



# Activism, emotion, and genre: Young adults' composition of Urgent Action Letters<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how members of a high school-based activist group compose Urgent Action Letters (UALs). In this genre of letter, the writer petitions a government official to uphold the human rights of a specific individual. Using tools of ethnography and discourse analysis, the article considers how group members employ the conventions of the UAL genre. By working in this genre, it is argued, members perform and learn to perform identities and emotions appropriate both for petitioning government officials and for affirming membership in the group. That is, the UAL genre functions for the group both as a means of pressuring governments and as a means of cultivating the identities and emotions of human rights activists.

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## 1. Introduction

Every Thursday at Riverton High School,<sup>1</sup> twenty to thirty students gather after the final bell to convene a meeting of their school's chapter of Amnesty International, the worldwide human rights organization. During the final fifteen minutes of each meeting, members read an Urgent Action Call issued by Amnesty's central office (Appendix A). The call outlines the case of an individual whose rights are being violated and prompts members to write Urgent Action Letters (UALs) petitioning government officials to honor that individual's rights. More specifically, calls provide writers with a bulleted list of points to make and actions to demand (e.g., "Call [1] on [State Minister] Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury to ensure that [human rights activist] Shampa Goswami receives protection from further harassment whilst fully respecting her wishes").

Given the large volume of UALs generated by the call, most Amnesty members at Riverton know their individual letters may not be read closely (or at all). Despite this knowledge, few of their letters are word-for-word reproductions of Amnesty's talking points. To varying degrees, most letters expand on points raised in the call, assert a personal voice, and express emotions ranging from concern to alarm to indignation.

Why, though, do Amnesty members put anything into their writing when they believe their UALs may be sorted, unread or half read, into a pile in some government office? What kind of voice and which kinds of emotions do members seek to express in their letters? How do more- and less-experienced members of the group mobilize the UAL's generic conventions to negotiate voice and emotion? These questions form the core of the present study.

<sup>☆</sup> A different and briefer analysis of the data presented in this article appears in Collin (2013a).

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Despite decades of research on critical literacies, scholars in literacy studies have developed few ways of answering questions about writing, emotion, and student activism (for more of this argument, see [Holland & Skinner, 2008](#)). These questions are of growing importance, given the proliferation in North America of student activist groups such as gay–straight alliances, environmental clubs, and human rights associations ([Russell, Muraco, & Subramaniam, 2009](#); [Wraga, 1998](#)). These clubs engage students' passions and prompt students to write in a range of genres, yet the connections between genre, emotion, and student activism have seldom been explored. I investigate these connections by examining Amnesty members' statements about the UAL genre and by presenting discourse analyses of UALs composed by members of the group.

## 2. Background: critical literacies, activist literacies

For the past several decades, researchers in education studies and composition studies have examined practices and pedagogies of critical literacy ([Behrman, 2006](#); [Fishman & McCarthy, 2001](#); [Freire, 1986](#); [Janks, 2000](#); [Shor, 1992](#)). Although definitions vary, critical literacies are often understood as ways of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking that foreground questions of power and difference and promote efforts to rectify injustice. Through taking up these practices, students may rewrite both “the word and the world” ([Freire, 1986](#)). In this article, I consider how the word and the world are rewritten by figures seldom studied in critical literacy research: self-identified student activists.

In addition to neglecting the efforts of activist students, critical literacy research often undertheorizes the emotional dimensions of critical practice. Indeed, although Freire emphasizes the importance of love in political struggle and encourages righteous indignation at injustice ([Freire, 1986](#)), neither he nor his followers theorize emotion carefully. This oversight is due in part to critical literacy's inheritance, via classical Marxism, of the Enlightenment view of emotion as in conflict with and less substantial than reason (see [Micciche, 2007](#)). As a result, much work on critical literacy fails to consider the emotional dimensions of students' efforts to rewrite the word and the world. While the importance of emotion was and is acknowledged by [Vygotsky \(1998, 1999\)](#) and some other critical thinkers influenced by Marx, these figures are in the minority in critical literacy's pantheon. I address this shortcoming by considering how, through composing Urgent Action Letters, students generate and express emotions suitable for activist work.

By examining the emotional dimensions of critical literacy, I also pose questions and present ideas of interest to educators committed to social justice. Through an investigation of the literacy practices of an Amnesty chapter, I work to highlight some of the possibilities for and challenges of rewriting the word and the world in schools. To do the latter, I argue, educators might reconceive genres as rhetorical spaces in which students rework the emotions that fuel critical engagement with the world.

## 3. Theoretical framework

This study begins from the premise that communication shapes and is shaped by the situations in which it occurs ([Fairclough, 2003](#); [Gee, 2005](#); [Halliday, 1994](#)). Situations, writes [Gee \(2005\)](#), may be understood as networks of seven inter-related areas: identities; social relationships; activities; significance; connections; politics; and sign systems/knowledge. Thus, when an actor communicates, he or she embodies an identity, establishes social relationships, performs an activity, and so forth. Knowledge of situation types and appropriate ways of building and acting in situations is stored in the cultural repertoires of actors' social groups. Novice members gain the knowledge in their groups' repertoires both through overt instruction and through “legitimate peripheral participation” ([Lave & Wenger, 1991](#)) in the group's efforts to build and act in situations. Crucially, members must learn to adapt knowledge of situations to suit the particularities of new conjunctions of space and time. When adaptations are recognized by others as legitimate—never a sure thing—the group's knowledge of situations changes.

In order to build situations, communicants adapt and circulate their groups' discourses, or ways of understanding the world and representing the world ([Fairclough, 2003](#); [Foucault, 1972](#)). To build the situation “activists petitioning government officials,” for instance, Amnesty members adapt and mobilize a discourse of universal legal rights. This discourse offers writers ways of building the seven areas of situations: people are individuals with rights (identities); all are equal under international law (social relationships); fair trials are entitlements (significance); and so forth ([Evans, 2005](#); [Mutua, 2008](#)).

Actors learn to fit discourses to specific situations by learning the genres their groups employ. Genres are understood here both as “rhetorical habitats” in which communicants recognize situations and as “rhetorical habits” by which communicants build and act in the situations they recognize ([Bawarshi, 2003](#), p. 113; see also [Bazerman, 1988](#); [Collin, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c](#); [Kamberelis, 1999](#); [Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999](#); [Miller, 1984](#)). Thus, genres help actors discover which discourses to mobilize in a situation, how to adapt those discourses, and how to build the situation's seven areas (identities, relationships, activities, etc.). Genres are also the *means* by which discourses are fit to situations, identities are embodied, relationships are forged, and so forth. For instance, the Urgent Action Letter has been developed by members of Amnesty as a genre that evokes and drives forward the situation “activists petitioning government officials.” Furthermore, the genre elicits the use of a discourse of universal legal rights and prompts writers to figure themselves as activists (identities), express solidarity with the oppressed (relationships), and call upon government officials to uphold international law (actions). Writers may build situations by using terms and constructions typical of the genre (e.g., writers may identify themselves as activists by writing “Amnesty International” under their signatures). Crucially, however, individuals are not *forced* to use generic conventions to act as a genre calls them to act. They may try to mobilize different discourses and build the situation in different ways.

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