

# WORLD WAR I LETTERS

## Purpose

You have been learning about the impact of the First World War on both soldiers and civilians. In this activity, you will use your knowledge of the war from the texts, images, and videos you have analyzed to create a fictional letter from the perspective a soldier or civilian writing to their loved ones. This will help you exercise your historical empathy and creativity skills as you demonstrate your knowledge of events associated with the First World War. This should give you a better feeling about what it was like to be a part of World War I, and perhaps will also give you a sense of what it might be like for soldiers and civilians who are in war torn areas around the world today.

## Practices

### *Contextualization, sourcing*

In this activity, you are asked to think about the viewpoint of your letter's writer from a historical perspective, rather than from today's perspective. As part of this, it's necessary to consider context. Being aware of and engaging in historical empathy is key to understanding how people thought, felt, and acted in the past.

## Process

In this activity, you will first hear about WWI from the perspective of a soldier, then you will be asked to craft a fictional letter from a soldier or civilian writing to their loved ones. While you have learned a lot about World War I so far in the course, you haven't really gotten the perspective of a soldier fighting in the trenches.

Your teacher will read the following excerpt to you, feel free to follow along. The excerpts in this primary source document are from the diary of Private Walter Hutchinson, a British soldier from Yorkshire who participated in the first days of the Battle of the Somme, the deadliest battle in the history of World War I.

*Start out by reading the following excerpt to your students. Let them know that the excerpts in this primary source document are from the diary of Private Walter Hutchinson, a British soldier from Yorkshire who participated in the first days of the Battle of the Somme, the deadliest battle in the history of World War I.*

*"On Saturday July 1st we set off for the trenches about 10 o'clock. As soon as we got on the road we saw an awful sight for there was wounded men by hundreds coming from the line. When we was going across the marsh, German shells was dropping all round but none of us was hit. We then landed to a communication trench. But before we had time to get in it Fritz [German troops] sent us a tear shell. That was our first taste of gas...*

*We hadn't gone far up the trench before we came across three of our own lads lying dead. Their heads been badly damaged by a shell. Their names were Voice and Webster Brothers.*

*We had to go scrambling over the poor fellows—in and out, in and out. It was one of the awful sights I had ever witnessed and at this point our own lads was coming out wounded as we was following them in. Then the order came down dump everything and fix bayonets you have got to fight for it lads.*

*We obeyed the order like men...*

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*I was talking to these three men some 10 yards away and a shell dropped and killed all the three of them. It was an awful sight. I then went and reported the matter to the officers and they came at once to the scene. We then got the poor fellows buried which was a very difficult task for shells was dropping all round us."*

Source: Hutchinson, Walter. "Extended extracts: Diary from the Somme," *The Telegraph*, February 21, 2007.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1543319/Extended-extracts-Diary-from-the-Somme.html>

What do you think it might have felt like to be Private Walter Hutchinson?

In this activity, it is your job to take on the role of either a soldier or a civilian in World War I who is writing to loved ones during the war. The process of putting yourself in someone else's shoes from the past and seeing things from their perspective is often referred to as historical empathy.

If you choose the role of the soldier, you will be writing home to your family. As part of the letter, you should describe the conditions on the battlefield such as trench warfare and the impact of the new weapons introduced in this war. Additionally, you cannot just re-use or restate the information in Hutchinson's diary. Instead, you might need to do a little research to find out what things were like for your particular soldier. This may change depending upon if you choose a soldier from the Allied or Central Powers and may also change depending upon when the letter was written during the war.

If you choose the role of a civilian, you are writing to a family member who is serving in the war. You should describe the sacrifices made at home to support the war effort. Again, details will depend upon where the family is located, who they are writing to, where the soldier is located, and the time in which the letter was written.

Whether you choose soldier or civilian, you should also explain the emotional toll of war and include the feelings one might have on a battlefield or at home. Also be sure to include the reason your country is at war and why the fighting is necessary. Finally, include a short bio of your soldier or civilian, including their age, date of birth, gender, country of origin, geographic location, side on which they're fighting/supporting, whether they are a citizen or colonial subject being forced to fight in the war (conscript) or someone who joined willingly, and so on. The bio does not need to be extensive but enough to provide some context.

You may want to do some research to find out more about people's experiences during this time period so that your letter is as authentic as possible. If your teacher requires extra research, make sure to cite any sources used.

Once you're done, consider sharing your letter with the class. As you listen to other letters, can you guess the bio (location, Allied or Central Powers, time period, etc.) of those people using the context clues provided in the letter?