

Letter from the Somme

by Wilfred Owen

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Background

This is an extract from one of the many letters sent home by the poet and soldier Wilfred Owen from the trenches of the First World War. In January 1917, Owen had led his platoon up to the Western Front to hold a dug-out in No Man's Land. This letter tells of some of the horrors the soldiers faced. It includes a chronological series of events, action verbs in the past tense, and temporal connectives. As well as factual detail conveying the horrific reality of the war, it has touches of the gentle irony and lyrical phrasing that grace Owen's poetry.

What's on the CD-ROM

The differentiated text is a third person recount of a famous episode when the opposing armies called a truce and played football together on Christmas Day. Children can compare this text with Owen's personal recount, and use it as the basis of a first person recount.

Discussing the text

- Read the extract and explain that it is from a letter written in 1917 by the poet Wilfred Owen to his mother, while he was a fighting in the First World War. Look for references in the text that indicate it is a letter home. (Going to church, the canary.)
- Revise some of the key features of a recount text. Focus on the verbs, asking the children to identify the person and tense of verbs the writer uses. What other kind of recount might be written in the first person, other than a letter? (Diary, journal, autobiography.)
- Remind the children that a recount tells an event or, as here, a series of events. Highlight all the linking words and phrases related to time, such as: *then, after, every few minutes, so far.*
- Discuss the tone of the letter. Owen is describing the horrors of war, but he also introduces humour and irony in places. Encourage the children to find examples of the way he *lightens* the tone.
- Go on to examine some of the descriptive detail. Recap that a recount may describe sights, sounds, feelings, tastes and smells, and ask the children to look for words that describe the sounds of war.
- Direct the children to points where Owen

uses a series of words or synonyms to build descriptive detail, for example, in describing the mud, or the struggle to get over No Man's Land. Note examples of metaphor and onomatopoeia.

- Pick out some of the terms specific to warfare, such as *No Man's Land, dug-out* and *bombardment*, and ask the children if they can explain them. Ask the children what type of word bombardment is. (Noun.) See if they can think of any other words that share the same root. (Bomb, bombard, bomber.)

Talk, read and write

- Remind the children of the onomatopoeic words that Owen uses to describe the sounds of the machine guns and explosives. Can they think of, invent or find in a thesaurus other words or phrases to describe the sounds?
- Ask the children to list all the wartime terms that Owen uses and to adapt definitions from at least two dictionaries to write a glossary to the text.
- Remind the children that Owen sometimes uses a number of words or phrases to describe something. For example, he uses four subtly different words to show the effort of getting across No Man's Land. Challenge the children to find other synonyms that he might have used, again using a thesaurus. Ask them to replace the words in the sentences and discuss the shades of meaning. You could ask the children to close their eyes and picture the scene each time.

Extension

The children could:

- read some of Owen's poetry, with an eye for references to some of the experiences in this text
- look at websites on the First World War to read some personal recounts in journal or letter form of life in the trenches and experiences of No Man's Land
- watch DVDs about the First World War and make notes to inform their writing of first or third person recounts of some of the experiences (including sights and sounds) of the war.