

In Their Own Words: Civil War Letters
Lesson Design by: Jim Wheeler, Chillicothe High School
11th Grade United States History
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Teaching Traditional American History Program
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Mike Lair, Project Director
<http://www.chillihistoryproject.com/>

Lesson Overview: This lesson can be done just about at any time during a unit on the Civil War. Students will be analyzing primary historical records by reading actual letters written during the Civil War by the participants themselves, learning about life during the Civil War in the process.

Essential Questions:

1. How different were the two sides in the Civil War?
2. What was life really like during the Civil War?

Objectives: After completing this lesson, students should be able to:

- Analyze a primary historical record (MO GLE: SS 2a.B.(2));
- Evaluate the record's value to the study of history (MO GLE: SS 7.D.(4));

Materials: Before the lesson, the teacher should select letters that the students will study. There are a wealth of websites featuring these documents; several are listed here. It is helpful to select a small series of letters (the number can be adjusted, but two is suggested here) written by the same person if possible so that students can get a sense of continuity and, in some cases, a sense of drama in that the students will know the writer's background (what he or she has been through).

Many of the letters can be printed either in their original form (more authentic for the students but perhaps more difficult to read), or in transcription. Giving students letters in both forms might be the most beneficial.

American Civil War Collection at the Electronic Text Center:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/civilwar/>

Letters from an Iowa Soldier in the Civil War: <http://www.civilwarletters.com/index.html>

Letters About The Civil War: <http://www.civilwarhome.com/letters.htm>

Civil War Letters of the Christie Family:

<http://www.mnhs.org/library/Christie/intropage.html>

Vermont in the Civil War: Two Soldiers' Stories:

<http://www.vermonthistory.org/educate/cwletter/cwletter.htm>

A large collection of links to letters and diaries: <http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/links/links6.htm>

Class Time: One or two 50-minute periods.

Teacher Input: Select one letter that the class can read together. A letter from a soldier would be best. The letter should either be put on an overhead or each student should receive a copy. After reading the letter, ask the following questions for discussion:

1. Where is the soldier at the time he wrote this letter? How far from home?
2. Why did the soldier tell where he was?
3. How did the writer feel when he wrote the letter? What parts of the letter tell us this?

Tell the students that they will be analyzing actual letters from people who lived through the Civil War. Who better could tell their story than the people who were there?

Activities: Students can do this activity individually or in pairs. Give each student or pair two letters, preferably from the same writer. Half of the class should receive letters from a Northern or pro-Union writer; the other half should receive letters from a Southern or pro-Confederate writer.

Ask the students to select the letter that was written first. Give them time to read the first letter. Then hand out copies of the Written Document Analysis Worksheet. Ask student to complete the worksheet for the first letter. Then, repeat the process for the second letter.

Next, ask students to write down some of the themes they see in the letters. Some themes might include:

homesickness	loneliness	boredom	hunger
patriotism	illness	religious faith	love
fear	sadness	courage	

Put these themes on the board. Then, ask students to trade letters (North for South). Ask students to read their new letters, looking for the themes. Ask students to highlight or underline the parts of the letters that show each theme. What can they conclude from this?

Questions for review:

1. Are we seeing similar themes in both Northern and Southern letters?
2. What can we conclude from this?

Assessment: Students should imagine that they are participating in the Civil War. Each student should write a letter that reflects the themes that they discovered in this lesson.

Extension:

Students may find it interesting to find their own letters on the web if they have access.

This lesson might also be adapted using Civil War photographs. An excellent online archive can be found on the Library of Congress site:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwhtml/cwphome.html>

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1.	<p>TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td><input type="radio"/> Newspaper</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Map</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Advertisement</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="radio"/> Letter</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Telegram</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Congressional Record</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="radio"/> Patent</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Press Release</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Census Report</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="radio"/> Memorandum</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Report</td> <td><input type="radio"/> Other</td> </tr> </table>	<input type="radio"/> Newspaper	<input type="radio"/> Map	<input type="radio"/> Advertisement	<input type="radio"/> Letter	<input type="radio"/> Telegram	<input type="radio"/> Congressional Record	<input type="radio"/> Patent	<input type="radio"/> Press Release	<input type="radio"/> Census Report	<input type="radio"/> Memorandum	<input type="radio"/> Report	<input type="radio"/> Other
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<input type="radio"/> Memorandum	<input type="radio"/> Report	<input type="radio"/> Other											
2.	<p>UNIQUE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Interesting Letterhead</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Notations</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Typed</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Seals</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> Interesting Letterhead	<input type="checkbox"/> Notations	<input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten	<input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp	<input type="checkbox"/> Typed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Seals					
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3.	DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:												
4.	<p>AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:</p> <p>POSITION (TITLE):</p>												
5.	FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?												
6.	<p>DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)</p> <p>A. List three things the author said that you think are important:</p> <p>B. Why do you think this document was written?</p> <p>C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.</p> <p>D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.</p> <p>E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:</p>												

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 Washington, DC 20408