

*A tool from the August 2024 Newsletter*



## Self-Advocacy: A Guide for Young Scholar Families

While self-advocacy is often associated with older students, such as those in middle and high school, advocating for oneself is a skill that can be developed at any time in an educational journey. As many Young Scholar parents are aware, younger children in elementary school can also have strong opinions about their education and what might help them learn best or what they may need to achieve their goals.

As with any other skill, parents can encourage their Young Scholars to develop their self-advocacy skills by providing scaffolding and support. One tool that can be used to foster self-advocacy skills is writing a letter. When a situation arises where self-advocacy might be helpful, self-advocacy letters can come in to serve as a starting point for students to advocate for themselves. There are many benefits to writing a self-advocacy letter including:

1. **Developing Self-Advocacy Skills:** Crafting a letter may allow your Young Scholar to practice communicating their thoughts and needs in a structured, low-stress environment. They can draft and revise the letter as many times as they need before sharing it with their teacher. This may support them in becoming more comfortable and confident in expressing themselves and communicating their needs in other forms.
2. **Improving Teacher Understanding:** When teachers receive a letter directly from a student, this can provide personal insight into their learning style, strengths, and challenges. Teachers may be receptive to understanding and addressing a student's needs when they hear them from the student, which may foster the foundation for a supportive classroom environment.
3. **Larger Advocacy Efforts:** This letter can be a component of your broader advocacy efforts with your Young Scholar's school. When families work together to support a student's educational needs, their advocacy efforts have the possibility of being effective and productive.

## Supporting Your Young Scholar

You can assist in writing this letter by brainstorming with your Young Scholar. This brainstorming may include asking your Young Scholar questions, such as: “What do you want to say?” Or “What’s most important to you?” Encouraging your Young Scholar to think about what they want to communicate may support the brainstorming process. If writing is challenging for your Young Scholar, they could dictate their thoughts while you transcribe what they say or use speech-to-text technology. Personal touches such as drawings, photos, or examples of work they are proud of can add a layer of meaningfulness to the letter.

## Possible Uses for a Self-Advocacy Letter

The original version of the Self-Advocacy letter template only had a single focus. But we all know that a self-advocacy letter can be used in a variety of situations. With feedback from Young Scholar families, we have expanded this bundle to include templates for a few natural self-advocacy situations that are common in our community. This guide will share outlines for several self-advocacy scenarios and have an optional twice-exceptional add-in. Self-advocacy letters can be handed directly to the teacher or scanned and emailed/shared through the school's communication system. Here are some instances that a family might want to use a self-advocacy letter:

- **Start of a New School Year:** As a new school year begins, this could be an opportunity for Young Scholars to share about themselves and their school experiences. They could highlight their strengths, interests, and any support they might need early on. A self-advocacy letter sent at this time may support Young Scholars in establishing a rapport with their teacher from day one. Starting the school year with clear communication can set a positive tone and show the teacher that the Young Scholar is proactive and engaged. If the letter is being written during the beginning of the school year, your Young Scholar may want to get it to their teacher before the school year starts, if possible. Alternatively, a few days or a week after the school year begins could be an ideal time so it doesn't get lost in the shuffle during the busy time that the beginning of the school year can be.
- **Starting at a New School:** Moving to a new school can be simultaneously exciting and challenging. A self-advocacy letter could be an opportunity for Young Scholars to introduce themselves. This could help ease the transition by providing the new school staff with helpful information right from the start. A self-advocacy letter may ensure that strategies from the previous school can be continued or adapted at the new school, minimizing disruption to the Young Scholar's learning. Also, it may empower Young Scholars by allowing them to take control of their educational experience to meet their unique needs. If your Young Scholar starts at the school mid-year, it may be beneficial to send it when they are enrolled. Alternatively, perhaps waiting to see how things go at the new school and sending a letter after the first week or two. This way, your Young Scholar can settle in and decide what they may want to include and be able to provide information related to their new school.
- **Mid-Year Rapport Building:** Regular check-ins can be an effective strategy to meet the varied needs of Young Scholars. A mid-year self-advocacy letter could be an opportunity

for Young Scholars to share their thoughts on how things are going so far, highlight successes and challenges, reflect on what's working and what isn't, and propose ways to adjust their classroom experience for the remainder of the year. Additionally, this could be an opportunity to strengthen the Young Scholar-teacher relationship as they address any ongoing or new needs. A possible time to send this letter could be once a significant period has concluded (e.g., at the end of the quarter or semester; or, after a significant test or project).

- a. If the letter is being written due to an ongoing advocacy situation, it could be included in the documents that are brought to a scheduled meeting with your Young Scholar's education team, or to a parent-teacher conference.
- **Proposing an Independent Project, Study Course, or Modification to the Current Curriculum:** Sometimes, adjustments to a class curriculum can be requested to benefit a Young Scholar's learning experience. In a situation such as this, a self-advocacy letter can be used to request a tailored educational experience. This letter can be used to clearly outline the proposed project, study course, or modification, explain how it aligns with the Young Scholar's strengths and interests, and detail the resources and support they may need. Writing a letter requesting a change may show that the Young Scholar is willing to take charge of their learning journey, demonstrating responsibility and a proactive attitude thus promoting engagement and motivation.
    - a. There are a few possible times when a proposal letter could be sent. Here are a few ideas: If your Young Scholar already knows something they would like to integrate by the time the school year starts, sending it just after the beginning could be a useful time. Or, if your Young Scholar wants to take a wait-and-see approach, they could strategically send the letter just before beginning a new unit or major project as this is when their teacher could be finalizing plans and could incorporate adjustments. Alternatively, sending a letter during mid-year or mid-term could be a useful time as it's a natural break point for reflection and adjustment. This is a period when teachers and students can assess what's working and what could be improved.
  - **A Paragraph Describing Twice-Exceptionality:** For twice exceptional (2e) Young Scholars, writing about being 2e can be empowering. Doing so may allow them to view and understand their unique blend of strengths and challenges in a positive light. This understanding can foster self-awareness, help them advocate for their needs effectively, and encourage a growth mindset. This approach aligns with research indicating that neurodivergent students flourish when they understand how their brains work and leverage their strengths to navigate challenges. For more on this, see the article from Scientific American, "[Neurodivergent Kids Flourish When They're Taught How Their Brains Work](#)." This paragraph on twice-exceptionality can be integrated into any of the other self-advocacy letter templates. It is meant to be used on its own or blended with other templates in this bundle.

To support you and your Young Scholar in getting started with self-advocacy letters, below are templates that you can adapt to fit your Young Scholar's specific situation and needs. These

templates are designed to highlight your Young Scholar's strengths and interests while also addressing any challenges they may face. Each template encourages your Young Scholar to ask questions and open a dialogue with their teacher, laying the groundwork for a positive and supportive relationship.

## New School Year Letter Template

*This introductory letter is meant to be used at the beginning of the school year. Asking a few questions in the letter may prompt a response. This doesn't have to be detailed, it's just meant to break the ice.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I like to be called \_\_\_\_\_. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ to be in your class this year. One really important thing to know about me is

\_\_\_\_\_. What's one important thing about you?

Last year, I was in \_\_\_\_\_'s class. My favorite thing about last year was \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_. My least favorite thing about last year was \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_. How did last year go for you?

This year I'm looking forward to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. I'm most nervous about \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What do you hope for this year?

My ideal day at school would include \_\_\_\_\_ I really like learning about \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_ What do you like learning about?

As a student, I think I'm really good at \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. I hope to be even better at this by \_\_\_\_\_.

I know that sometimes I need help with \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

because \_\_\_\_\_. When I need help, please \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.

I really like when teachers \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What do you like about teaching?

Thank you for \_\_\_\_\_. I hope \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

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## Starting at a New School

*It can be simultaneously exciting and anxiety-inducing to start at a new school or do anything where you don't know anyone. This letter is meant to help your Young Scholar to introduce themselves to a new schoolteacher or administrator.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I like to be called \_\_\_\_\_. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ to be in your class this year. One really important thing to know about me is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What's one important thing about you?

The school I attended before was \_\_\_\_\_. One thing I really enjoyed about my previous school was \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What is one thing you really enjoy about [insert name of new school]?

I'm feeling \_\_\_\_\_ about starting at a new school because \_\_\_\_\_. Do you have any suggestions about how to make a smooth transition?

At [insert name of new school], I'm looking forward to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What are you looking forward to this year?

My ideal day at school would include \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. I really like learning about \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. What do you like learning about?

I know that sometimes I need help with \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_. When I need help, please \_\_\_\_\_.

I really like when teachers \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_. What do you like about teaching?

Thank you for \_\_\_\_\_.

I hope \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

## Mid-Year Rapport Building

*This letter is meant to help a Young Scholar get to know their teacher, coach, or someone else better. They've already been introduced, but maybe things didn't start off on the best foot. Some of the questions in this letter are meant to strategically gather information for your family to*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

So far this year, I've really enjoyed \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ because  
\_\_\_\_\_. Is there something that  
you are really looking forward to teaching this year?

Outside of school, I \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. What do you like to do  
when you aren't teaching?

One of the breaks that we both share is lunch. At lunch you can usually find me eating  
\_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_. What do you like to  
bring for lunch?

Looking ahead to \_\_\_ break, I am looking forward to having some more time to  
\_\_\_\_\_. What do you like to do on your breaks?

You know, this is my first time being \_\_\_ years old. One of my strengths is \_\_\_\_\_. I am still  
working on \_\_\_\_\_. What were you like at my age?

One fun fact that I like to share with people is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. What's one fun fact that you like sharing with others?

Thank you for taking some time to check in with me. I hope you have a good rest of your day,  
and I will see you \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

## Proposal for an Independent Study Project/Course

*A student's own voice can speak loudly during the advocacy process. This letter is meant to give the education team some perspective on why your Young Scholar wants to pursue an independent study course or project.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I have an idea \_\_\_\_\_. With your help, I would like to \_\_\_\_\_. I'm seeking \_\_\_\_\_.

I am passionate about learning \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

For my ideal project/course, I envision being able to \_\_\_\_\_.

The objective for this is to \_\_\_\_\_.

The steps I plan to take to reach this objective are to \_\_\_\_\_.

Potential roadblocks that may impede my progress toward this objective are \_\_\_\_\_.

I expect to get \_\_\_\_\_ out of reaching my objective.

Thank you for \_\_\_\_\_. Your \_\_\_\_\_ would be \_\_\_\_\_. What are your thoughts on this?

I look forward to \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Proposal for a Modification

*A student's own voice can speak loudly during the advocacy process. This letter is meant to give the education team some perspective on why your Young Scholar would benefit from a course modification.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I have an idea to modify \_\_\_\_\_. I would like to  
\_\_\_\_\_. I'm seeking  
\_\_\_\_\_.

I was wondering if there was a way to satisfy \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ requirement by  
instead \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_? For example, instead of  
\_\_\_\_\_ perhaps I could  
\_\_\_\_\_.

For my ideal modification, I envision \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. I want to do this because  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Following through with this plan would require: \_\_\_\_\_. I can see  
myself struggling with \_\_\_\_\_ along the way. I expect to gain  
\_\_\_\_\_ from implementing this modification.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and consider my modification. What are your thoughts?

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

## Twice Exceptionality

*Many educators are not familiar with twice exceptionality, which gives students the beneficial opportunity of introducing the concept of twice exceptionality on their own terms. This is meant for students to give their educators a bit of introductory language to use with them. This paragraph can stand alone or be integrated into the other self-advocacy templates. Since it is a bit different to read and fill out, there is an example included after the template.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I wanted to write this and tell you a little bit about my brain. I'm twice-exceptional (2e). My brain might work a little bit differently than other people in my class. I am really strong at/in \_\_\_\_\_ . For me, this means that I can \_\_\_\_\_ really well. But having a brain like mine also comes with some struggles. One struggle that I'd like you to know about is \_\_\_\_\_. So far, my family and I have been doing \_\_\_\_\_ to help. Have you met other people who struggle with this too?

I am still learning about my brain. I learned recently that I \_\_\_\_\_. What's something that you've learned about yourself? Thank you for reading this. I hope that we can \_\_\_\_\_ together.

This template might be a little bit different than the others in this bundle. Many families use the 2e paragraph as part of a larger self-advocacy letter. Here's an example of what the 2e template could look like when it's filled out:

*Dear Ms. Smith,*

*I wanted to write this and tell you a little bit about my brain. I'm twice-exceptional (2e). My brain might work a little bit differently than other people in my class. I'm really strong at talking to people about my thoughts. For me, this means that I can tell stories with lots of detail. But having a brain like mine also comes with some struggles. One struggle I'd like you to know about is that I struggle to keep my thoughts in my head, even when I try. So far, my family and I have been working on "taking turns" and patience to help. Have you met other people who struggle with this too? I am still learning about my brain. I recently learned that people call brains like mine "ADHD." What's something that you recently learned about yourself? Thank you for reading this. I hope that we can have a good 2<sup>nd</sup> grade year together.*