spoke differently than today's Kentuckians do, so your version will—and should—sound different than the original author's.
- Once you've finished writing your version of the story, trade with a partner and read each other's work. You don't necessarily need to grade the work on what's right or wrong, but pay close attention to how the stories you've written today are different (and similar) to the ones from Civil-War Kentucky. Discuss your findings.
- A few things you might notice:
 - **Vocabulary:** Over time, the English language has evolved. Some words change in meaning; some words fall out of use. Did you have to change any of the vocabulary? Were there words that you didn't understand?
 - **Spelling and grammar:** Now you know that literacy levels in nineteenth century. Not everyone had access to education; not everyone could read and write. Literacy is more widespread and education more accessible in today's Kentucky. Many of these documents from Civil-War Kentucky are inconsistent in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. What does that say about the era? What does your version of the story say about yours?
 - **Dialect:** Dialects are peculiar to a specific region or group. Think about where the document was created. Can you hear the dialect of the author?
- Lastly, after reviewing and discussing each other's work, answer the question, "Why?" Thinking about the language you've read and the language you've used, why might your version of the story be so different from your nineteenth-century subject? Why might your writing be so different from your classmate's?

