

# **Descriptive Writing through Civil War Letters & Landscapes**

Susan Ferranti, 5th Grade English Language Arts

This unit is designed to be taught in a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade English Language Arts/Social Studies classroom. In the social studies lessons, students will learn about Boston's role in the Civil War and practice reading and analyzing historical documents.

## **Lesson One: Letters to Home**

### **Goals**

The goal of this lesson is to look at the Civil War letters from an English Language Arts perspective. How did soldiers communicate their experiences in the war to loved ones at home?

### **Objectives**

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- identify examples of figurative language and descriptive writing in a primary source document.
- use descriptive language in their own writing.

### **Curriculum Frameworks**

- MA Grade 5 Writing Standard #3.d: Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.
- MA Grade 5 Language Standard #4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
- CCR Reading Standard 10: Read and comprehend complex literary text independently and proficiently.

### **Materials**

- Primary Source: Letter from Edward Burgess to his Mother, December 2, 1863 (appears at the end of this lesson)
- Technology: Document camera
- Other: ELA notebooks, pencils

## **Procedure/Activities**

1. Do Now/Warm Up (5 minutes): In their ELA notebooks, students will free-write about forts. This might include places they have visited, examples from social studies class, or a drawing. This will engage students' background knowledge about forts, as well as have them practice trying to describe something.
2. Guided Reading (10 minutes): The teacher will introduce the lesson to the class, and tell them that they will be looking at a letter from a real Civil War soldier and then practicing their own descriptive reading. The teacher will use a document camera to show the class Edward Burgess' letter, so they can see his handwriting and the length of the letter. The teacher will pass out copies of the letter to the class. The teacher will read the letter out loud to the class, pausing to ask clarification questions.
3. Descriptive Language Lesson & Scavenger Hunt (10 minutes): The class will examine how Burgess is trying to describe his living quarters to his mother. Using the document camera, the teacher will analyze the first paragraph of the letter where Burgess describes the fort. Then, working with a partner, students will underline words that Burgess uses to describe his fort. If students finish early, they can circle all adjectives they find in the letter.
4. Independent Practice (25 minutes): Students will be asked to pretend that they are a soldier at Fort Totten. Using Burgess' drawing, how would you describe where you live to your family and friends at home? The teacher will post the following guided questions on the board:
  - What shape is the fort?
  - Where are the tents placed?
  - What colors do you see in the walls of the fort, the ground, the trees, etc. (use your historical knowledge to make educated guesses!)
  - What does it smell like?
5. Wrap Up (10 mins): The teacher will ask for student volunteers to share out their best examples of descriptive writing.

## **Assessments**

1. The teacher will informally circulate during the Do Now and the Descriptive Language Scavenger Hunt to ensure understanding.
2. The teacher will collect and grade the descriptions of the fort.

## **Extension**

For homework, students could complete a final draft of their descriptions, and include two similes. Artistic students could have the option of creating their own drawing of a fort, using color or even a model.

Edward Burgess to his Mother, December 2, 1863

Fort Totten

Dec 2 1863

Dear Mother

I received your letter today I was glad enough you had better believe. In the first place I will answer all your questions, you ask if I am warm nights? yes pretty warm. we have a stove in our tent & so we keep pretty warm. Are your slippers wearing out. no but I am going to sew some canvass on the bottoms so that I can wear it around the tent. what did you do with your old valise? I left it in R. I got 2 big bundles of Papers of while I was in Readville from Uncle E. I suppose I was very glad of them. our fort is made of a kind of peat cut out about the shape of bricks & piled together just outside the wall a deep ditch 26 ft wide is dug & so contrived that it can be filled with water with in an hour. If not inside the wall is a huge structure of logs & dirt about 30 ft wide

[page break]

& 160 ft high ft high it is built to stop balls from our tents which are built at its foot enclosed you will find a plan of this fort. I have been well ever since we came here but some of the boys have had the fever & ague which seems to be the prevailing disease here & have been waiting a good while for a letter I think it will better to write once a week not wait for return letter for it takes about a fortnight for a letter to go and come I got three stamps but I am going to write to Willie & Clara & that will take & I thought I would save the other to reply to one of them if I should get an answer they both ~~go~~ wrote good letters W said he had got a pen-holder for me but I was too late to get it for I got the letter the day I left R. I shall write to them today & the letters will probably go by the same boat as this. we don't see many rebels all we see are prisoners or deserters some poor 20 deserters come in every night they are rough looking

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chaps I tell you they are dressed in clothes like my cashmeret pants. Give my love to the Moreys & tell Charlie I should like to see him. Give my love to Elija & Blaney & to Augusta I tell Eddie Allen that I should like to have him come out here a while if he could. we had a first rate-time here on Thanksgiving, in the morning the whole Garrison was drawn up in a hollow square & the Proclamation of the Pres. was read by the Chaplain of the 5<sup>th</sup> R.P. Arty & was followed by a short prayer after which we were dismissed & passes were given to all who wished to Newberne where there was a greased pole, sack race, greased pig & other amusements. the rhode island companies had rice puddings & other dainties. but we poor recruits rejoiced in Hard tack & salt beef which looks looks like cast iron. I dont think you had better send me a box yet as I am comfortable write soon

[page break]

send me some Lowell papers & one late Boston Journal

Your Truly

EB Peirce

PS tell me whether you can get state aid or not I will send you some cotton when I can get some more.

the leaves are all gone now excuse bad writing E.B.P.

Give my love to father & tell him to be sure to write

## Lesson Two: In Their Shoes

### Goals

The goal of this lesson is for students to analyze a primary source document and then put themselves in the shoes of someone in the Civil War and write their own letter home. Students will synthesize the Civil War content from social studies class and the documents used in ELA class in a writing exercise.

### Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will write a letter from the perspective of a Civil War soldier using historically accurate details.

### Curriculum Frameworks

- CCR Writing Standard 9: Draw evidence from literary and information texts to support analysis, reflection and research.
- CCR Reading Standard 10: Read and comprehend complex literary text independently and proficiently

### Materials

- Primary Source: Letter from Charles Douglass to Frederick Douglass, July 6, 1863:  
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart4.html>
- Technology: Document camera
- Other: ELA notebooks, pencils

### Procedures/Activities

1. Do Now/Warm Up (5 minutes): Students will respond to the following question in their notebooks:  
Imagine you are a soldier in the Civil War. What kinds of things would you write about in your letters home? Make a list of topics.
2. Guided Reading & Discussion (15 minutes): The teacher will introduce the lesson to the class, and tell them that they will be looking at a letter from a real Civil War soldier and then practicing their own descriptive reading. The teacher will use a document camera to show the class Charles Douglass' letter, so they can see his handwriting and the length of the letter. The teacher will read the letter aloud, pausing to ask comprehension questions. After, the teacher will allow the class to share their responses to the letter.
3. Independent Letter Writing (30 minutes): Students will pretend to be a Civil War soldier stationed in Readville, MA and will write a letter home. They can describe their living conditions, a battle, a conflict,

the food, their feelings, etc. The letter must be at least two paragraphs long and must use historically accurate details.

If students finish early, they can proof-read with a partner.

### **Assessments**

1. During the Do Now, the teacher will circulate to ensure all students are on-track.
2. The teacher will collect and grade the letters.

### **Extension**

Students could write a final draft of the letters.

Students could decorate an envelope or a stamp.

Students could include a drawing to help explain something from their letter.

## **Lesson Three: Fort Warren**

### **Goals**

This lesson will take place near the end of the student's Civil War unit, and culminates the writing focused portion of the unit. Students will take a field trip to Fort Warren on George's Island so that they can see a real fort that was used in the Civil War and learn about life there from historians. As part of the field trip, students will again put themselves in the shoes of a Civil War soldier and complete a series of reflections. This lesson will take place after students have toured the fort and have a general sense of its landmarks and purpose.

### **Objectives**

As a result of this lesson, students will use a historical landscape to write a diary from the perspective of a Civil War soldier using historically accurate details.

### **Frameworks**

- MA Grade 5 Writing Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

## **Materials**

- Clipboards, paper, writing instruments

## **Procedures/Activities**

1. Introduction (5 minutes): Explain that students will be revisiting various areas of the fort and completing writing exercises. At each station, students are to pretend that they are a soldier during the Civil War and write a diary entry. Encourage students to look at the landscape around them, as that's what the soldiers would have seen, and describe their surroundings using their descriptive language. (Ideally, this would be done in groups of 10 to minimize distractions)
2. Station #1 - Inside the fort (20 minutes): Have students pretend they are a prisoner. What would it be like to be trapped inside? How would you feel?
3. Station #2 - On the Parade Ground (20 minutes): Have students pretend they are a soldier relaxing after a day of practicing marching on the parade ground. Imagine other soldiers are playing baseball around you. What would you write about your day?
4. Station #3 - By the Cannon (20 minutes): Have students imagine they are on guard duty. Look out at the ocean and back at Boston. How would you feel knowing you were protecting your city and your family?

## **Assessments**

Teacher will collect and grade the diary entries.

## **Extension**

Compare Fort Warren with Fort Totten in Edward Burgess' letter and drawing.

Add additional diary entries and create a book, with decorated cover.

Create a bulletin board with pictures of each station (historic drawings and modern-day photographs) and student's diary entries