

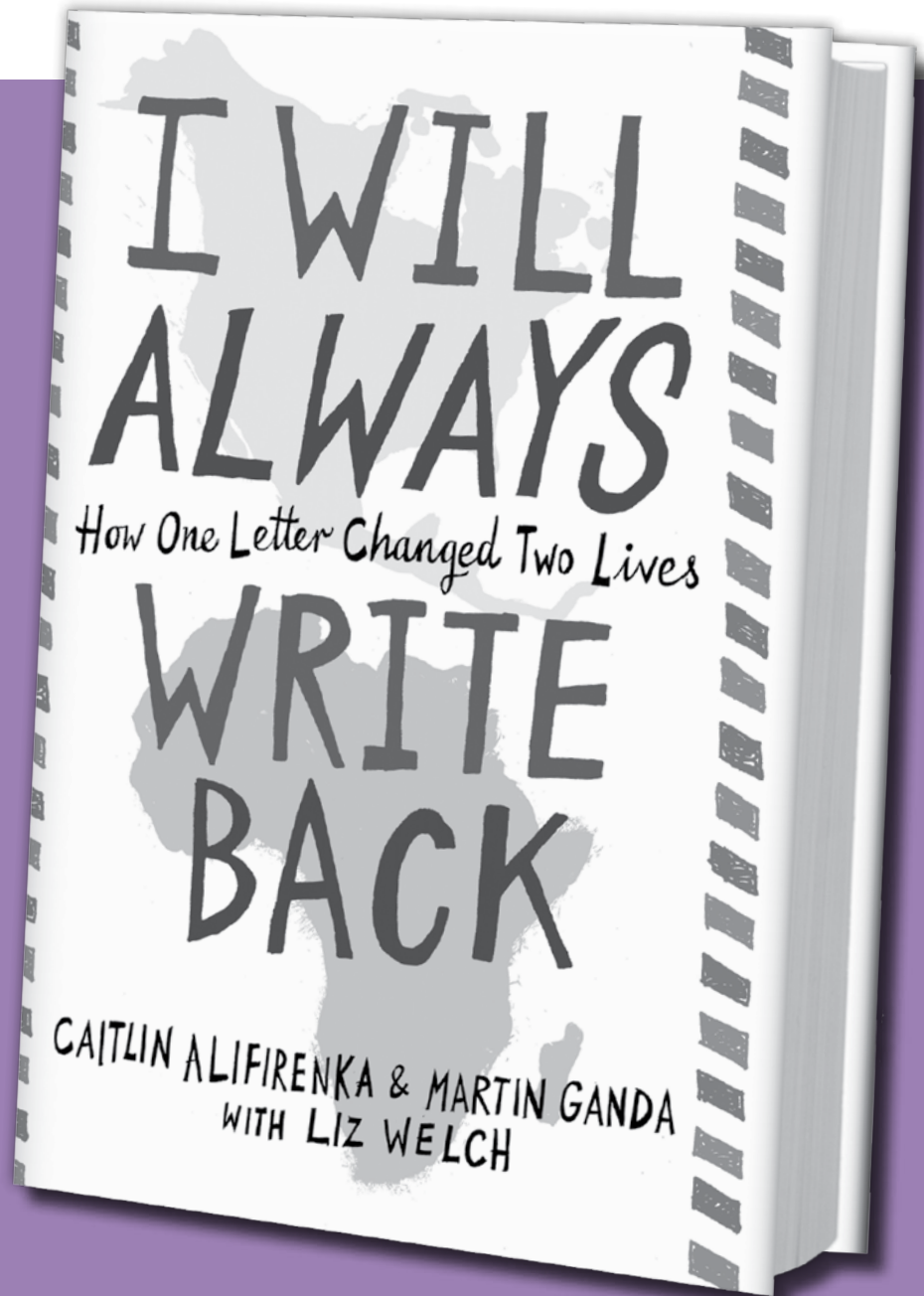
educator's guide

# I WILL ALWAYS WRITE BACK

## Curriculum connections

- ❖ Social Activism
- ❖ Multiple Perspectives
- ❖ Letter Writing

Ages 12 & up



CAITLIN ALIFIRENKA & MARTIN GANDA  
WITH LIZ WELCH

## COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This guide is aligned with the following Common Core Standards for 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. If you teach another grade you will want to visit [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org) and find the coordinating standards for your students.

### Reading: Informational Text

#### Key Ideas and Details

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges, is shaped, and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

#### Craft and Structure

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.5

Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

### Speaking and Listening:

#### Comprehension and Collaboration

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.A

Come to discussions prepared having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

#### Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

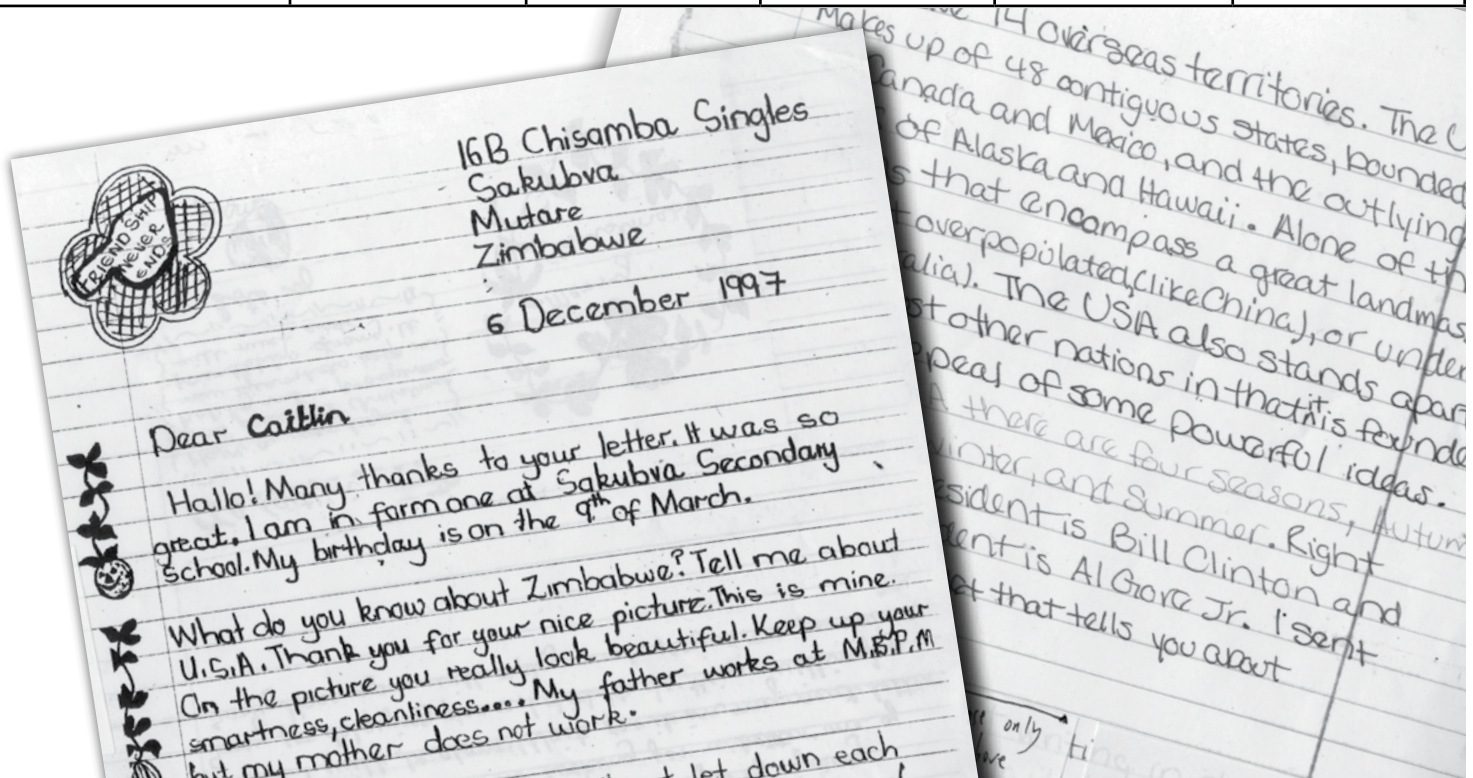
##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Have students mark their opinion of the following statements below. Then, place posters around the four corners of your room that correspond with the rankings and have students move between them as you discuss them.

Statement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	WHY I think this
It's easy to believe your problems are the most important.					
Having a pen pal could change your life.					
It's important to learn about other cultures and families.					
People are more changed by giving than receiving.					
Education is always the ticket to a better life.					



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Caitlin choose Zimbabwe for her pen pal, and not somewhere more relatable, like Germany or England?
2. Describe Martin's day to day life. In what ways is it similar or different to Caitlin's?
3. Explain what Caitlin learns from Martin's second letter.
4. Why is Martin's father impressed with Martin's correspondence to Caitlin and her picture?
5. Does Caitlin understand Martin's life? How is her idea of his life different from reality?
6. How does Martin feel about Caitlin's dollar? Why? Does this make you think about the money you have right now differently?
7. Describe some of the struggles Martin faces just to send his letters.
8. Why does Caitlin keep disregarding some of the things Martin says like how one shirt "greatly increased [his] wardrobe"? Why do you think she misses these details?
9. Describe some of the things the boys in Zimbabwe are enamored with from the American letters.
10. Why does Caitlin feel bad telling Martin so much teen drama? Should she? How do we keep our everyday problems in perspective?
11. By January 1999, how has Martin's life changed? Why does Martin decide to tell Caitlin the truth about his life?
12. List the ways that Martin proves he is a hard worker. What could you learn from his examples? What do they make you appreciate? How do the examples change Caitlin?
13. Cite evidence which reveals Martin's feelings toward Caitlin and her privileged life.
14. Paraphrase some of the problems Caitlin faces in trying to get Martin the first care box. What are some of the things Martin receives from it? Classify the items from most important to least and be prepared to defend your answers.
15. Compare and contrast Stephanie and Caitlin.
16. What aspects of Martin's photos accurately represent his life and what aspects are embellished, if any? Describe the boys from Martist Brothers School and compare them to Martin.
17. Describe Caitlin's attraction to Damon, and how he is different from her previous love interests. How have Caitlin's ideas about the future changed?
18. Compare and contrast the Zimbabwe clinic to one found in America. What can be done about the inequity?
19. How does 9/11 change Caitlin's perspective on the world? Does it impact Martin as well?
20. Describe some of the ways the Internet helps Martin. Can you imagine your life without it now?
21. Why might some colleges (like Gwynedd Mercy) decline Martin's request? Why was Martin so surprised at how easily he acquired a passport?
22. Explain why Caitlin disregards Damon's concerns about her studying too much and wanting to go to college.
23. In what ways is Wallace similar to Martin? In what ways is he different?
24. List the struggles Martin faces in trying to get to America.
25. How has Martin's attitude toward Caitlin and her family changed throughout the years?
26. Compare and contrast Damon's and Caitlin's attitudes toward learning and college.
27. Describe Chigodora and the villagers that inhabit it.
28. Is Caitlin's mother optimistic about Martin's future? Explain.
29. List some cultural differences between the USA and Zimbabwe. Which ones do you think are important, if any? Why?
30. Explain how Martin manages to get into Villanova with a full scholarship. How does this change the trajectory of more than just his own life?
31. Describe Martin's feelings toward his trip to America and the lost airplane ticket.
32. How does Martin greet Caitlin's family? Why?
33. Describe some of the culture-shock Martin faces in America.
34. Summarize Martin and Caitlin's life as it's described in the epilogue.

## COMMON CORE PROJECTS

### Writing

Find pen pals for your class and begin a correspondence that could last a lifetime at these teacher-friendly sites:

theteacherscorner.net/penpals/  
epals.com  
pen-pal.com

### Research

After signing up for a pen/email pal, research the country where the pen/email pal is from. Find out important details such as: major cities, exports, food, languages spoken, religions widely practiced, key moments in history, and notable locations. Create a list of key information that a correspondent ought to know as they write to their new friend.

### Summarizing

Good readers are able to summarize the most important points of a text. A summary should focus on the most important aspects of a selection and underline the central ideas, not the supporting details. At the end of each chapter write a one to two sentence summary and mark key quotes (with page numbers in MLA style) which support this conclusion. Be prepared to discuss and defend not only your summary but your choice of quotes. Below is an example:

Summary	Key Quote:
12-year-old Caitlin picks a pen pal from Zimbabwe. Although she usually isn't excited about school she is about the project.	"Honestly, I was not all that interested in school, but there was something almost magnetic about this crazy-sounding place: Zimbabwe." (Alifirenka & Ganda 3)

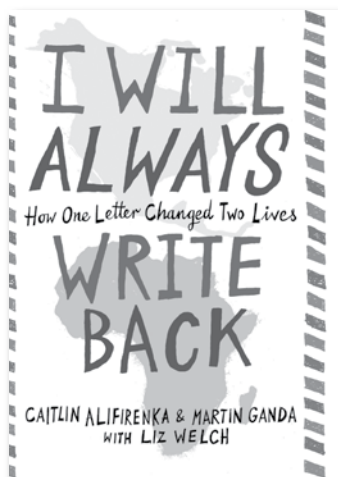
### Vocabulary

As students read the text they can fill out the following chart to discover the meaning of unknown words in context.

New word discovered while reading:	How it appears in the text:	What I think it means based on that context:	Dictionary definition:
Intrigued	"But something about the way the name looked up on the blackboard intrigued me."	Interested	To make someone interested or curious

# I WILL ALWAYS WRITE BACK

## about the book



**I WILL ALWAYS WRITE BACK**

HC 978-0-316-24131-1

Also available in downloadable audio  
and eBook formats

*The true story of an all-American girl and a boy from an impoverished city in Zimbabwe and the letter that changed both of their lives forever.*

It started as an assignment. Everyone in Caitlin's class wrote to an unknown student somewhere in a distant place. All the other kids picked countries like France or Germany, but when Caitlin saw Zimbabwe on the board, it sounded like the most exotic place she had ever heard of—so she chose it.

Martin was lucky to even receive a pen pal letter. There were only 10 letters, and 40 kids in his class. But he was the top student, so he got the first one.

That letter was the beginning of a correspondence that spanned six years and changed two lives.

In this compelling dual memoir, Caitlin and Martin recount how they became best friends—and better people—through letters. Their story will inspire readers to look beyond their own lives and wonder about the world at large and their place in it.

## about the authors



Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda met as pen pals in 1997. Caitlin, an ER nurse, lives outside of Philadelphia with her husband and young daughter. Martin lives in New York and has an MBA from Duke University.



Photo © David Jacob

Liz Welch is an award-winning journalist and memoirist whose critically acclaimed first book, *The Kids Are All Right* (coauthored with her sister Dana Welch), won an ALA Alex Award.

