

Civil War Letters: Writing from Primary Sources

Name: _____ Date: _____

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze the tone and content of a real Civil War soldier's letter and write an original letter home using historically accurate details.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- notebook paper
- pen or pencil (blue or black ink for an 'old letter' look)
- tea bag (optional, for aging paper -- adult supervision)
- internet-connected device or history reference

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

1. Read the excerpt below, adapted from a real Civil War soldier's letter (Sullivan Ballou to his wife Sarah, 1861): "I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government... my love of country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battle field."
2. Identify and underline the sentence that shows the soldier's internal conflict between love of family and duty to his country.
3. Research (using an internet-connected device or reference book) three real facts about daily camp life for Civil War soldiers (food, shelter, or communication).
4. Write an original 8-10 sentence letter as if you are a Civil War soldier writing home. Include the three real facts you researched and at least one line expressing conflicted feelings, similar to Ballou's.
5. Optional: lightly dab a used, cooled tea bag on the edges of your paper (with adult supervision) to give it an aged look, then let it dry.

QUESTIONS

1. What internal conflict does Sullivan Ballou describe in his letter?

2. Why are personal letters like this considered valuable primary sources for historians?

3. What three real facts about Civil War camp life did you include in your letter?

4. What conflicted feeling did you include in your letter, and how does it compare to Ballou's?
