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GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT STUDIES INSTITUTE  
*offered by Northwestern University*

# OPEN LETTERS

## A RESOURCE GUIDE

Personal Writing, Purposefully Shared

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# Table of Contents

<b>Preface: About Open Letters</b>	Page 4
<b>Section One: The Open Letter Experience</b>	Page 5
1.1 The Open Letter Framework	
1.2 Open Letter Examples	
Example 1: Dance Hall	
Example 2: Human Test Questions	
Example 3: There's Tension	
<b>Section Two: Open Letter Applications</b>	Page 9
2.1 Ways Open Letters Have Been Used	
2.2 Other Ways Open Letters Could Be Used	
<b>Section Three: Open Letter Resources</b>	Page 10
3.1 Sample Open Letter Prompts	
3.2 Sample Lesson Plan for Introducing Open Letters	
3.3 Sample Open Letter Story Slam Guide	
<b>Section Four: About the Authors</b>	Page 14

# Preface: About Open Letters

We were first introduced to Open Letters while taking a class called “Writing for Social Change” with Professor Robert Gundlach at Northwestern University. As Global Engagement Studies Institute (GESI) alumnae, we applied for Professor Gundlach’s writing class hoping such a structured approach would help us unpack and understand our experiences abroad in India. Each week in class, we wrote an Open Letter in response to a prompt, and shared our letters out loud with our colleagues. The act of writing these letters with an audience in mind, and then reading them aloud, allowed us to first distill our thoughts and experiences into a clarified letter form, and then give voice to those thoughts in a safe and brave intellectual community. In response to a noted lack of creative freedom and processing in GESI’s program by students, alumni and staff alike, we introduced an expanded, tailored Open Letter model into the GESI curriculum in 2014 with the support of the Buffett Institute for Global Studies. This curriculum provided a space for personal reflection as a complement to the assigned field essays during the GESI experience.

We’ve been humbled by the overwhelmingly positive response to the Open Letter process, and excited by the possibility of bringing Open Letters into new spaces. Through the distribution of this packet, we hope to expand this practice beyond our current domestic and international reach.

# Section One:

## The Open Letter Experience

### 1.1 THE OPEN LETTER FRAMEWORK

The Open Letter framework includes both the individual writing and group sharing process:

#### Individual Writing

- In technical terms, an Open Letter is one-page response to a communal prompt. It is personal writing, purposefully shared.
- This should not feel like an assignment—it's a tool. As soon as it feels like an assignment, you should look deeper into the ways you're writing and the things you're writing about. More than anything else, this is the opportunity to practice a ritual during a shared experience. We hope that this is a place and practice that will provide a grounding for your journey.

#### Group Sharing

- The group sharing process can be tailored to your programmatic needs. As you get to know your group members and processes better, you can specify sharing guidelines to fit your sharing style. Sample sharing guidelines below.

#### Sample Sharing Guidelines

- Select a meeting time and place that are conducive to reflective discussion (ex: every Friday after your team check-in at a local park, quiet coffee shop, etc.)
- Select an Open Letter moderator each week who will facilitate intentional sharing
- After each letter, conversation should come in the form of two responses:
  - These are the things that resonated with me
  - These are the things I have questions about
- As a reminder, this is a tool for team capacity building, not an assignment. Push yourself to be open to sharing, even if it's uncomfortable.

## 1.2 OPEN LETTER EXAMPLES

### Example 1: "Dance Hall" by Aaron Faucher

**Prompt: Write a thank you letter to someone you met in-country**

Access recording at the following link: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/35006495/GES1%20Open%20Letter%20-%20Aaron%20Faucher%20-%20Dancehall.aif>

### Example 2: Human Test Questions by Bria Royal

**Prompt: Write about the ways you and others are transported**

*This is the Human test. Tally the number of questions you can answer 'yes' to. If you can answer yes to one or more of the following questions, it is likely that you are currently a person exhibiting natural signs of personhood. This portion of the test covers human transportation:*

1. Have you ever crawled?
  2. If so, have you ever crawled on a bathroom floor?
  3. If so, have you ever crawled on a bathroom floor while asking your God for help or forgiveness?
  4. If not, have you ever crawled on a bathroom floor while asking a God you don't believe in for help or forgiveness?
5. Have you ever been the first to get in a car and waited awkwardly for others to enter to see if they were gonna put on their seatbelt or not?
6. Have you ever stood on a bus?
  7. If so, have you ever not held onto the bars just to look cool?
  8. If so, did you pretend the bus was a giant skateboard?
9. Have you ever had to move to the back of the bus?
  10. If so, have you ever worried that you wouldn't make it back up in time?
11. Have you ever had to move to the back of the bus and made a Rosa Parks joke in your mind?
  12. If so, did you feel guilty about it later?
13. Have you ever had to sit in the middle seat of the very back of a bus and envisioned yourself flying through the windshield should the bus crash or stop too hard?
  14. If so, have you ever stood just to avoid that situation?
15. Have you ever been scared that a bus would leave you if you had to get off to let someone else off?
16. Have you ever been offended that no one on the bus told you that there was a seat available right behind you?
  17. If so, upon realizing, did you keep standing out of spite?
18. Have you ever decided not to stand up for someone else to sit down on a bus because you didn't want to make them feel old?
19. Have you ever decided not to stand up for someone else to sit down on a bus because you felt like you really earned that seat?
20. Have you ever touched thighs with a stranger and got slightly aroused?
  21. If so, did you wonder if the stranger "felt it" too?
22. Have you ever touched thighs with a stranger and felt violated?

23. Have you ever jumped to a shadow glacier to avoid the lava?
24. Have you ever crossed the street to be on the shady side even though you were already on the side of your destination?
25. Have you ever given up on being on time, and then felt bad after realizing you could've been on time if you'd walked just a little bit faster?
26. Have you ever been stopped and questioned for walking?
  27. If so, did that situation escalate quickly?
28. Have you ever been told to "walk fast" through a certain part of town?
29. Have you ever chosen to walk a really long distance just to be with other people?
30. Have you ever chosen to walk a really long distance just to avoid being with people?
31. Have you ever chosen to walk a really long distance just to avoid turning around and passing the same people?
32. Has a walk intended to let off some steam ever caused you to be more emotional?
33. Have you ever cried while walking?
  34. If not, have you ever successfully kept yourself from crying while walking but still ended up with a shit ton of snot running from your nose?
35. Has being followed by a stray dog ever made your day?
36. Have you ever consciously not walked on the cracks even though you knew it wouldn't break your mama's back, but simply because, now that you've noticed, stepping on a crack would just feel wrong?
  37. If so, have you ever looked like an idiot trying to walk one step per sidewalk square?
38. Have you ever had to leave your home town?
39. Have you ever had to leave your home town to find education or work?
40. Have you ever had to leave your country to find education or work?
  41. If so, were you forced to go back home?
  42. If not, were you forced to build this new country?
43. Have you ever really wanted to go home?
44. Have you ever thought that it might not be such a bad idea if you never went home again?
45. Have you ever been unsure about where home is?

### Example 3: "There's Tension" by Kamila Muhammad

Prompt: Write about a tension.

Well, there's tension in my shoulders. I'm carrying more than air, but the weight of my expectations, hopes and dreams of planting a legacy in uncharted territory because my family can't afford to travel and they live vicariously through me maybe they won't say but I have to come back happy and brown with stories but all I feel is the weight of expectation and my shoulders hurt too much to be happy.

Well, there's tension in my color. Back home I try to practice solidarity and nod to all the Black and Brown faces in any given space. We acknowledge one another's struggle, feel comfort we're not the only one who has seen the things we've seen and felt the things we've felt. But here I'm the wrong shade of brown. Am I almost white? I've never been white before. So funny to have whiteness thrust upon me in a foreign land, and be unable to reap any of its privileges. I will go back home and be stared at. I walk the streets of Udaipur and I am stared at. The tension in the color of my skin weighs heavy on my shoulders and oh do they want to sag from the burden. But no, I am a beautiful Black (?) queen and I must stand erect, ignore the tension and represent strong and tall.

Well, there's tension in my pockets. Folks assume I'm American (white?) and I have money. Ha. When those little girls tug at my sleeve ("allo! 'allo!) to beg for change, I feel tense because I don't have it. Change. I don't have the money because back home I'm not too far removed from their situation. (I've had to beg myself in some regards.) I am tense because they assume without knowing me. They have my single story all mapped out and at the climax

I give them fifty rupees so they can eat that day but I just can't. I don't have the change to change their lives either and I'm sorry. It don't even make me sad because I've seen babies back home with unkempt hair line the streets with their mamas with sad eyes too, eyes that have seen what I have seen and felt what I have felt. I am thought to be rich here and maybe the \$\$\$ I have in my stash makes me so here but remembering any leftover \$\$\$ goes to rent, to food, to music makes me want to beg a stranger for their kindness.

Well, there is tension for me at Jatan. I want to work as hard as my colleagues but I lack the resources. I wish I could clear my mind, shut it off, maybe it wouldn't drift to dark places maybe I could focus maybe I could feel like I belonged there instead of like a sore thumb. I feel like I stick out do they think I'm lazy because sometimes my mind can't handle all these changes? Because I spaced and left my computer I look like a fool wasting her time on her phone but really I am trying to be productive. Sometimes I just have to fight the tension and my music my loved one's words my screenshots are salve on my swollen shoulders so silently I sink into myself, dig deep down maybe remember my job come up for air promise I'll be productive I'm just self-conscious and try to be the last to admit it.

Well, there are tensions in my reasons why. Learn about a new culture they said. It'll be beautiful they said. It'll be fun they said. Maybe they don't carry this weight (can't you see it there?). maybe I was wrong not to wait before I took a break from everything and everyone I know maybe I was wrong about everything. My reasons why ignite a new passion learn expand your horizons across another ocean but my path is littered with hesitation about my perceptions and oh the tension oh the tension I wish I could toss you burn you in the piles with the trash but you linger like a kiss I'll never taste and my shoulders shrink up just to think up how to rid myself of you.

# Section Two:

## Open Letter Applications

### 2.1 WAYS OPEN LETTERS HAVE BEEN USED

- Weekly personal reflection and team capacity building exercise during study abroad experience (e.g. Northwestern University Global Engagement Studies Institute)
- Personal reflection and team capacity building exercise during domestic and international service learning experience (e.g. Alternative Student Breaks)
- Weekly personal reflection and writing practice in academic classroom
- Open Letter Story Slam in academic setting (e.g. culmination of experience, student group)
- Ongoing alumni engagement tool (e.g. Alumni Open Letter Story Slam)

### 2.2 OTHER WAYS OPEN LETTERS COULD BE USED

- Personal reflection and team capacity building exercise during university or program orientation experience
- Community-building tool for conferences and summits
- Staff development for businesses and organizations (e.g. mission and vision crafting, ongoing professional development)

\*An Open Letter Story Slam is an excellent way of having participants share Open Letters with a larger group, if they've been in small groups throughout their experience. See 3.3 ***SAMPLE OPEN LETTER STORY SLAM GUIDE***.

# Section Three:

## Open Letter Resources

### 3.1 SAMPLE OPEN LETTER PROMPTS

- What do you expect to see, hear, feel, taste, smell while in-country?
- Take a walk. What do you see, hear, feel, taste, smell in your first week in-country?
- Write about an image you'd never seen, or experience you'd never had, before this week.
- Write a letter to someone back home about what you wish they could understand.
- Write about a tension (intrapersonal, interpersonal, intercontinental, an exchange you witnessed or experienced, political, socio-economic, etc.).
- Write about the ways you and others are transported.
- Write what you wish you could say to someone you've met in-country, but can't or don't know how.
- Write about a moment of release you've had in-country-- a moment where you exhaled.
- Write about a moment that you needed more than you asked for.
- Write about a part of your identity that you're seeing or feeling in a different light in-country.
- Write about a time since you've been in-country when you felt powerful or powerless.
- Write about a reframing of a past experience.
- Write a thank you letter.
- Write a letter to yourself while you were on the plane to your country. What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?
- Write a letter to yourself 6 months from now - what will you hold on to?
- Write about connection.
- Write a love letter to your hometown.
- Write about a moment you were a part of from another person's perspective.
- Write a letter in list form.
- Write a letter of only questions.
- Write a letter that sits in the shadow of a previous letter.
- Write a letter that lives on the edges of a previous letter.
- Write a letter that takes place within a single second.

## 3.2 SAMPLE LESSON PLAN FOR INTRODUCING OPEN LETTERS

Time: One hour

Materials: Writing utensils, paper, sample Open Letters

### 1. What is the purpose of introducing Open Letters into the GESI experience?

In previous years, students have felt that the GESI curriculum is too prescriptive. Our presence is a response to that. Open letters are directly in response to students seeing a lack of freedom in the curriculum. This should not feel like an assignment—it's a tool. As soon as it feels like an assignment, you should look deeper into the ways you're writing and the things you're writing about. More than anything else, this is the opportunity to practice a ritual while in-country. You will be experiencing a lot of challenges, and dealing with a lot of unfamiliar things, and we hope that this is a place and practice that will provide a grounding for your journey.

### 2. What is an Open Letter?

- In technical terms, an Open Letter is one-page response to a communal prompt, addressed most often to your colleagues. It is personal writing, purposefully shared.
- In the context of GESI, it is the complement to your academic field essays. It is your opportunity to have creative space for reflection and expression.
- You will write one Open Letter per week. In the back of your journal, there will be a question at the top of a page, and space for you to respond. While we provide a prompt, the writing is for you -- this is an open process so let the prompt take you where you need to go, whether that be a present experience or a moment from the past. At the end of each week, you will gather with your team to share your letters. This should become a ritual, a tool, scaffolding for your shared emotional experience.
- It is for you and it is for others. This can look like a lot of different things, but it is our hope that you use these letters to communicate with your team about where you're at and where you hope to be.
- Everyone has the same prompt so that there is a shared framework for personal introspection. There are no right answers, but we hope you hold yourselves and your teammates to high standards.

### 3. What does this look like in practice?

We were first introduced to Open Letters while taking a class called "Writing for Social Change." As GESI alumnae, we applied for the writing class with the hopes that such a structure would help us unpack and understand our GESI experiences. Each week, we would write an Open Letter in response to a prompt, and share our letters out loud with our colleagues. The act of writing these letters with an audience in mind, and then reading them aloud, allowed us to first distill thoughts and experiences into a clarified letter form, and then give voice to those thoughts in a safe intellectual community. We got in the habit of writing these letters, and ultimately decided to continue our practice after the end of the class. This past year, a group of our colleagues has been writing letters on a given theme and sharing them with one another each month. We have found this to be a necessary tool in our post-college confusion.

### 4. Sample letters

- Read excerpts from two letters
- Take questions about the process of writing -- sometimes our letters take alternate forms (poems, short stories, etc.)

## 5. Activity: 7 minute letters

- First prompt: what do you expect to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste in country?
- Write individually about this prompt for 7 minutes

## 6. Sharing

- After 7 minutes, group up with your NGO team members
- As you get to know your team members and your team processes better, you can specify sharing guidelines to fit your sharing style. Until then, we have a set of guidelines that you can follow and adapt as you please.
  - Select a team moderator -- someone to help facilitate the sharing process in an intentional way
  - One person talking at a time
  - Push yourself to be open to sharing, even if it's uncomfortable. As a reminder, this is a tool for team capacity building, not an assignment.
  - After each letter, conversation should come in the form of two responses:
    - These are the things that resonated with me
    - These are the things I have questions about
- Any questions?
- Share with NGO team members
- How did that feel?
  - Raise your hand if you felt a little uncomfortable doing that
  - Raise your hand if you felt completely comfortable doing that
- We hope that your comfort level of sharing grows so that you can allow your writing to be increasingly introspective, and your support for your colleagues to become increasingly strong

## 7. Wrap up: What is this going to look like in country?

Each week, you will have an Open Letter question. You'll have the whole week to write your letter. On Friday, you will share your letters. You can decide when and where to do this, but we hope that you will develop a ritual with your team and hold one another to sticking with that ritual. There may be opportunities for your whole GESI group to share your letters in-country, but that depends on geography and how often you'll be able to be in the same space. At the post-departure summit, you'll have an opportunity to share your letters and hear from others at our Open Letter Story Slam.

### 3.3 SAMPLE OPEN LETTER SLAM GUIDE

Time: 1 hour 30 minutes

Materials: Open Letters, recording equipment if applicable

#### 1. What is the Open Letter Story Slam?

- We know that you are learning how to share your stories in academic and/or professional setting (ex interviews); this session is a way to explore and practice creative articulation of your stories and experiences
- This is an opportunity for us
  - Individually, to share our writing and experiences with the entire GESI community
  - Collectively, to come together and explore the ways individual experiences across countries and communities relate to one another

#### 2. Setting rules for the space

- There will be sacrificial slammer -- someone who start things off and helps ease any nerves about sharing your letters and stories (Ariel will be the sacrificial slammer)
- Depending on location, we will decide how people are set up (circle for example) -- it should be a comfortable and inviting space for people to speak in
- Letter readers: before you begin, state your name, your country, and to which prompt you are responding
- Audience members, be supportive, attentive listeners
- After each letter, we will take a few comments from the group – words or experiences that resonated with you, questions you have for the letter reader, etc.
- This is a space where every experience is valid -- we are all entering this space with different experiences; there may be things you really relate to and things you don't relate to all -- remember this is a place to celebrate not only our experiences but the fact that we are brave enough to share them with one another

#### 3. Participants share their stories

- Moderator will manage the order of speakers and ensure that participants continue to be encouraging of one another during comment time
  - To streamline the sharing process, we suggest you create a visually accessible sign-up somewhere in the space (ex: whiteboard) so that the group knows who is on-deck to share and participants can continue to sign-up throughout the event with minimal disruption.

#### 4. Wrap up

- Group debrief, taking comments from any and all prompts:
  - Raise your hand if there was a moment that reminded you of your own letters or experiences
  - Raise your hand if there was a moment in which something surprised you
  - Raise your hand if responding to these Open Letters was difficult for you
  - We hope you continue to share out these letters and stories far beyond this session
  - Thank you for being brave and supportive, individually and collectively.

# About the Authors

Danielle Littman holds her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Creative Writing from Northwestern University, where she focused on Playwriting, Devising, and Creative Nonfiction. While at Northwestern, she also completed the Civic Engagement Certificate Program in the School of Education and Social Policy. Today, she holds a position as a Cultural Liaison for the Chicago Park District Department of Culture, Arts, and Nature, and teaches writing and theatre workshops throughout Chicago. She can be reached at [Danielle.Littman@gmail.com](mailto:Danielle.Littman@gmail.com).

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Please contact [\*\*gesi@northwestern.edu\*\*](mailto:gesi@northwestern.edu) if you would like more information about how to bring Open Letters to your program or organization.