

Doing Sourcework—An Example

SOURCE A Letter from the Front

Letter sent by Trooper John Newton with the Canadian Army Corps in France, to his brother, Cam, in British Columbia, December 7, 1915. The spelling in the letter is unaltered.

France
Dec. 7th 1915.

Dear Cam.

Thanks for your letter of Nov 15th which reached me yesterday. Yes, we are getting now what we have been waiting for almost a year, we have been into it on three different occasions. Trench fighting is no picnic at this time of the year, one is plastered with mud from head to foot all the time. The mud is more than knee deep in lots of places. We just get the dugouts & parapets nicely fixed up when Fritz gets wild & knocks them all down again. I would certainly like to have a look at the German trenches, our artillery put over about ten times as many shells as they they do, & I think their trenches must be in a devil of a mess. Quite a few of our fellows have been knocked out already. We don't see much of the Germans but the trenches are so close together we can hear them talking quite plainly, some places they are only 40 yds. Rats are just about as plentiful as mosquitos in Saskatchewan, they crawl into bed with one in the dugouts & sit up on the parapet right beside you & just wink when a rifle is fired. We are obliged to store out rations in tin boxes, the first time I went in 3/4 of a loaf of bread mysteriously disappeared.

We are in action about half the time, the balance of the time we stay in a cow barn a few miles from firing line. The most ticklish part of this job is the listening post on nobodies land between trenches, one has to remain perfectly silent & give the signal if necessary of any movement Fritz may be making & all of a sudden one finds himself staring right into the eyes of a big squareheaded German crawling through the grass on the same duty. The listening post carries a rifle & ammunition but has orders not to fire unless absolutely necessary, so we don't stop to argue the point. By the way there is generally an extra ration of rum on this post, which helps considerably. One is just given enough to cultivate the fighting mood, but some fellows say it makes them feel like going over to Fritz & shaking hands.

I think Lance is at Marsielles now, he was about thirty miles from here until just lately. He is in a far better branch of the service than this, we are supposed to be a mounted regiment but are doing just the same work as infantry. We have broken in two lots of horse & had them taken away from us again. There is only one squadron of mounted Canadians who have been allowed to keep their mounts out here. My address is Trooper J.L. Newton #109529. B. Squadron. 4th C.M.R. 2nd Brigade C.M.R. Canadian Army Corps. B.E.F. France.

Let me have a another line from you, I will guarantee you an early reply. I expect it will be about Christmas time when you receive this, so I will close by wishing you a happy Xmas & a prosperous New Year.

From Your Affect. Bro
Jack.

Scan the source before you look at the questions—a quick read will let you know what kinds of evidence you are dealing with. Notice that Source A is a letter home from a Canadian soldier in the front lines of WWI. Then, try the “Thinking It Through” questions that follow the sources.

? Use Source A to answer questions 1 to 6.

1. Make a list of “special terms” used in the letter in Source A that represent WWI to you. Explain how and why these terms are important to your understanding of the war. Which of these terms stand out to you as particularly representative of the war?
2. How does the author feel about the enemy? Supply some evidence from the letter to back up your response.
3. Why do you think the soldiers at listening posts were given instructions not to fire unless absolutely necessary?
4. Letters from the Front were censored—screened by officials to ensure that Canadians at home didn’t learn war secrets or read condemning statements about the Canadian army or its allies, nor reports about Allied soldiers dying or in serious distress. In what way does the author write the letter so that it passes the censors? Supply some evidence from the letter to back up your response.
5. The author came from a farming community in Saskatchewan and kept horses. Given the new technology being used during the war, why were horses necessary? How do you think someone who kept horses would react to the use of horses during the war?
6. What does this primary source offer that a secondary source might not? What are the limitations of this primary source?

Look through the Expressing Understanding section below. These questions and activities are meant to extend your learning and push your creative thinking as well as critical thinking.

Expressing Understanding

7. Thousands of letters from soldiers at the front have been preserved. On their own, they are limited in their significance, but as a collection they form an impressive body of evidence about conditions and perceptions during the war. At what point would a letter become noteworthy enough in its own right as an important historical document? What criteria should be used to determine whether a source is historically significant?
8. Find out more about the role horses played in WWI. Make some comparisons to other uses of animals in warfare in the past. What factors do you think played the greatest part in changing this practice in the twentieth century?
9. Build a simple trench diagram that includes elements mentioned in Source A.
10. Create a storyboard to narrate the letter using a sequence of drawings.

Applying Historical and Geographic Thinking

At any point as you work with sources, you can apply the historical or geographic thinking concepts. For example:

Significance: Do individual letters from soldiers have any lasting impact on history, or do they simply refer to events and subjects that are significant? What was the legacy of trench warfare on the landscapes of Western Europe?

Evidence: How do historians use sources like this? Is this source reliable as an explanation of trench warfare in WWI? What efforts have been made to document the location of Canadian-built trenches?

Continuity and Change: What aspects of weaponry and combat from the source can still be seen in modern warfare?

Cause and Consequence: What caused the need for the trenches in the first place? Where and when were trenches first used? What were some consequences of WWI trench warfare in Western Europe?

Perspective: Who is “Fritz,” why is “he” called that? What can you learn about “his” perspective on trench warfare in WWI? How did the German trenches differ from Allied trenches?

Ethical Judgment: Can we objectively examine the use of horses in WWI without introducing our present-day values and ideas about the treatment of animals?



SOURCE A

Technology 1



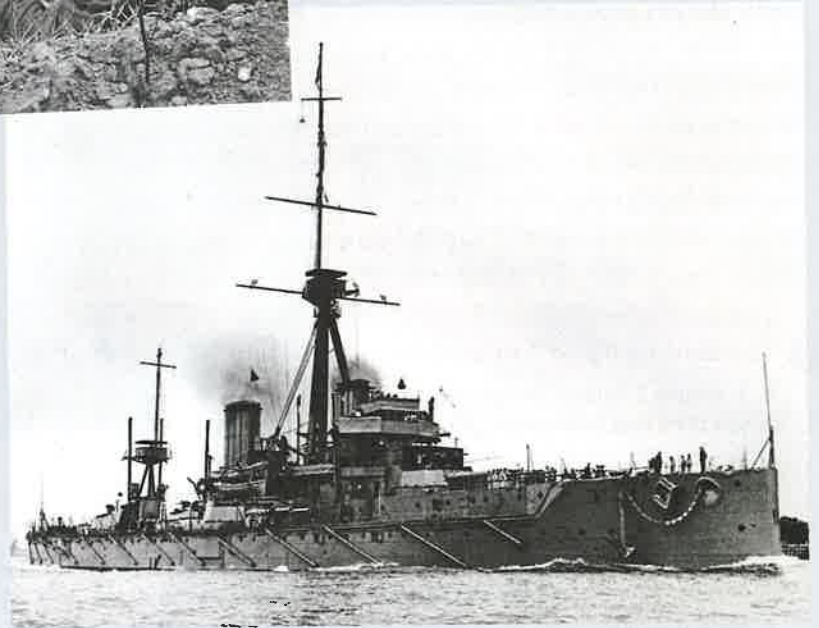
SOURCE B

Technology 2



SOURCE C Technology 3

SOURCE D
Technology 4



SOURCE E Technology 5



? Use Sources A to E to answer questions 1 to 3.

1. Identify six weapons of WWI that are shown in the images in Sources A to E. (Hints:) The left image in Source E shows destroyed trees caused by the weapon on the right. You can get two weapons from the image in Source C.
2. Which of the above technologies was developed during the war, and why was it necessary for them to be developed? What did the developers hope to achieve with these new technologies?
3. Are any of the above technologies still in use today or are they obsolete? What, if anything, has taken their place?

SOURCE F**Nurse Mabel B. Clint**

Excerpt from Mabel B. Clint's memoir, *Our Bit: Memories of War Service by a Canadian Nursing Sister*, 1934.

One very bad case became our "star" patient. His cyanosed face was the colour of mahogany, and for nearly two weeks he breathed only from oxygen cylinders. Two special nurses were assigned for his care for several days, substituting one tank for another without break. Enquiries came from Base Medical Stores as to what No. 1 Canadian was doing with the oxygen! I was not believed in England when I read from my diary that we used 59 cylinders, but it was recorded at the time. However, to the complete amazement of everyone, K...recovered, walked with assistance along the grassy paths one day, cheered by his sympathetic comrades, and saw England again. His farewell words were in regard to another sick man: "I'll say the Canadians are looking after him, and he'll be all right."

SOURCE G**Commander Haig's View on Casualties**

British commander Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig in June 1916 before the Battle of the Somme began.

The nation must be taught to bear losses. No amount of skill on the part of the higher commanders, no training, however good, on the part of the officers and men, no superiority of arms and ammunition, however great, will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men's lives. The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists.

? Use Sources F and G to answer questions 4 to 8.

4. In Source F, Nurse Clint talks about the patient's skin turning mahogany colour and his face being "cyanosed." What do you think that term means? How would the treatment of victims of gas attacks differ from the treatment of victims of shell explosions?
5. When and where do you think the gas attack occurred that resulted in the patient's treatment mentioned in Source F? Is this a primary or secondary source?
6. What does the quote in Source G say about General Haig's view of casualties during war? Do you think that other commanders of World War I would have shared Haig's view? Explain.
7. What is your opinion of Haig based on his quote? What factors influence how you perceive Haig's comments? In other words, how do you arrive at your opinion?
8. Note your response to the previous question. How similar or different do you think your opinion of Haig is compared to people living in Canada during WWI? What do you think Nurse Clint from Source F would think of Haig's comments?

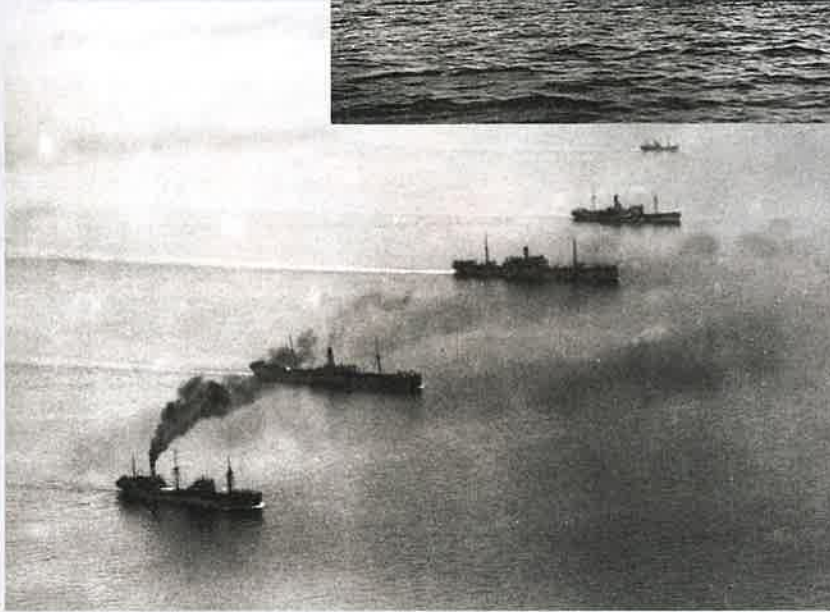
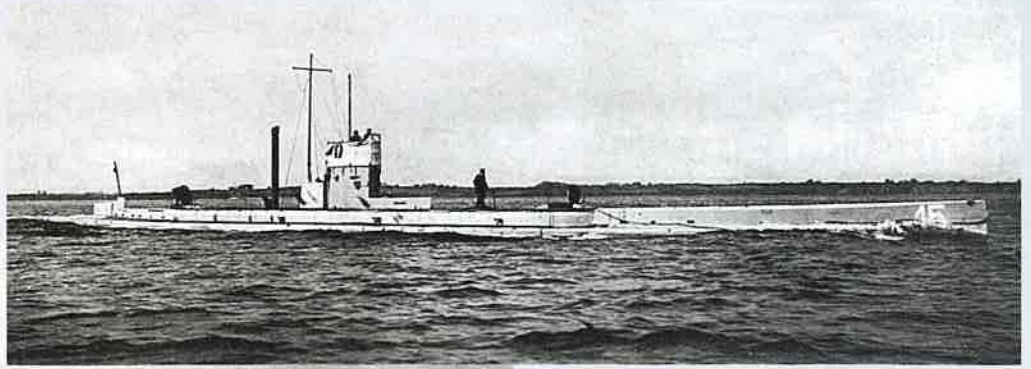
SOURCE H**Chlorine Gas Attack, c. 1917, France****SOURCE I****British Soldiers After a German Gas Attack, 1918**

? Use Sources H and I to answer questions 9 and 10.

9. Looking at the use of gas as seen in Source H, identify two advantages and two disadvantages of using gas as a weapon.
10. a) Looking at the British soldiers in Source I, how do you think the gas attack has affected them? Give evidence from the picture to back up your answer.
b) What might be other effects of the gas on these soldiers? Explain.

SOURCE J

WWI
U-boat,
1914



SOURCE K

Convoy of Ships in the
North Atlantic, 1916

? Use Sources J and K to answer questions 11 and 12.

11. Looking at the image in Source J, identify two ways that U-boats changed the war at sea during WWI.
12. Why was it necessary for the Allies to use convoys, as seen in Source K, to ship goods and supplies from Canada to Britain?

Expressing Understanding

13. In what way do the images in Sources A to E show that WWI was a "Total War"?
14. How would the experience of a nurse or doctor in a war zone today be different from or similar to those of World War I? How would present-day technology make their work easier (medical advancements) as well as more difficult (advanced weaponry)?
15. In what way would the attitude and views expressed by Haig in Source G help to explain the massive increase in the number of casualties during the Battle of the Somme as well as WWI in general?
16. The British and their allies also used gas during World War I, yet it is the Germans who are most criticized for its use. Give reasons why this is so. After WWI, gas was banned as a weapon by the Geneva Convention of 1929. Why was gas banned and not other types of technology, such as the machine gun or artillery, which killed many times more soldiers than gas? Are agreements that set up the rules of war a waste of time? Explain.
17. What weapon technology do you believe is immoral to use in a war?
18. Technology made WWI unique from all conflicts before it. Research and write a paragraph explaining how military technology makes modern conflicts today different from all previous ones.