LETTERS HOME

FROM A TRENCH SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR I

**Task:** Using your own research, simulation experience, and the following examples, get into the mindset of a Great War trench soldier. Write a letter home to your country describing your experience. This letter should be about a page in length and should include all of the following items:

1. Greeting and who you are writing to (parents, girlfriend/boyfriend, friends back home, etc…)
2. What is the war like?
3. What dangers do you face daily?
4. What is life like in the trench?
5. What diseases or sicknesses are you seeing daily?
6. What do you have to eat in the trench?
7. What are some other issues you have in living in the trench?
8. What are some positive things about living in the trench?
9. What do you and your fellow soldiers do to pass the time between attacks?
10. Information about the battle(s) they are fighting in.
11. How does your soldier feel about the war? (ex. enthusiastic, tired, disheartened, frustrated…)
12. Have a closing and put who the letter is from.
	1. Closings are ideas like: Your friend, Love, Best Wishes, etc…

**\*\*\*\*Do not copy and paste information. You many take inspiration from the examples but you MUST write this letter in your own words\*\*\***

**RUBRIC**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Criteria** | **Level 4 (80%-­‐100%)** | **Level 3 (70%-­‐79%)** | **Level 2 (60%-­‐69%)** | **Level 1 (50%-­‐59%)** |
|  | \* The letter | \* The letter | \* The letter | \* The letter |
|  | demonstrates an | demonstrates a | demonstrates a | demonstrates little |
|  | excellent | very good | fair understanding | to no |
|  | understanding of | understanding of | of the topic of | understanding of |
|  | the topic of study | the topic of study | study by | the topic of study |
| **Knowledge and** | by providing a | by providing a | mentioning some | by mentioning few |
| **Understanding** | description of the | description of the | or all of the | of the following: |
|  | following: the | following: the | following: the | the frontlines, |
|  | frontlines, what | frontlines, what | frontlines, what | what life is like for |
|  | life is like for the | life is like for the | life is like for the | the soldier, details |
|  | soldier, details of | soldier, details of | soldier, details of | of the battle |
|  | the battle | the battle | the battle |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Application** | \* The information is very interesting as it discusses all of the following: personal feelings of the soldier, feelings towards the person they are writing to, how they feel about war | \*The information is interesting as it discusses all of the following: personal feelings of the soldier, feelings towards the person they are writing to, how they feel about war | \*The information is somewhat interesting as it discusses some or all of the following: personal feelings of the soldier, feelings towards the person they are writing to, how they feel about war | \* The information is not interesting as it discusses some of the following: personal feelings of the soldier, feelings towards the person they are writing to, how they feel about war |
| **Communication** | \*the letter is excellently written and reads easily\*no mistakes in spelling and or grammar | \*the letter is well written and reads easily\*2 or no mistakes in spelling and or grammar | \*the letter is disorganized and does not read easily\*3-­‐5 mistakes in spelling and or grammar | \*the letter is disorganized and does not read easily\*more than 5 mistakes in spelling and or grammar |
| **Thinking & Inquiry** | \*the ideas in the letter are very original | \*the ideas in the letter are original | \*some of the ideas in the letter are original | \*little to no ideas in the letter are original |

**Total: /20**

**SAMPLE LETTERS FROM THE TRENCHES**

**“If you have never had trench foot described to you, I will explain. Your feet swell to two to three times their normal size and go completely dead. You can stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are lucky enough not to lose your feet and the swelling starts to go down, it is then that the most indescribable agony begins. I have heard men cry and scream with pain and many have had to have their feet and legs amputated. I was one of the lucky ones, but one more day in that trench and it may have been too late.”**

**(Harry Roberts)**

**"We must looked out for our bread. The rats have become much more numerous lately because the trenches are no longer in good condition. The rats here are particularly repulsive, they are so fat - the kind we call corpse-rats. They have shocking, evil, naked faces, and it is nauseating to see their long, nude tails."**

**Erich Maria Remarque**

**“No 1……2 Private A B; the Battalion (Pioneers) South Staffordshire Regiment was tried by FGCM on the following charges: “Misbehaving in such a manner as to show cowardice”. The accused, when proceeding with a party for work in the trenches, ran away owing to the bursting of a shell and did not rejoin the party. The sentence of the court was to suffer death by being shot."**

**“We slept in our clothes and cut our hair short so that it would tuck inside our caps. Dressing simply meant putting on our boots. There were times when we had to scrape the lice off with the blunt edge of a knife and our underclothes stuck to us. “**

**(Elizabeth de T’Serclaes – a nurse on the front line)**

**“To get a ‘cushy’ one is all the old hands think about. A bloke in the Camerons wanted a ‘cushy’ bad! Fed up and far from home he was. He puts his finger over the top and gets his trigger finger taken off and two more besides. “I’m off to bonny Scotland!” he says laughing. But on the way down to the dressing station, he forgets to stoop low where an old sniper is working. He gets it through the head.”**

**(Robert Graves)**

**“The water in the trenches through which we waded was alive with a multitude of swimming frogs. Red slugs crawled up the side of the trenches and strange beetles with dangerous looking horns wriggled along dry ledges and invaded the dugouts, in search of the lice that infested them.”**

**(unknown journalist)**

**“Whilst asleep during the night, we were frequently awakened by rats running over us. When this happened too often for my liking, I would lie on my back and wait for a rat to linger on my legs; then violently heave my legs upwards, throwing the rat into the air. Occasionally, I would hear a grunt when the rat landed on a fellow victim.”**

**(R L Venables)**

After the war, Captain G. H. Impey, 7th Battalion,

Royal Sussex Regiment, wrote about his experiences of

trench life.

The trenches were wet and cold and at this time some of

them did not have duckboards and dug-outs. The battalion

lived in mud and water. Altogether about 200 men were

evacuated for trench feet and rheumatism. Gum boots were

provided for the troops in the most exposed positions. Trench

feet was still a new ailment and the provision of dry socks

was vitally important. Part of the trench was reserved for

men to go two at a time, at least once a day, and rub each

other's feet with grease.

**Private George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969**)

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'. In parcels from home it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder or pomade, but the lice thrived on the stuff.

**Life in the Trenches**

Trenches and life within those [trenches](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/trench.htm) have become an enduring topic from [World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_one.htm). Throughout the war millions of soldiers experienced and endured the horrors of trench warfare. Some wrote down for posterity what these experiences were and as time has moved on from World War One more and more of these written documents – frequently in the form of a diary – have come to light. Others wrote about their experiences in book-form. On the British side “Goodbye to All That” by Robert Graves is considered a classic. For the Germans, “All Quiet on the Western Front” by Erich von Remarque was considered to be such a potent anti-war book that Hitler banned it. Over the years both books have sold in large numbers. In recent years “The Last Fighting Tommy” by Harry Patch gave an evocative account of trench life at [Passchendaele](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle_of_passchendaele.htm). Others who wrote about their lives in the trenches did not achieve the fame of Graves or Remarque but their accounts are equally as valid. As recently as 2006 a trench diary kept by Private Bert Camp was discovered by his grandsons while the letters written home from the trenches by Private Freddie Noakes were published for the first time in 2010.

However, regardless of who wrote what about the trenches, all have one consistent theme – the horrors experienced by the men who had to live in them.

All of the soldiers who fought in trenches would have had a good idea of what a good trench was like and what constituted a bad trench. Frank Richards wrote about his experiences in trenches:

“A good standing trench was about six foot deep, so that a man could walk upright during the day in safety from rifle-fire. In each bay of the trench we constructed fire-steps about two feet higher than the bottom of the trench, which enabled us to stand head and shoulders above the parapet. During the day we were working in reliefs, and we would snatch an hour’s sleep, when we could, on a wet and muddy fire-step, wet through to the skin ourselves.

If anyone had to go to the company on our right in the daytime he had to walk through thirty yards of waterlogged trench, which was chest-deep in water in some places.

The duckboard track was constantly shelled, and in places a hundred yards of it had been blown to smithereens. It was better to keep off the track when walking back and forth, but then a man had to make his way sometimes through very heavy mud…..wet snow had begun to fall, which turned into rain and some parts of the land were soon a bog of mud to get drowned in.”

Bruce Bairnsfather experienced trench life in the early stages of World War One.

“It was a long and weary night, that first one of mine in the trenches. Everything was strange, and wet and horrid. First of all I had to do and fix up my [machine guns](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/machine_guns.htm) at various points, and find places for the gunners to sleep in. This was no easy matter, as many of the dugouts had fallen in and floated off downstream.

In this, and subsequent descriptions of the trenches, I may lay myself open to the charge of exaggeration. But it must be remembered that I am describing trench life in the early days of [1914](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/1914_world_war_one.htm), and I feel sure that those who had experience of them will acquit me of any such charge.

To give a recipe for getting a rough idea, in case you want to, I recommend the following procedure. Select a flat ten-acre ploughed field, so sited that all the surface water of the surrounding country drains into it. Now cut a zig-zag slot about four feet deep and three feet wide diagonally across, dam off as much water as you can so as to leave about one hundred yards of squelchy mud; delve out a hole at one side of the slot, then endeavour to live there for a month on bully beef and damp biscuits, whilst a friend has instructions to fire at you with his Winchester every time you put your head above the surface.

Well, here I was anyway, and the next thing was to make the bets of it. As I have before said, these were the days of the earliest trenches in this war; days when we had none of those “props” such as corrugated iron, floorboards, and sand bags.

When you made a dug-out in those days you made it out of anything you could find, and generally had to make it yourself.”

Some British soldiers found that captured German trenches were better built than British ones – as H S Clapham wrote after a successful attack on a German trench in Y Wood.

“When I dropped into the Hun trench I found it a great place, only three wide, and at least eight feet deep, and beautifully made of white sandbags, back and front. At that spot there was no sign of any damage by our shells, but a number of dead Huns lay in the bottom. There was a sniper’s post just where I fell in, a comfortable little square hole, fitted with seats and shelves, bottles of beer, tinned meats and a fine helmet hanging on a hook.”

August Hope wrote about the horrors he experienced.

“It was 9 a.m. and the so-called trench was full of corpses and all sorts of equipment. We stood and sat on bodies as if they were stones or logs of wood. Nobody worried if one had its head stuck through or torn off, or a third had gory bones sticking out through its torn coat. And outside the trench one could see them lying in every kind of position. There was one quite young little chap, a Frenchman, sitting in a shell-hole, with his rifle on his arm and his head bent forward, but he was holding his hands as if to protect himself, in front of his chest in which there was a deep bayonet wound. And so they lay, in all their different positions, mostly Frenchman, with their heads battered in by blows from mallets and even spades, and all around rifles, equipment of all kinds and any number of kepis. The 154th had fought like furies in their attack, to revenge themselves for the shellfire.

A heap of five corpses lay just this side of the barrier; we were constantly having to tread on them to try to squash them down in the mud, because, in consequence of the gunfire, we couldn’t get them out of the trench. Our feelings gradually became quite blunted.”

**World War 1 Trench Warfare**

The Western Front during World [War 1](http://jimmythejock.hubpages.com/hub/World_war_1_A_Day_in_the_Trenches) stretched from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier with France.

Both sides dug themselves in ending any possible chance of a quick war; this caused a stalemate, which was to last for most of the war. Over 200,000 men died in the trenches of WW1, most of who died in battle, but many died from disease and infections brought on by the unsanitary conditions.

The Great War lasted from 1914-1918 simply because of the fighting in the trenches, where taking ground from the enemy was a slow process because when men tried to attack in the trenches they were shot down almost as quick as they emerged from their own trench.





**Life in the Trenches**

The first thing a new recruit would notice on the way to the Frontline was the smell, rotting bodies in shallow graves, men who hadn't washed in weeks because there were no facilities, overflowing cess pits, creosol or chloride of lime, used to stave off the constant threat of disease and infection. Cordite, the lingering odour of poison gas, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke, and cooking food. Although overwhelming to a new recruit, they soon got used to the smell and eventually became part of the smell with their own body odour.



A Dead soldier lies rotting on the battlefield

**Rats and Lice**

Rats were a constant companion in the [trenches](http://jimmythejock.hubpages.com/hub/World-War-1-A-Letter-From-The-Trenches) in their millions they were everywhere, gorging themselves on human remains (grotesquely disfiguring them by eating their eyes and liver) they could grow to the size of a cat.

Men tried to kill them with bullets shovels or anything else they had at hand, but they were fighting a losing battle as only 1 pair of rats can produce 900 offspring in a year.

Some [soldiers](http://jimmythejock.hubpages.com/hub/World_War_1_America_Declares_War_on_Germany) believed that the rats knew when there was going to be a heavy bombardment from the enemy lines because they always seemed to disappear minutes before an attack.

Lice were a constant problem for the men breeding in dirty clothing they were impossible to get rid of even when clothes were washed and deloused there would be eggs that would escape the treatment in the seams of the clothes.

Lice caused [Trench Fever](http://hubpages.com/topics/health/first-aid/first-aid-for-fever/2379), a particularly painful disease that began suddenly with severe pain followed by high fever. Recovery - away from the trenches - took up to twelve weeks.

It was not discovered that lice were the cause of trench fever though until 1918.

Millions of frogs were found in shell holes covered in water; they were also found in the base of trenches. Slugs and horned beetles crowded the sides of the trench. Many men chose to shave their heads entirely to avoid another prevalent scourge: nits.

The cold wet and unsanitary conditions were also to [cause trench](http://jimmythejock.hubpages.com/hub/World-War-1-Trench-Living) foot amongst the soldiers, a fungal infection, which could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench Foot was more of a problem at the start of trench warfare; as conditions improved in 1915, it rapidly faded, although a trickle of cases continued throughout the war.



Highland Territorials jumping a German trench when attacking on the Cambrai front

**Shell Shock**

Between 1914 and 1918 the British Army identified 80,000 men (2% of those who saw active service) as suffering from shell-shock. Early symptoms included tiredness, irritability, giddiness, lack of concentration and headaches. Eventually the men suffered mental breakdowns making it impossible for them to remain in the front-line. Some came to the conclusion that the soldiers condition was caused by the enemy's heavy artillery. These doctors argued that a bursting shell creates a vacuum, and when the air rushes into this vacuum it disturbs the cerebro-spinal fluid and this can upset the working of the brain.

**World War 1**

**Hell on Earth**

Death was everywhere in the trenches, at any time of day or night it could be your corpse laying in the mud, whether through the shell bombardment, poison gases, disease or a random bullet from a sniper.