



LETTER TO MY TEENAGE SELF

Melbourne teenager Grace Halphen had a tough time transitioning to high school – she struggled to make friends and fit in. When she realised that this is a common experience, she wondered why she'd felt so alone. At thirteen, Grace embarked on a project to contact all the Australian public figures she admires, asking them to provide advice to help teenagers navigate the inevitable ups and downs of adolescence.

In *Letter to My Teenage Self*, more than 50 prominent Australians write heartfelt letters to their younger selves, passing on the wisdom they wish they'd had at the time. From learning to laugh at yourself (Adam Gilchrist), realising that the qualities that make you stand out are the ones that makes you *so rad* (Missy Higgins), not letting the negatives shape who you become (Guy Sebastian), practising gratitude (Nathan Buckley), and the reassurance that you'll get over anger about people treating you badly because you'll get better at treating yourself well (Judith Lucy), *Letter to My Teenage Self* provides inspiration and reassurance for parents and teenagers alike.

Study notes written by
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STUDY NOTES

WRITING EXERCISES

Note: While this book is appropriate for readers aged 12+, some letters touch on issues such as bullying, mental health, sexuality, and drug and alcohol experimentation.

- Write a letter to your 30-year-old self, and then try to imagine being that age and write a reply from them to you. What kind of advice might they have for you?
- Many teenagers – probably a majority – experience some form of body image issues. It’s hard for everyone to move from childhood through puberty. And some of the letter-writers are no exception: they had insecurities about everything from their teeth to height to a bad haircut. Let’s turn this around. What do you like most about your body? Why do you like it so much? Write about it.
- All of the letters and letter-writers are different in many ways, but it’s interesting that many, if not most, say three things:
 - 1) Whatever you’re going through as a teenager gets better as you get older.
 - 2) You can always learn from your mistakes – there’s no such thing as failure.
 - 3) Follow your dreams and stay true to yourself.

All of these things are tied together. If you follow your dreams, you’re going to experience all kinds of twists and turns and roadblocks along the way, and you’ll make mistakes that you’ll learn from. But if you follow your dreams and stay true to yourself, it’s almost certain that things will get better for you, in whatever way that happens to be. What is your dream for your future right now? Write down ten points on how you can pursue this dream.



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- A couple of letter-writers, including David Koch and Elliot Costello, talk about how important adult role models were to them. Write about the adult you admire the most and what they mean to you – it can be anyone from a teacher to a YouTube star to a fictional character on your favourite TV show.
- The editor of this book, Grace Halphen, decided to put it together partly because she had a difficult time moving from primary school to high school. How is high school different from primary school? Write a paragraph about your first week in high school and what stood out to you as being different, scary, exciting or fun. Then write a paragraph about how your first week after high school – possibly your first week at uni, TAFE or your first job – might work out. Where would you like to be and what would you like to be doing? (Try to take this seriously and not write about a week of lying around eating chocolate!)

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH EXERCISES

- Many of the letter-writers experienced bullying as teenagers, including Missy Higgins, Judith Lucy, Jo Stanley and Justin Heazlewood. Comedian Fiona Scott-Norman had a particularly bad experience: ‘Your nickname is “Spider”, nearly everyone at school teases you, you’re a foot taller than all the boys, and it’s horrible being the most unpopular kid out of nearly 2000 students.’ But, she goes on to add, ‘school will be over before you know it and, despite your fear, “deeply unpopular” isn’t your brand for life. It also transpires that your giraffe-like legs are a drawcard once you grow into them.’ Bullying is awful and should be cut down wherever it rears its ugly head. These days a lot of bullying takes place on social media. What kind of policies does your school have to combat bullying? Have a talk about this as a class.
- What does it mean to be ‘cool’? Some people might say that flaunting fancy cars, handbags, brand names and lots of money while putting other people down is cool – but not the letter-writers in this book. Adam Gilchrist talks about the importance of respecting everyone, no matter how different they might

seem: they're all human beings like you. Erik Thomson believes that 'to give true depth and meaning to your life, you must develop an acute sense of compassion and service to others'. Many others talk about how things that made them stand out when they were teenagers, like their creativity and intelligence, led to success and 'coolness' later in life. Lisa Mitchell used to worry that she didn't look anything like an American TV star, but now she realises that she was a 'dark horse waiting to bloom'. And Missy Higgins says that:

Right now there are moments when it feels like you're never going to belong anywhere, right? That you're just too different? That no one could possibly understand a freaky alien like you? Well, just know this: some day in the not-too-distant future you'll realise that those qualities make you SO RAD. Seriously. Possibly even the exact things you're being teased for right now at school are the exact things that will gain you respect and many-a-high-five once you're out into the real world.

Have a class discussion about what being cool and what being a good person mean to you.

- Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression affect many Australians. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'In 2014–15 there were 4.0 million Australians (17.5%) who reported having a mental or behavioural condition' (www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/C0A4290EF1E7E7FDCA257F1E001C0B84?Opendocument). Four million of us! And that's just in one year – think of all the adults who must have experienced mental health issues in the past and who are now healthier, including some of the letter-writers. So if you're experiencing mental health issues, you're far from alone. The good news is that you can go to trusted adults for help, and help is also available from programs such as Headspace (<http://headspace.org.au>), Youth Beyond Blue (www.youthbeyondblue.com/home) and the Kids Helpline (<https://kidshelpline.com.au>). As Nick Lee advises in his letter, 'Too much

stress can lead to health problems. Don't keep things bottled up – let them go.' What do you know about anxiety and depression? Do some research into both of these common illnesses and discuss them as a class.

- Some of the letter-writers talk about being pressured by their peers into doing things that they might not have done on their own. Have you ever heard about 'peer pressure' being a problem for teenagers? The truth is that peer pressure doesn't go away after high school: there will always be pressure from others to do things their way or to be more like them. Even your teachers in the staffroom might be putting peer pressure on each other sometimes! But as some letter-writers point out, peer pressure is very intense in high school when you spend so much time with people your age and often your gender, with little choice about which school you attend and whose class you're in, rather than in the workplace where a whole variety of people come together by choice. Have you ever felt pressured into doing something by a friend or classmate? What are some good strategies to cope with peer pressure? Discuss them as a class.
- All proceeds from *Letter to My Teenage Self* are going to the Reach Foundation. From their website, www.reach.org.au: 'Reach supports young people to get the most out of life. We aim to improve the wellbeing of young people so they can be healthy and resilient to meet life's challenges, and fulfil their potential.' As a class, take a look at the Reach website. Who founded Reach? What kind of work does Reach do to help young Australians? You might even want to try joining the Reach crew of 16 to 25 year olds.

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