

# Darwin the Collector

## Activity 2: Write a letter home

[www.darwinproject.ac.uk/learning/7-11/darwin-the-collector](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/learning/7-11/darwin-the-collector)

### Suggested preparation

Presentation: A voyage around the garden: Charles Darwin the Collector

Ask the expert film: Collecting and conserving Darwin's plants

Christine Bartram from Cambridge University's Herbarium discusses Darwin's plant collections from the Beagle voyage.

### How long will activity take?

- 40 mins

### What do I need?

- Darwin letter extracts and questions
- Blank letter template or plain paper

Darwin wrote many letters home whilst on the Beagle Voyage. Read some of them here and then write a letter to Darwin about your own discovery.

### What do I do?

- 1) In pairs read one of the letters that Darwin wrote about his collecting whilst on the Beagle voyage and answer the questions on the accompanying sheet.
- 2) Write a letter following the instructions at the bottom of the question sheet. You can use the blank letter template or just plain paper.



# LETTER 196

From Professor John Stevens Henslow

To Charles Darwin

15 January 1832

Transcribed extracts

[www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-196](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-196)



Cambridge  
15 Jany 1832

My dear Darwin,

...Your account of the Tropical forest is delightful. I can't help envying you— Most of the plants are very desirable to me. Avoid sending scraps. Make the specimens as perfect as you can, root, flowers & leaves & you can't do wrong. In large ferns & leaves fold them back upon themselves on one side of the specimen & they will get into a proper sized paper...



} this side is folded back at the edges

...For goodness sake what is No. 223 it looks like the remains of an electric explosion, a mere mass of soot—something very curious I daresay – Wd. it not be a good precautionary measure to transmit to England a copy of your memo- randa, with your next packet?...  
Every individual specimen once arrived here becomes an object of great interest, & tho' you were to send home 10 times as much as you do, yet when you arrive you will often think & wish how you might & had have sent home 100 times as much!...

Most affectly. & sincerely yrs.

J S Henslow

## Questions

1. Which parts of the plant does Henslow ask Darwin to include and what condition should they be in? Why?

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2. What does Henslow say No. 223 looks like?

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3. Why do you think Henslow wants Darwin to send a copy of his memoranda (list of items) with his parcels?

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4. Imagine you are a Victorian explorer on a voyage and have made an important discovery. Using the blank letter template, write a letter to Charles Darwin, describing the rare plant specimen that you have found. Tell him why it is interesting and how you will package it to make sure it arrives safely.

## LETTER 210

From Charles Darwin

To Professor John Stevens Henslow

18 July 1833

Transcribed extracts

[www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-210](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-210)



Rio de la Plata  
H.M.S. Beagle  
July 18th.— 1833.

My dear Henslow,

...Our direction, for a long period hence, will be Valparaiso: I should be so much obliged if you would write to me:— You only know anything about my collections, & I feel as if all future satisfaction after this voyage will depend solely upon your approval.

...By the same packet, which takes this, there will come four barrells: the largest will require opening, as it contains skins, Plants &c &c, & cigar box with pill boxes: the two next in size, only Geological specimens need not be opened, without you like to see them, the smallest & flat barrell, contains fish; with a gimlet , you can easily ascertain how full it is of spirits...

This is not nearly all which I have collected this summer, but for several reasons I have deferred sending the other half.— It is useless attempting to thank you for taking charge of my collections: for as I know no other person who would; this voyage would then be useless & I would return home.—...

Your most obliged & affectionate friend—

Chas. Darwin.—

## Questions

1. Why do you think the barrel containing animal skins needed to be opened on arrival and why do the boxes containing geological specimens not need to be opened?

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2. Why are the fish in the smallest barrel kept in spirits (alcohol)? (A gimlet is a small tool for drilling into wood)

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3. Why does Darwin feel grateful to Professor Henslow?

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4. Imagine you are a Victorian explorer on a voyage and have made an important discovery. Using the blank letter template, write a letter to Charles Darwin, describing the rare plant specimen that you have found. Tell him why it is interesting and how you will package it to make sure it arrives safely.



# LETTER 238

From Charles Darwin

To Professor John Stevens Henslow

March 1833

Transcribed extracts

[www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-238](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-238)



E. Falkland Isd.  
March — 1834

My dear Henslow,

I am quite astonished that such miserable fragments of the Megatherium should have been worth all the trouble Mr. Clift has bestowed on them. I have been alarmed by the expression 'cleaning all the bones', as I am afraid the printed numbers will be lost: the reason I am so anxious they should not be, is that a part were found in gravel with recent shells, but others in a very different bed.

I am very glad the plants give you any pleasure: I do assure you I was so ashamed of them, I had a great mind to throw them away; but if they give you any pleasure I am indeed bound, & will pledge myself to collect whenever we are in parts not often visited by Ships & Collectors.— With them there are as many seeds, as I could find (you had better plant all ye rubbish which I send, for some of the seeds were very small!).—

There is no opportunity of sending a Cargo: I only send this, with the seeds, some of which I hope may grow, & show the nature of the plants far better than my Herbarium...

Farewell my dear Henslow—believe me your most obliged & affectionate friend.

Charles Darwin.—

## Questions

1. Why is Darwin worried that the Megatherium (giant ground sloth) bones are all being cleaned?

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2. What does Darwin think of the plants that he has collected and what does he suggest Henslow should do with all the seeds?

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3. Why might growing seeds be better than making a herbarium specimen?

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4. Imagine you are a Victorian explorer on a voyage and have made an important discovery. Using the blank letter template, write a letter to Charles Darwin, describing the rare plant specimen that you have found. Tell him why it is interesting and how you will package it to make sure it arrives safely.



# Blank letter template

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[www.darwinproject.ac.uk](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk)





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