

# 1 **An Introduction to the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams**

2 The roughly 1200 letters of correspondence between John and Abigail Adams traces one of the most  
3 fascinating, romantic, and inspirational partnerships in American history. He was her “Lysander” (a  
4 famous Greek military hero) and she was his “Miss Adorable.” More importantly, they were both each  
5 other’s “Dearest Friend.”

6 John and Abigail were incredibly close and their correspondence proves it. The letters, written over 50  
7 years of marriage, reveal a marriage that was full of affection, intimacy, mutual respect, humor, and  
8 love. Additionally, these exchanges provide readers with a unique window into the founding of the  
9 United States and into the lives of two of its founders. Not only was Abigail John Adams’ wife and true  
10 love, she was his intellectual equal and they shared a common outlook on the world. Their letters record  
11 conversations about the American independence and the Revolutionary War, the rights of women and  
12 the immorality of slavery. She was as his primary political advisor and managed their household when  
13 he was often away from home.

14 Following the end of his political career, John and Abigail retired together at their home in  
15 Massachusetts. No more letters were written.

1 **Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams**

2 March 31, 1776

3

4 I long to hear that you have declared an **independency**—and by the way in the  
5 new **Code of Laws** which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire  
6 you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them  
7 than your **ancestors**. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the  
8 Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care  
9 and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a **Rebellion**,  
10 and will not hold ourselves **bound** by any Laws in which we have no voice, or  
11 Representation.

12

13 That your Sex are Naturally **Tyrannical** is a Truth so thoroughly established as to  
14 admit of not dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the  
15 **harsh** title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then,  
16 not put it out of the power of the **vicious** and the Lawless to use us with cruelty  
17 and **indignity** with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs  
18 which treat us only as the **vassals** of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed  
19 by **providence** under your protection and in imitation of the **Supreem Being**  
20 make use of that power only for our happiness.

21

22 *Note: The spelling and language has not been changed.*

23

cruel and oppressive ruler  
encourage or start

disagreement

without regard for others  
hate, despise

1 **Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams**

2 April 14, 1776

3

4 As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that  
5 our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and  
6 **Apprentices** were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown  
7 turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their  
8 Masters.

9

10 But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and  
11 powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. —This is rather too **coarse** a  
12 Compliment but you are so **saucy**, I wont blot it out.

13

14 Depend upon it, We know better than to **repeal** our Masculine systems. Altho they  
15 are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not **exert** our  
16 Power in its full **Latitude**. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in **Practice**  
17 you know We are the **subjects**. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than  
18 give up this, which would completely subject Us to the Despotism of the Petticoat, I  
19 hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every  
20 good Politician would plot, as long he would against Despotism, Empire,  
21 Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy. —

22

23 *Note: The spelling and language has not been changed.*

24

25

unstable/ rebellious

warning

required

women ruling as tyrants; a  
petticoat is an underskirt

forms of government where  
many groups of people are  
treated unfairly

## Text-Dependent Questions

Name of Text: **Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776; Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776**

Question Composers: Temoca Dixon and Marcia Motter

Nevade State Standards: H2.[6-8].13

CCSS: RHST.6-8.1, RHST.6-8.2, RHST.6-8.6, RHST.6-8.10; WHST.6-8.2, WHST.6-8.9; SL.7.1, SL.7.2; L.7.1

Questions in Finalized Order	Teacher Notes and Possible Answers
<p>Reread both letters. As you are reading, underline, circle, or highlight the words that are spelled incorrectly.</p> <p>Talk with a partner and consider why these words might have been spelled differently in these two letters.</p>	<p>Letter 1: perticular , Laidies, <b>Rebellion, Supreem</b> Letter 2: Colledges, powerfull, wont, Altho, <b>Peticoat</b></p> <p><i>Teacher's Note: Noah Webster published the first American English Dictionary in 1828. The dictionary formalized the spelling of words, modified British spellings (ie: colour to color/ centre to center/ wagon to wagon) and added American words like "skunk" and "squash." Webster's work formalized the spelling of words in American English.</i></p>
<p>Who wrote the first letter and to whom was it written? Who wrote the second letter and to whom was it written? About how much time has pass between the writing of the two letters?</p>	<p>Letter 1, Line 1 – Abigail Adams to John Adams Letter 2, Line 1- John Adams to Abigail Adam Letter 1, Line 2 compared to Letter 2, Line 2= about 2 weeks</p> <p><i>Students consider the sources and the time period in which these two letters were written. They will notice that it is correspondence between a husband and wife and that the time between the letters is about two weeks. They also might notice the year, 1776, and that it is close to the date of the declaration of American Independence.</i></p>
<p>Abigail Adams is expressing her hope that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Continental Congress will declare American independence from Great Britain. What is she hoping for in this declaration?</p> <p>What evidence from the text describes her hopes for “an independency”? What evidence from the text describes her concerns if her hopes are not addressed?</p>	<p>Line 5-7: I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.</p> <p>Line 7-8: unlimited power would not be put into the hands of Husbands, all men would be tyrants if they could</p> <p>Line 9: if women are not paid attention too, they will “foment a Rebellion” and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”</p> <p><i>The connection she makes to American independence and women’s’ rights is the primary claim within her letter. It sets the tone for the rest of her letter and</i></p>

Questions in Finalized Order

Teacher Notes and Possible Answers

	<p><i>for the response by her husband, John Adams in the second letter. Students will recognize that Abigail Adams was an early advocate for women's rights.</i></p>
<p>In line 8, Abigail Adams claims that “all Men would be tyrants if they could” and that it is a truth “so thoroughly established” that it is indisputable (lines 13-14). In the second paragraph (lines 13-20), what solutions does she offer for solving this “thoroughly established problem?”</p>	<p>Line 14-15: give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend.                  Line 18-20: Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.</p> <p>She pleads that Master become a friend and that if men would only imitate God, they would use their power only to make women happy.</p>
<p>In Abigail's letter on line 18, what words could be substituted for “your Sex?”</p>	<p>your manliness, your gender, your masculinity</p>
<p>On line 16, Abigail Adams writes that “it” should be “put out of power.” What is <i>it</i>, and how does she refer to <i>it</i> throughout her letter?</p>	<p>It refers to:                  Line 7: men's unlimited power, Line 8: men's tyrannical behavior                  She refers to it in several instances:                  Line 13: men are Naturally Tyrannical, Line 15: Masters, Line 16: vicious and Lawless, Line 18: they consider women vassals</p> <p><i>This question generates several examples of men's tyrannical behavior. From this, students will be able to recognize the strong and negative opinion Abigail has of the way husbands treat their wives, men treat the ladies.</i></p>
<p>The word <b>providence</b> (line 19) describes the idea of being placed under the care and guidance of God. What words or phrases in the second paragraph illustrate this idea?</p> <p>What words or phrases from the same paragraph describe the opposite idea of providence?</p> <p>Now consider the evidence you gathered and write two sentences describing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The way Abigail Adams believes men treat women</li> <li>2. The way Abigail Adams believes women should be treated by men</li> </ol>	<p><u>Ideas describing providence:</u> Line 15 “endearing one of Friend,” Line 18-19 “regard us as Beings placed by providence under your protection” Line 19-20 “imitate the Supreme Being, make use of that power for women's happiness.</p> <p><u>Ideas describing the opposite:</u> Line 13 “Tyrannical,” Line “harsh title of Master,” Line 16, “power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity.” Line 18 “vassals of your Sex”</p> <p>Sentences should include evidence from the text (listed above). While students might not know the concrete meaning of words like vassal or even Master (the</p>

Questions in Finalized Order

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	<p>reference to slavery makes it more familiar within the context of the Colonial period), they should be able to infer their meanings based on their comparisons and rich classroom discussion of the textual ideas.</p>
<p>In the second letter, John Adams responds to his wife’s demand to “remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors (Line 6-7).” First, though, he qualifies the impact of the “Struggle” (line 5) on other groups in colonial America. Using evidence from Abigail’s letter, what “Struggle” is he referring to? What groups are listed and what have they done to “loosen the bands of Government everywhere?”</p>	<p>Adams is referring to Abigail’s longing to hear that independence has been declared (Letter #1: Line 4)            Lines 5-6: Children and Apprentices were disobedient            Lines 6-7: schools and Colledges were grown turbulent            Line 7: Indians slighted their Guardians            Lines 7-8: Negros grew insolent to their masters</p>
<p>Reread lines 10-12. What “Tribe” is Adams referring to?</p> <p>What words does he use to describe this tribe?</p> <p>Based on this evidence, what do you think is John Adams personal belief about this tribe?</p>	<p>Line 10: “But your Letter” refers the reader back to the Abigail’s letter to “remember the Ladies.” The Tribe he is referring to is American Ladies.</p> <p>Line 10: this Tribe is more numerous, more powerful and it has grown discontented.</p>
<p>In line 12, John uses the word <b>saucy</b> to describe Abigail. Synonyms for <b>saucy</b> range from disrespectful and rude to smart, bold and sassy. What meaning is John ascribing to Abigail? Using evidence in the texts to support your answer.</p>	<p>Smart, Bold, and Sassy are the best synonyms.            Students may point out any of the following ideas to support their answer:</p> <p><b>Letter 1:</b> The subject of her letter is bold! She is making requests of her husband and his political life that are absolutely radical in 1776. Abigail is not fearful of telling her husband that men are tyrants (line 8 and 13), that he should “remember the ladies” (line 6), that women are so determined that a rebellion will be “fomented” (line 9). In the second paragraph, Abigail shows that she is smart as she compares men’s natural inclinations with expectations placed upon them by providence or the Supreme Being. Students should be given ample time to discover the comparisons Abigail makes and how her ideas illuminate her own intelligence and confidence.</p> <p><b>Letter 2:</b> Lines 4-12 layout an image of Abigail taking the ideas of the revolution to extremes. John builds upon supposed demands made by other groups and “cannot but laugh” (line 4) at his wife’s demand to “remember the ladies.” However, in the second paragraph John goes on to illustrate that women are, in many ways, ultimately the more powerful sex by admitting that</p>

Questions in Finalized Order

Teacher Notes and Possible Answers

	<p>“masculine systems” “are little more than Theory”(line 15), that “we are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in practice you know we are the subjects” (line 16-17) and finally that men only have the “name of master” (line 17). Students should work through this to understand that John recognizes Abigail’s bold, smart intelligence and plays along with it.</p>
<p>In line 14 John claims that “We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems” (line 14). This describes the social, political, and intellectual power of men in Colonial America. However, John contrasts this claim with the idea of the “Despotism of the Petticoat.”</p> <p>What words and phrases does John use to describe “Masculine Systems?”</p> <p>How does John contrast the power of the “Masculine Systems” to the “Despotism of the Petticoat?”</p>	<p><b>Masculine Systems:</b> Line 14-15: They are in full force, you know they are little more than Theory, dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude, Line 17-19: We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give this up... I hope George Washington and all his brave Heroes would fight 19-20: I am sure every good politician would plot, as long as he would against despotism...</p> <p><b>Despotism of the Petticoat:</b> Line 15: [they systems] are little more than Theory Line 16-17: We are obliged to go fair, and softly and in Practice you know, we are the subjects Line 17-18 if we gave up the name of Masters, we could be completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat.</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> By exploring these ideas and the contrast between the two examples of power, students will come understand different qualities of these letters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First, they will recognize that Masculine systems actually do control the public sphere but that women do hold a form of power over their husbands that requires men to be fair and soft and considerate to their wives.</li> <li>• Second, they might recognize the playful and friendly interaction between John and Abigail.</li> <li>• Third, John never really acknowledges Abigail’s demands. Though the writing may be light, John also understands that women’s rights are not the objective of the Revolution and gives her no assurance that her demands will ever be addressed.</li> </ul>
<p>In writing, “tone” describes the general attitude or mood of the writer being expressed through their writing. In John’s letter to Abigail, which word best describes his tone: condescending, playful, severe, or lighthearted? List evidence from the text that supports the word you chose. Explain why you selected the word you did to a partner.</p> <p>Is there a phrase you selected that could be used to support a different description of John’s tone in his letter to Abigail? Explain your answer.</p>	<p>Playful or lighthearted are words that best describe John Adam’s tone.</p> <p><b>Line 4:</b> as to your “Extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh.” (Synonyms for extraordinary are remarkable, exceptional, amazing, stunning, phenomenal- John is responding positively to Abigail even though he won’t pursue her demands).</p> <p><b>Lines 10-11:</b> “your letter was the first intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented” Here, John is referring to women as the most numerous and powerful group with revolutionary interests but also notes that he won’t blot out this compliment he just paid her even though it was rather coarse/ insensitive.</p> <p><b>Lines 14-21:</b> He spends this last paragraph identifying the ways in which women do have power in society- he is illustrating men’s dependency on their wives and contrasting that with men’s need to maintain the power that they do have through their “Masculine systems” and finally compares the Despotism of the Petticoat to other forms of unjust governments and the commitment of Washington and all brave heroes to fight against.</p>

### **Writing Prompt:**

Abigail Adams was one of the first women in American society to advocate for women's equality. According to these two letters, what did Abigail Adam believe about the position and plight of women in colonial America?

Write a paragraph describing Abigail's beliefs about women in colonial America. Use at least three pieces of evidence from the letters to support your claim. Be sure to cite the evidence correctly by using line numbers (Lines 3-4) at the end of the sentence. Your paragraph must include one quotation (4-7 words) and one paraphrase. Connect the evidence to the claim with reasoning that explains the evidence.

### **Checklist identifying key points that will assist in measuring student success and/or difficulty with the close reading and/or writing prompt**

#### **Letter 1:**

Line 6-7: She implores John to remember the ladies and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.

Lines 7-8: men have unlimited power, they choose tyranny,

Line 9-20: if not heard women will foment rebellion and not hold themselves bound by laws in which they have no voice

Line 13-17: men are tyrannical, unwilling to give up power, and some treat women viciously, with cruelty, indignity and with impunity.

Line 15- 20: A Man/husband should be tender and endearing friend to his wife. Husbands should realize they are placed under the care of their husbands by providence/ the Supreme Being and should be protected and made happy by them.

#### **Letter 2:**

From this letter, some students will infer through John's response that she was treated as an equal in her marriage. She felt confident and unafraid about speaking her mind to him about her convictions. She wanted this for all women and felt that equality for women should be recognized in the new "Code of Laws" being written for a new nation.

#### **In their writing students should:**

- Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories
- Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, and quotations
- Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone
- Provide a concluding statement that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented
- Quotations are cited correctly using line numbers from the text (Lines 8-9) at the end of the quote.

#### **Sample Answer:**

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The letters from the spring of 1776 between John and Abigail Adams reveal Abigail's beliefs about women's equality in colonial America before the revolution. In Abigail's letter, she implores her husband to "Remember the Ladies" and to be "more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors" as he prepares to write a new code of laws for a new independent nation (Line 6.) This shows that Abigail considers it a good time for her to assert her convictions for women's equality because beliefs about equality were expanding in the colonies. Abigail also understands that men like their power and are unwilling to give it up. She argues that they are naturally tyrannical and have a tendency to be cruel and vicious and to even treat women like slaves. (Lines 13-18). Though she contrasts these ideas with the notion of being treated tenderly and as a friend, Abigail reveals her thinking that men are also biggest roadblock to change. Finally, Abigail proclaims that if women go on being ignored, they could incite a rebellion against the new code of laws in which they have no hope of being represented by. This demonstrates Abigail's commitment to the idea of women's equality and her zeal to pursue women's equality in the new American Nation.

**These words merit LESS time and attention**  
 (They are concrete and easy to explain, or describe events/ processes/ideas/concepts/experiences that are familiar to your students.)

**These words merit MORE time and attention**  
 (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, and/or are a part of a large family of words with related meanings. These words are likely to describe events, ideas, processes or experiences that most of your student will be unfamiliar with.)

Line #	Word	Definition	Line #	Word	Definition
4	independency	An independent territory, nation, or the like.	9	rebellion	The act of disobeying rules or fighting against authority.
5	Code of Laws	Complete system of laws.	10	bound	Held to by law or duty.
7	ancestors	A person from whom one is descended and who lived several generations ago.	13	tyrannical	Imposing one's will on others by threat or force; despotic; oppressive.
15	harsh	Severe or strict.	17	indignity	Something that offends or injures one's dignity; humiliation or insult.
16	vicious	Likely to be cruel or violent; fierce.	18	vassals	A person in the Middle Ages who was given the use of land in return for loyalty and service to a lord.
19	Supreme Being	God; divine power.	19	providence	Divine guidance, care, or direction.

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams; April 14, 1776

6	apprentices	Someone who works for somebody else to learn that person's skill or trade.	10	intimation	Something hinted at, implied, or subtly revealed.
12	saucy	smart, sassy	11	coarse	Without social skills; crude; vulgar.
14	repeal	To do away with or cancel officially.	16	latitude	The right or power to act and choose freely.
16	exert	To use or put into action; apply.	17	practice	An activity that is the usual way of doing something; rule; habit.
19	petticoat	A skirt worn under an outer skirt; slip. In this case, referring to women.	17	subjects	A person who is controlled by a leader or by a state.
			20	empire	A group of nations or peoples under one ruler or government.
			21	monarchy	A nation or government ruled by or in the name of a monarch (one ruler, like a king or queen).
			21	aristocracy	A class of people who have a high social position because of the family they are born

					into. Members of the aristocracy are usually richer and have more privileges than other members of society.
			21	oligarchy	A government or state in which a few people or a family rule.
			21	ochlocracy	Government by a lawless crowd of people.