

# Inquiry Activities for the American Writers Museum's *American Voices* Exhibit

These activities draw upon the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning, which is a **collaborative search for answers to meaningful questions**.

Shared Inquiry is a **teaching stance** that emphasizes:

- Genuine curiosity and divergent thinking
- Open-ended questioning
- Students listening to and learning from each other
- Civil discourse, even when disagreement is strong

When conducting any of these activities, focus on modeling curiosity and asking questions about students' ideas, rather than validating or paraphrasing responses. It's also helpful to encourage students to ask each other questions and respond directly to one another.

For more about Shared Inquiry, see the video found [here](#).

## Activity Options



**Big Ideas: Exploring exhibit themes**



**Connect and Compare: Making and analyzing a text connection to exhibit content**



**Author's Craft: Close reading of a text excerpt connected to the exhibit**



**Written Response: Writing about ideas connected to exhibit materials and concepts**  
**(Think Like a Writer and Historical Context options)**

**Note:** You may choose to link the Author's Craft and Written Response activities by having students write in response to an author's craft exploration.

## Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.
2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.
3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.
4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.

## About the Great Books Foundation

Founded in 1947, the Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that creates reading and discussion programs for students and adults with the conviction that literacy and critical thinking help form reflective and well-informed citizens.

For more about us, visit [greatbooks.org](http://greatbooks.org).



# Activities for *American Voices: The New Nation*

Louisa May Alcott

## Big Ideas

### Activity Summary

Students explore a theme or concept relevant to the exhibit.

#### Student learning objectives

- To activate and build background knowledge related to the exhibit
- To deepen connections to important ideas in the exhibit

**Time needed:** 10–15 minutes per question

#### Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) one of the suggested questions to explore.
2. Choose whether to have students share their ideas verbally (in pairs or small groups) or in writing.
3. If desired, have students share their ideas in a larger group and/or extend their written response.

### Suggested Questions

- Why do some fictional characters stay with you after reading about them? What character from fiction has been especially important to you?
- What does self-reliance mean to you? What do you think is positive about self-reliance, and what about it can become a problem?
- Why do you think that Jo March's "bad temper and burning ambition" have influenced so many writers and public figures?

### Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
- 3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.**
- 4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.**

# Connect and Compare

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## Activity Summary

Students make and explore a text connection to exhibit information and concepts.

### Student learning objectives

- To identify and articulate a significant text connection to exhibit content
- To explore different ways of connecting to exhibit content by sharing responses

**Time needed:** 25–35 minutes

### Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) whether to brainstorm ideas verbally before writing.
2. Share the graphic organizer with students (see page 6). If needed, model how you would begin to complete the organizer (see the example on page 5).
3. Have students share and compare their completed graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.

## Suggested Connection Prompt

In the exhibit, children’s book historian Leonard S. Marcus describes *Little Women* as an “enduring family story.” What is another novel you think has a powerful focus on family relationships? What is similar and different about this novel and *Little Women*?

## Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
- 3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.**
- 4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.**

## Connect and Compare

### Example

### Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

In the exhibit, children's book historian Leonard S. Marcus describes *Little Women* as an "enduring family story." What is another novel you think has a powerful focus on family relationships? What is similar and different about this novel and *Little Women*?

#### Novel you connect with *Little Women*: *Julia Alvarez, How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay*

<p><b>Where and when is this novel set?</b></p> <p>Early 2000s; Vermont, New York City, Dominican Republic</p>	<p><b>What kinds of challenges does the family in this novel face? List as many as you can.</b></p> <p>Parents are getting divorced</p> <p>Tía Lola comes from the Dominican Republic and lives with Miguel, his sister, and his mother</p> <p>Family has to get used to living in Vermont after living in New York City</p> <p>Miguel has trouble making friends at his new school</p>
<p><b>How well do the family members get along? What do they learn in the novel?</b></p> <p>Miguel and his sister, Juanita, fight a lot, and at first, Miguel doesn't want Tía Lola to live with them. In the end, Miguel and Juanita are able to get along better, and Miguel learns to appreciate Tía Lola. Everyone in the family ends up being happy in Vermont and visiting Miguel's father in New York City.</p>	<p><b>How does this novel compare to <i>Little Women</i>?</b></p> <p><b>Most similar:</b></p> <p>Family goes through hard times together and learns to get along better</p> <p>Some funny things and some sad things happen</p> <p>Relationship between siblings is important</p> <p><b>Most different:</b></p> <p>Family is American but has important ties to Dominican Republic and visits there</p> <p>Miguel's parents get divorced</p> <p>Members of the family speak both English and Spanish</p>

What do you think is the most significant similarity between *Little Women* and the novel you connected it with? *The families in both books have some hard times but learn to get along better.*

What do you think is the most significant difference between *Little Women* and the novel you connected it with? *The family in Tía Lola moves around the country more and speaks two languages.*

# Connect and Compare

## Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

In the exhibit, children's book historian Leonard S. Marcus describes *Little Women* as an "enduring family story." What is another novel you think has a powerful focus on family relationships? What is similar and different about this novel and *Little Women*?

Novel you connect with *Little Women*: \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>Where and when is this novel set?</b></p>	<p><b>What kinds of challenges does the family in this novel face? List as many as you can.</b></p>
<p><b>How well do the family members get along? What do they learn in the novel?</b></p>	<p><b>How does this novel compare to <i>Little Women</i>?</b></p> <p><b>Most similar:</b></p>  <p><b>Most different:</b></p>

What do you think is the most significant similarity between *Little Women* and the novel you connected it with? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What do you think is the most significant difference between *Little Women* and the novel you connected it with? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Author's Craft

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## Activity Summary

Students read a text excerpt, mark it using a note-taking prompt, and complete a graphic organizer documenting their responses.

### Student learning objectives

- To explore a literary element used in a text important to the exhibit
- To analyze how the author's choices affect the reader's experience

**Time needed:** 25–35 minutes

### Instructions

1. Share the graphic organizer (page 9) and text excerpt (pages 10–11) with students; if needed, model how you would mark a specific part of the text and how you would note it on the graphic organizer.
2. Have students read the text excerpt and mark it with their notes, then review their notes and complete the graphic organizer.
3. If desired, have students share and compare their graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.

## Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
- 3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.**
- 4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.**



As you read the excerpt from *Little Women*, mark places where a character's words or actions show what she is feeling. Note two to three feelings for each character.

Character	Character's words or actions	Feeling(s) shown
Jo		
Meg		
Amy		
Beth	<p>Says she wants to buy slippers for Marmee</p> <p>"Let's each get her something for Christmas"</p> <p>Lets the bread burn while she watches her sisters rehearse their play</p>	<p>Kindness and sympathy for her mom</p> <p>Happy to get her sisters involved in her plan</p> <p>Excited and not paying attention</p>

Which character's feelings do you connect with most, and why? I connect most with Beth's feelings because she cares about people and is kind of shy. She wants her sisters to join in getting a gift for Marmee, but she'd rather watch the play than be in it.



# Author's Craft

As you read the excerpt from *Little Women*, mark places where a character's words or actions show what she is feeling. Note two to three feelings for each character.

Character	Character's words or actions	Feeling(s) shown
Jo		
Meg		
Amy		
Beth		

Which character's feelings do you connect with most, and why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

## Chapter 1: Playing Pilgrims (excerpt)

The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her. Meg stopped lecturing, and lit the lamp, Amy got out of the easy-chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze.

“They are quite worn out; Marmee must have a new pair.”

“I thought I’d get her some with my dollar,” said Beth.

“No, I shall!” cried Amy.

“I’m the oldest,” began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided—

“I’m the man of the family now Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone.”

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” said Beth, “let’s each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves.”

“That’s like you, dear! What will we get?” exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought soberly for a minute; then Meg announced, as if the idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, “I shall give her a nice pair of gloves.”

“Army shoes, best to be had,” cried Jo.

“Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed,” said Beth.

“I’ll get her a little bottle of Cologne; she likes it, and it won’t cost much, so I’ll have some left to buy something for me,” added Amy.

“How will we give the things?” asked Meg.

“Put ‘em on the table, and bring her in and see her open the bundles. Don’t you remember how we used to do on our birthdays?” answered Jo.

“I used to be so frightened when it was my turn to sit in the big chair with a crown on, and see you all come marching round to give the presents, with a kiss. I liked the things and the kisses, but it was dreadful to have you sit looking at me while I opened the bundles,” said Beth, who was toasting her face and the bread for tea, at the same time.

“Let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping to-morrow afternoon, Meg; there is lots to do about the play for Christmas night,” said Jo, marching up and down with her hands behind her back, and her nose in the air.

“I don’t mean to act any more after this time; I’m getting too old for such things,” observed Meg, who was as much a child as ever about “dressing up” frolics.

“You won’t stop, I know, as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. You are the best actress we’ve got, and there’ll be an end of everything if you quit the boards,” said Jo. “We ought to rehearse tonight; come here, Amy, and do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that.”

“I can’t help it; I never saw anyone faint, and I don’t choose to make myself all black and blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can go down easily, I’ll drop; if I can’t, I shall fall into a chair and be graceful; I don’t care if Hugo does come at me with a pistol,” returned Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was chosen because she was small enough to be borne out shrieking by the hero of the piece.

“Do it this way; clasp your hands so, and stagger across the room, crying frantically, ‘Roderigo! save me! save me!’” and away went Jo, with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling.

Amy followed, but she poked her hands out stiffly before her, and jerked herself along as if she went by machinery; and her “Ow!” was more suggestive of pins being run into her than of fear and anguish. Jo gave a despairing groan, and Meg laughed outright, while Beth let her bread burn as she watched the fun, with interest.

Then things went smoothly, for Don Pedro defied the world in a speech of two pages without a single break; Hagar, the witch, chanted an awful incantation over her kettleful of simmering toads, with weird effect; Roderigo rent his chains asunder manfully, and Hugo died in agonies of remorse and arsenic, with a wild “Ha! ha!”

“It’s the best we’ve had yet,” said Meg, as the dead villain sat up and rubbed his elbows.

“I don’t see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You’re a regular Shakespeare!” exclaimed Beth, who firmly believed that her sisters were gifted with wonderful genius in all things.

“Not quite,” replied Jo, modestly. “I do think *The Witch’s Curse, an Operatic Tragedy* is rather a nice thing; but I’d like to try *Macbeth*, if we only had a trapdoor for Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. “Is that a dagger that I see before me?” muttered Jo, rolling her eyes and clutching at the air, as she had seen a famous tragedian do.

“No, it’s the toasting fork, with Ma’s shoe on it instead of the bread. Beth’s stage-struck!” cried Meg, and the rehearsal ended in a general burst of laughter.

# Written Response

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## Activity Summary

Students write about ideas connected to exhibit materials and concepts.

### Student learning objectives

- To respond creatively to exhibit materials and concepts
- To develop an individual voice in writing and use it to share ideas that are personally significant

**Time needed:** 25–35 minutes

### Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) the Think Like a Writer or Historical Context option to write about.
2. Have students use the appropriate planning sheet (page 14 or 16) to plan their work.
3. If desired, have students share and compare their graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.
4. Have students complete their writing on a computer or in a notebook.

## Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
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# Think Like a Writer

## Example

### Showing a Character's Feelings

Authors have many ways of letting readers know what characters are feeling: what they say, what their facial expressions are, how they move, and even how they dress. Using the planning sheet below, make notes for a scene where one or more characters' words or actions show feelings. Then write the scene.

#### Planning your scene

What format will you write in (prose, drama, poetry)? *Prose*

If writing in prose, will it be written in the first, second, or third person? *Third person*

Who is the main character? If the character is from a book, film, or other media, include that information. *Bilbo Baggins from The Hobbit*

What feelings will this character show? List at least two. *Exhaustion and contentment*

What will happen in the scene? *Bilbo gets home from a long trip and has dinner with a friend.*

Where is the scene set (time and place)? *Bilbo's hobbit hole, Middle-earth, imaginary time*

#### Need some inspiration? Try doing one or more of the following:

- Brainstorm your scene with a partner.
- Imagine how a friend or family member might describe the character.
- Make the facial expressions you think the character would in the scene. How would you describe those expressions in words?
- Imagine the sound of the character's voice. Is it high-pitched or low? Loud or soft?

The road was long, dark, and wet. "Drat!" exclaimed Bilbo as his walking staff again sank into the gooey mud of the pathway. He moved his pack to the other shoulder and groaned a little. It was hard to keep his eyes open, and his clothes were damp from the drizzle. He felt that he wanted to lie down by the side of the road, never mind the icy puddles, and sleep. "But not much farther now," he said under his breath.

At last he saw some light through the bare tree branches ahead. It was the window of his hobbit hole! And even better, the door was opening!

Bilbo's friend Sam Gamgee stood at the door with a lantern, trying to see down the road. "Sam!" yelled Bilbo. "Hope you have a fire going!"

"Not just a fire, I have stew ready too," said Sam. "You must be half frozen! You've been walking all day."

Bilbo reached the door and immediately took off his boots, sighing with relief. He held his chapped hands in front of the fire, warming them. The rich smell of the stew made his stomach rumble.

As Bilbo and Sam sat at the table and ate their stew and crusty bread, Bilbo smiled for what seemed like the first time in ages. "Thanks for welcoming me home, Sam," Bilbo said. "I don't think I could have walked another step. And stew has never tasted this good!"

# Think Like a Writer

## Showing a Character's Feelings

Authors have many ways of letting readers know what characters are feeling: what they say, what their facial expressions are, how they move, and even how they dress. Using the planning sheet below, make notes for a scene where one or more characters' words or actions show feelings. Then write the scene.

### Planning your scene

What format will you write in (prose, drama, poetry)? \_\_\_\_\_

If writing in prose, will it be written in the first, second, or third person? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the main character? If the character is from a book, film, or other media, include that information. \_\_\_\_\_

What feelings will this character show? \_\_\_\_\_

What will happen in the scene? \_\_\_\_\_

Where is the scene set (time and place)? \_\_\_\_\_

### Need some inspiration? Try doing one or more of the following:

- Brainstorm your scene with a partner.
- Imagine how a friend or family member might describe the character.
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## Historical Context

### Example

### Louisa May Alcott

Which of Louisa May Alcott's actions that is described in the exhibit do you admire the most, and why?

Your answer to the question (your thesis statement): *I most admire Louisa May Alcott for being a Civil War nurse.*

Reason 1: *It was a choice to be a nurse. She didn't have to do it.*

Reason 2: *She did it when she was pretty young, and probably saw some hard things.*

Reason 3: *She also wrote about being a nurse.*

Write a paragraph using your reasons to back up your thesis statement.

*Louisa May Alcott did a lot of surprising things in her life. She wrote Little Women, one of the most famous children's novels of her time. But the most admirable thing she did was work as a nurse during the Civil War. She chose to do this when she didn't have to. At the time, women who could afford not to work outside the home usually didn't. Louisa May Alcott was in her 20s when she worked as a nurse. Since so many soldiers got badly hurt in the war, she probably saw some very hard things. She also wrote about her experiences in a book, Hospital Sketches. This is important because it let more people know what was going on with the soldiers who were hurt in the war.*

# Historical Context

## Louisa May Alcott

Which of Louisa May Alcott's actions that is described in the exhibit do you admire the most, and why?

Your answer to the question (your thesis statement) \_\_\_\_\_

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Reason 1: \_\_\_\_\_

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Reason 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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Reason 3: \_\_\_\_\_

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Write a paragraph using your reasons to back up your thesis statement.

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