# Letters and Limits

Use source details and quotations to test historical claims.

**USH.P.3.1.A** "Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, evaluating features such as author, date, and origin of information."

NAME _____ DATE _____

## 1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

**YOUR JOB** Underline a phrase in each letter that reveals the writer's position, circle each letter's date and place of writing, and number one sentence that explains a limit of the letters as evidence.

### A Private Exchange in 1776

1. In March 1776, while colonists argued about whether to break from Britain, Abigail Adams wrote from Braintree, Massachusetts, to her husband John, a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. On March 31, she asked him to "Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors." She also warned that women would not feel bound by laws in which they had "no voice, or Representation." Her letter gives a direct record of what she asked one powerful delegate. It does not show that Congress discussed her request or that all women agreed with her.

2. John answered Abigail on April 14, 1776, from Philadelphia. He wrote, "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh." Later he declared, "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems." His reply records his reaction to Abigail, not a vote of Congress. Because he was a delegate and her husband, he had both political influence and a personal stake in the exchange. His laughter might signal that he dismissed her demand, but a private letter alone cannot prove how every delegate thought about women's legal rights.

3. In July 1776, Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. It announced that "all men are created equal," but the Adams letters were not part of the Declaration. A classroom historian writing in 2026 might connect the letters to questions about who was included in the new nation's promises. That historian writes long after 1776, whereas Abigail and John wrote during the independence movement. Neither spouse wrote as an official voice of Congress in these letters. Readers can compare the private exchange with public records, but they should not treat one couple's words as a complete record of national opinion.

## 2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What change did Abigail seek? Quote a phrase from her March 31 letter, then explain how its date and place of writing help place her request in the independence movement.

2. What does John's April 14 reply suggest about his position? Quote his words and explain why his role as a delegate does not make this letter an official congressional decision.

3. How might Abigail's letter complicate a reading of the Declaration's claim that “all men are created equal”? Cite words from both sources and explain why their different origins matter.

4. Could a historian writing in 2026 use these letters to prove what all women in 1776 wanted? Cite a phrase from one letter and explain how its author limits that conclusion.

## 3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

In three sentences, plan how you would test whether the Declaration's equality claim changed women's legal rights in 1776. Quote one primary source from the passage, explain what its author, date, or origin makes it useful for, and name a different kind of record you would check for evidence of legal change.

ANSWER KEY

# Letters and Limits

HIGH SCHOOL · USH.P.3.1.A

## PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline a phrase in each letter that reveals the writer's position, circle each letter's date and place of writing, and number one sentence that explains a limit of the letters as evidence. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

## PART 2 · ANSWERS

| # | QUESTION | ANSWER |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | What change did Abigail seek? Quote a phrase from her March 31 letter, then explain how its date and place of writing help place her request in the independence movement. | **Abigail asked John to "Remember the Ladies" and give women a voice in laws. She wrote from Braintree on March 31, 1776, while colonists were debating independence.** |
| 2 | What does John's April 14 reply suggest about his position? Quote his words and explain why his role as a delegate does not make this letter an official congressional decision. | **John wrote, "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems," suggesting he opposed the change Abigail sought. He wrote privately as her husband, not on behalf of Congress.** |
| 3 | How might Abigail's letter complicate a reading of the Declaration's claim that "all men are created equal"? Cite words from both sources and explain why their different origins matter. | **The public Declaration says "all men are created equal," while Abigail's private letter warns of laws in which women have "no voice, or Representation." Her concern raises a question about who benefited from the Declaration's promise, but her letter does not establish what Congress intended.** |
| 4 | Could a historian writing in 2026 use these letters to prove what all women in 1776 wanted? Cite a phrase from one letter and explain how its author limits that conclusion. | **No. Abigail's request to "Remember the Ladies" shows what she asked John to consider, but one woman's private letter cannot establish what all women wanted.** |

## PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would test whether women's voting rights changed after independence. Abigail Adams's March 31 letter from Braintree describes laws in which women had "no voice, or Representation," showing her concern at that time rather than a change in law. I would compare dated Massachusetts voting laws from before and after 1776 to check whether those rights changed.

Accept interpretations supported by accurate quotations and source details. Distinguish what the private letters reveal about their writers from claims about Congress, all women, or changes in law.