

Using Email to Encourage Authentic Writing

by **Connie Belanger**

Teaching authentic reading and writing has become easier for those instructors with Internet access. When students communicate with other students using email; they are practicing reading, writing, speaking and listening (to instructions) in ways that connect them with world events and draw a link between school work and the technological world we live in.

To use email as a teaching tool, it is necessary to get the students an email address and get them connected to cyberspace penpals, called "keypals". There are a number of ways to get your students an email address - a list of free email services can be found at: <http://members.tripod.com/~Lighthizer/index-11.html>

Once the students are signed up with an email address, they will need someone to write to, and there are a number of "keypal" sites on the Internet which will find the user a penpal, or "keypal" to write to. By running a search for "keypals" you should come up with a number of sites, but one such site is KeyPals! at: <http://www.ziplink.net/users/tlipcon/keypals/>

For older students, there is even a site online where you can register to be matched with "Senior Keypals". It's a good idea to check out the email and keypal sites and print out a copy of the registration pages to practice with in the regular classroom, before the students do this in the computer lab.

Where there are a limited number of computers, students could work in groups for this activity. Have each group apply for an email address, and let the students write group letters to their keypals.

While you are waiting for the students to receive information about their keypals, have them practice writing email letters, both in the classroom and using a word processor. In this way they will have some hard copy to work with the first time they send email in the lab.

This allows you more time to work with using the email program in your first class attempt, and creates less pressure on any students who may be nervous about this exercise.

Bring in some authentic printouts of email to demonstrate the style and show the students that email tends to be less formal than regular letter writing. Create some examples of these messages, if necessary. (You can even email us here at CONNECT and we will respond to provide you with some authentic examples.)

Also, it is wise to teach the students some self-defence techniques before they start writing to keypals. For example, never give your full name, telephone number or address to a stranger on the Internet, and never send pictures of yourself. (It doesn't matter that you are all adults, you don't know the person on the other keyboard!)

If students want to send a class picture to another class, of course, this is different than sending a complete stranger your personal information. These precautions will help protect the privacy and security of your students.

Once you are ready to start writing, the students may feel that they have nothing interesting to write about.

- * Working in groups can help break the ice for the first encounter.
- * Have the students write down information about your city or town. They can make a list of some of the interesting places there are to visit, or what the weather is like during the different seasons.
- * Students can interview each other for mini-biographies (again, don't put in too much personal information). Biographies can include descriptions, favourite hobbies, likes and dislikes, family recipes, etc.
- * Many instructors and students prefer to enter the text into a wordprocessing program first to run a spell check and make editing changes. In this case, just save, then copy and paste the text into the email letter. This is easier for many students than learning how to attach or import files.
- * Email files can be printed out for students who would like to keep hard copies of their correspondence.