



## CREATING WWI PERSONAS AND WRITING POSTCARDS FROM THE FRONT

### Understanding the Human Experience of WWI Through Correspondence

Recommended Grade Levels: 9-12  
Course Content: Language Arts

Authored by: Laurie Tafoya, National WWI Museum and Memorial Teacher Fellow

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What was it like to be a common soldier or a young nurse at the Front in WWI?
- What perspectives did he/she have on situations and events that are historically documented both in narratives and fictional texts?
- How did one communicate his/her experiences in correspondences with loved ones at home and away from the front?

**SUMMARY:** In this collaborative unit, students will utilize their understanding of the history of WWI and the impact it had on individual young men and women in the war by creating personas and corresponding with a peer.

**STANDARDS** TEKS. 110.32 (b)

**ALIGNMENT:** (8) Reading/Comprehension of Informational Text/Culture and History. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about the author's purpose in cultural, historical and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.  
(14) Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events and ideas.  
(18) Oral and Written Conventions/Handwriting, Capitalization and Punctuation. Students write legibly and use appropriate capitalization and punctuation conventions in their compositions.  
(19) Oral and Written Conventions/Spelling. Students spell correctly.

**TIME NEEDED:** Three (or four) 50-minute class periods

**OBJECTIVES:** *Students will:*

- Synthesize multiple sources to derive a description of a typical WWI soldier or nurse.
- Create a persona.
- Compose a postcard message to a loved one back home.
- Exchange postcards with a pen-pal or student in another class.
- Take on the role of recipient and evaluate and demonstrate understand and empathy for the human experience of WWI.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY:** Art  
History  
Literature  
English

**THEMES & CONNECTIONS:** This lesson is most effective in a larger unit that includes basic instruction about the Great War. The lesson follows an introduction to WWI including instruction in the following:

- 1) In-class screening of the movie, *Joyeux Noel* (2005)
- 2) Discussion of the war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

Themes from the movie and novel include friendship, loyalty, honor, patriotism, resourcefulness, effects of war and loss of innocence. These are expressed and grappled with throughout the postcard lesson.

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

- Postcard-size paper
- Novel, movie, and Webquest resources
- Colored pencils and markers
- Pencils or pens
- Maps of combatants' countries

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

That the human experience of young people serving in WWI was life changing is undeniable. A multitude of resources bears that out: novels, movies, documentaries, autobiographies, photographs and history books. The personal letters and postcards that have survived the war, however, are testimony to the experiences of the war perhaps more intimately than any other. Yet the question must be asked: How much did they tell? And how much did they *not* tell? How much was deleted because of military security censorship and how much due to personal discretion? And, when students take on a WWI persona, what do they choose to write about and what do they leave out? What tone do they take in their postcards home and why?

In the movie, *Joyeux Noel*, two Scottish brothers enlisted as soldiers. Sadly, the braver and older of the two dies in an early battle. In a poignant scene, the younger brother writes home to their mother, and instead of revealing the fact that the older brother William has died, he brags about William's successes in shooting and thanks his mother for the cake and the gloves they are sharing. He creates a fiction to spare his mother--and himself--of the reality of their loss.

In the war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, main character Paul Baumer reassures his mother, on a visit home, that everything was fine at the front, and allows his mother to think that the biggest danger for him is to be caught up with the wrong kind of women. He censors what he tells his mother, in an effort to spare her the gruesome reality of war at the front.

Such personal censorship was not uncommon. While postcards and letters would have been filled with concern for details of home, appreciation for care packages and references to important places visited (American soldiers at least were enthralled by the chance to visit Europe, for example), the writers would have included assurances of their safety and wellbeing. They also, it would seem, would leave out details of the serious hardships of war, presumably to spare their loved ones of the worry and concern.

# LESSON

## DIRECTIONS:

### Pre-Activity

Assign students a WebQuest (**Appendix A**) to use with [firstworldwar.com](http://firstworldwar.com) website. This should take no more than one class period and could be assigned as homework prior to the first day of the Postcard lesson.

### Day One

1. Connect: Have you ever received a postcard? Have you ever sent a postcard? What do they look like? What kinds of pictures are usually on postcards? What do you write in a postcard? Where does the address go?
2. Explore general postcards from various sources.
3. Show student postcard samples from WWI: personal collection, National WWI Museum and Memorial.
4. Discuss concept of persona, and brainstorm ideas: soldier, nurse, medic, doctor, airman...
5. Students create a persona for themselves, writing a short bio (attached activity).
6. Students choose recipient of their postcard (family member, loved one, friend) and begin composing rough draft on paper. Discuss and brainstorm as they write, drawing from prior research into war specifics: time period, date, countries involved, family scenarios, concerns, shortages and conditions, as described and discussed in war movie, *Joyeux Noel*, and novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

### Day Two

7. After class discussion and peer revisions, students transpose rough draft of postcard message onto the postcard, including a fictional recipient address. (Opportunity for a mini-lesson on proper address format and stamp placement, if necessary.)
8. Students then design the illustration on the back of the postcard to be either a motivational message from propaganda posters they observed in the WebQuest or a holiday-inspired illustration.

### Day Three

9. Postcards can be exchanged between classes or can be a collaboration with pen-pals in a class in another school
10. The students are now the 'recipients' of the postcards. Discuss again the human story of WWI, taking care to reinforce understanding of limited communication from the front lines, compared to the experiences of today's soldiers.
11. Students read the postcards, share informally, and then describe how it must have felt to be the recipient of such postcards and to read such details. Discussions of each postcard can go in a multitude of directions, but serves to place the students in the mindset of the participants of WWI.
  - o What is the writer saying? What is he/she not saying?
  - o How does that affect you as the fictional mother, brother, family, wife, best friend?

- Do the details in the postcard make you more worried or less worried about your loved one?
- What mood is the writer in?
- Is the writer being honest about conditions, or do you think he/she is trying to spare you?
- What is your impression of the war, having read this postcard?

#### **POST-ASSESSMENT:**

1. Bio activity (**Appendix B**)
2. Postcard assessment (**Appendix C**)
3. Informal discussion

#### **MODIFICATIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS**

As needed, per student.

- Verbal summary of WebQuest notes
- Reinforcement of assignment parameters
- Option of typing postcard message, if handwriting is a challenge

# APPENDIX A: WEBQUEST

Using the website *firstworldwar.com*, answer the following questions.

1. What event is most associated with the beginning of WWI?
2. Who were the Allied Forces?
3. Who were the Central Powers?
4. What years did the war take place?
5. Where was the Western Front?
6. When was the unofficial Christmas truce? Describe the event.

7. Why did the U.S. declare war against Germany?

8. Who was President when the U.S. went to war in 1917?

9. What was the purpose of propaganda posters?

10. What country produced the most propaganda posters?

11. What is Armistice Day? What is it now called?

12. Find two poems from the 1917 poetry collection *The Muse in Arms*, published on the site. List their titles and authors, and then write out your favorite line/lines from each.

A.

B.

13. Find three songs from different years and listen to them. Below, list the name of each song, who wrote it, who performed it and the year it was released.

A.

B.

C.

14. Watch the 1914 video clip of British soldiers receiving rations. Make a list here, comparing their daily rations to what the Germans received. (You will find this list in the text below the video clip.)

15. What three foods are listed on the humorous British postcard entitled “More German Atrocities”? (See “Vintage Photographs”, then “Postcards”) Why was this humorous?

16. What animals were used during the war? List at least five.



17. Who were the top three air aces of the war? (go to “The War in the Air”)

18. List four of the ground weapons used in the war.

19. What were the roles women played in WWI?

20. What was life like for a WWI nurse?

## APPENDIX B: WWI Bio

Your real name:

Your persona name:

Date of birth:

Country of birth:

Family details:

Role in the war:

How do you feel about the war?

What are some of the memorable experiences you've had in the war so far?

*(If you can find a photo on the internet that you imagine is your persona, print it out and include it here.)*

## APPENDIX C: POSTCARD ASSESSMENT

Illustration on back: \_\_\_\_\_  
What is your rationale?

Address completed correctly: \_\_\_\_\_

Date included: \_\_\_\_\_

Contents of missive: \_\_\_\_\_

## Further Resources:

Brittain, Vera. *Testament of Youth*. Penguin Classics, 2005 (1933).

Junger, Ernst. *Storm of Steel*. Penguin Classics, 2004.

O'prey, Paul, ed. *First World War Poems from the Front*. London: Imperial War Museums, 2014.

*War Horse*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Dreamworks, 2011. Film.

WWI postcard samples are available through the National WWI Museum and Memorial's Online Database:

<https://www.theworldwar.org/explore/online-collections-database>

## Bibliography:

*Joyeux Noel*. Dir. Christian Carion. Nord-Oest Productions, 2005. Film.

Remarque, Erich Maria, and A.W. Whelen. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1929. Print.

*firstworldwar.com*, a Multimedia History of World War One: <http://www.firstworldwar.com>