

REPORTING AMERICA AT WAR

CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Finding the Right Words

SUBJECT:

Journalism,

ESTIMATED**TIME REQUIRED:**

Three class periods.

OVERVIEW:

As Episode 1 of *Reporting America at War* reveals, war correspondents realize the importance of capturing the scene they are witnessing and finding the right words to convey what they see, all the while battling the whims of government or the military or both and the wily world of censorship. How hard is it to capture the essence of a scene using only words? Explore with your students some of the points these veteran correspondents make about the power of good writing during wartime, and allow students to try their hand at capturing a scene and finding the right words to describe it.

RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON:

Episode 1 of the *Reporting America at War*

Copies of “The Power of Detail” http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=26615 and copies of the award-winning article “Metal to Bone” by Anne Hull found on the same page.

Copies of “The Power of Brevity” http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=32195 and copies of the award-winning article “Desperate Days at the Merlin: Donald “Joe” Peak” by Julie Sullivan found on the same page.

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON:

Indiana Historical Society feature on Ernie Pyle

<http://www.indianahistory.org/heritage/pyle.html>

Scripps-Howard feature on Ernie Pyle <http://scripps.com/foundation/programs/pyle/pyle.html>

Ernie Pyle State Historic site <http://www.in.gov/ism/HistoricSites/ErniPyle/Historic.asp>

The “Radio Days” Edward R. Murrow site complete with biographical information on Murrow as well as sound links to Murrow broadcasts is located at <http://www.otr.com/murrow.html>

Murrow biography page from the State Library of North Carolina

<http://www.prioris.dcr.state.nc.us/nc/bio/literary/murrow.html>

“American Masters” page on Murrow

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/murrow_e.html

NPR page on Walter Cronkite, including sound files <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/cronkite>

Newseum “War Stories” page on Cronkite with sound files

<http://www.newseum.org/warstories/interviews/mp3/journalists/bio.asp?ID=28>

PBS Frontline interview with Cronkite

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/smoke/interviews/cronkite2.html>

Biography on Martha Gellhorn <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/gellhorn.htm>

NewsHour transcript, “The Women Who Wrote the War”

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/july-dec99/worldwar_women_10-11.html

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Newseum “War Stories” page on Andy Rooney with sound files

<http://www.newseum.org/warstories/interviews/mp3/journalists/bio.asp?id=14>

Capitol Hill Blue story on Homer Bigart http://www.capitolhillblue.com/artman/publish/article_2054.shtml

Malcolm Browne biography <http://www.sigmaxi.org/programs/prizes/honor.browne.shtml>

C-Span “American Writers” Classroom page on David Halberstam

http://www.americanwriters.org/classroom/resources/tr_halberstam.asp#

“60 Minutes” profile on Morley Safer <http://www.bs.news.com/stories/1998/07/09/60minutes/main13545.shtml>

NewsHour interview with Morley Safer on Vietnam

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.html

CNN interview with Peter Arnett about the first Gulf War <http://www.thehoya.com/news/012403/news8.cfm>

“Religion and Ethics” interview with Chris Hedges

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week622/hedges.html>

Newseum “War Stories” page on Christiane Amanpour with sound files

<http://www.newseum.org/warstories/interviews/mp3/journalists/bio.asp?id=23>

CNN biography page http://www.cnn.com/CNN/anchors_reporters/amanpour.christiane.html

STRATEGY FOR THIS LESSON:

1) Write the following quote from Episode 1 on the board for students to read:

“That’s why correspondents want to be there [war]; it has all to do with storytelling.” Bill Buford.

Then, ask students to brainstorm writing strategies or oral techniques that make for good storytelling. Students might draw from lessons learned about feature writing (e.g., use of description, vivid quotes, memorably described characters, clarity, concise writing, etc.) or lessons learned about fiction (e.g. suspenseful plot, strong dialogue, vivid characters, controlled writing, etc.). Make a list on the board of all the ideas the students were able to generate. Review the list and discuss with students how each idea might relate to the world of the war correspondent. For example, if the point of “description” had been mentioned as an important writing strategy in storytelling, discuss how description can capture the landscape of the battlefield for the reader back home who can’t see it.

Distribute copies of “The Power of Detail” and let students read the introduction to the award-winning article “Metal to Bone” by Anne Hull. Allow students to react to the article and to the reporters’ comments on writing with detail, and then encourage students to make connections to some of the points that the war correspondents made in Episode 1 about war reporting. Ask students if they see any connections? Similarities? Differences?

2) Divide students into small discussion groups. Assign each group one or two of the following quotes, depending on your class size. Have students discuss what each quote implies about the art of capturing the truth or horror of the war scene, the relating of history as it occurs, and censorship.

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QUOTES:

“History begins to face alteration as every second ticks by past the event itself. This is the first line of history...the correspondents and the reporters.” Walter Cronkite.

“In WWI, you had 50,000 Americans killed in just about a year, year and a half – it’s pretty hideous and trench warfare is hideous – and I don’t think the American people got any sense of what trench warfare was like from their daily newspapers. They read about it later in novels and books.” Rick MacArthur

“It was committed journalism, probably the beginning of real committed journalism where you were involved. You couldn’t write objectively because it would have been treacherous to the side in which you believed.” Phillip Knightly

Choosing sides in a war is not necessarily a bad thing...war correspondents need more than just the truth to get them to risk their lives.” Rick MacArthur

“As General Dwight D. Eisenhower declared in early 1942: “Correspondents have a job in war as essential as the military personnel. Fundamentally, public opinion wins wars.”

“A war correspondent has conflicting loyalties. On one side, do you have some responsibility to protecting the morale? Is there a time when criticism should be withheld because it’s such a delicate moment in a military campaign? On the other side, you have a tremendous responsibility to the people, the people back home, to give them a fairly clear view of what’s going on.” Mitchell Stephens

“War correspondents, they all grapple finally with the horror. They may not give it to us completely unvarnished, but they all see it for what it is, and they struggle to communicate it. I mean, I think in the end we’re the last romantics...because we keep fighting after we recognize how dark human beings are.” Chris Hedges

“There’s a very complicated mission that a war reporter’s got. To write something that a reader wants to read and to write something which is actually describing the ugliness of war. Giving us the narrative of war, it’s also a way of making sense of the thing we can never make sense of. The great war reporter makes a narrative out of the thing that can’t be told.” Bill Buford

Then, students should discuss the significant issues that relate to journalistic writing that are apparent in each quote. Encourage each group to share their observations with the class..

3) Assign students to go out into their community and find a “scene” to observe. Some possible scenes to observe could include: the frenzied cafeteria lines and dining scene at the height of lunchtime or dinner-time; the center of the college campus (quad, lawn, etc.) or the main hallway of your school at a specific, busy time; the library during peak study time; a busy science lab (with instructor’s permission); the office of a busy administrator; the newsroom; the student radio station. Have students spend an hour taking notes, listening to the sounds and conversations around them. Then, assign students to write their observations in such a way that they capture the essence of that scene. Encourage students to find the right words and the right tone for their scene, much like Ernie Pyle did in his famous articles.

Provide students with copies of “The Power of Brevity” and the award-winning article “Desperate Days at the Merlin: Donald “Joe” Peak” by Julie Sullivan. Assign students to read the handout before they begin writing their own scene. Students should plan to write about three double-spaced, typed pages. Have students share their work during the next class period. If possible, you might want to collect copies (perhaps revised and edited) and collate them into a collection for the class.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do the correspondents featured in Episode 1 seem more pro-war or anti-war as they reflect on their past wartime writing experiences? How do the experiences they had and the sights they saw seem to have affected them over the years?
2. In your opinion, does the war correspondent have to risk his or her life in order to report successfully? Is this too much to ask of a journalist or within the scope of the profession? Explain your answer.
3. Compare the experiences of veteran war correspondents' featured in the documentary with more recent war reporting by embedded reporters during the war with Iraq. What are the similarities and differences in style, tone and expression?
4. Explain some of the groundbreaking feats that Edward R. Murrow did during his broadcasts of WWI. What made these actions groundbreaking?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Assign students find out more about the reporters' featured in the documentary, and create a presentation for the class about their writing lives. Some students may select to review Ernie Pyle, Ernest Hemmingway, Martha Gellhorn, Chris Hedges, Mitchell Stephens, Phillip Knightly, Andy Rooney, Bill Buford, Victoria Glendening or Edward R. Murrow.

RELEVANT STANDARDS:

This lesson meets the following standards established for high school journalism in the publication *Applying NCTE/IRA Standards in Classroom Journalism Projects*, published by NCTE, 2002.

See also: <http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>

Standard 1: Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

Standard 5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 6: Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

Standard 11: Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lisa Greeves has taught high school English and Journalism classes for two Virginia school systems: Fairfax County Public Schools and Rockbridge County Schools. She has a bachelor's degree in English and Communication from James Madison University and a Master's Degree in English from Virginia Commonwealth University. She recently had a chapter published in the 2002 NCTE publication *Applying NCTE/IRA Standards in Classroom Journalism Projects*.