

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN: THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

VIMY IN LETTERS: WORKSHEETS

29th Infantry Battalion advancing over "No Man's Land" through the German barbed wire and heavy fire during the Battle of Vimy Ridge (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/W.I. Castle/PA-001020).

Personal letters give us a unique window into the past. They let us peer beneath the surface of another person's life and see history from a new perspective. Letters from soldiers who fought at the Battle of Vimy Ridge can provide us with a deeper understanding of the details of war while also revealing their personal perspectives. The language of a letter can provide insight into the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values of the writer. However we must remember that the letter's recipient is always in the mind of the writer. In this way, a letter becomes part of a conversation between the writer and recipient.

The first-hand observations of soldiers are crucial to understanding the Canadian experience of Vimy. From this we can piece together a wider picture of the past.

These worksheets accompany the video *Think Like a Historian: Vimy in Letters* (Francis Bathe), which explores a letter written by Francis Bathe to his sister May following his experiences at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. To mark the centennial of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Historica Canada has created the *Think Like a Historian* series of videos and worksheets to support educators and students in thinking critically about primary sources. The *Think Like a Historian* series was produced with the generous support of the Government of Canada. Historica Canada is the country's largest organization dedicated to enhancing awareness of Canada's history and citizenship.



A private moment (courtesy Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Archival Collection/CWM 19920044-393).

GUIDING QUESTION: What can Francis Bathe's letter reveal about the Battle of Vimy Ridge?

There are five key steps to analyzing primary sources:

1. The 5Ws
2. Context
3. Exploring
4. Reaching Conclusions
5. Finding Proof

TEACHER TIP: To complete these worksheets, students may want to watch the videos more than once. Turning on the subtitles can help second language learners understand the video. Watch the video as a class at least twice before beginning the worksheets. Work through the steps above, starting and stopping the video as needed.



A letter from home (courtesy Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Archival Collection/CWM 19920044-070).

A project of

HISTORICA
CANADA

With the
support of

Canada

THE 5Ws

The first stage of analysis is asking questions of the primary source. Working in pairs, answer the following questions after watching the *Vimy in Letters* video.

WHO? Who wrote the letter?	
WHEN? When was the letter written?	
WHERE? Where was the letter written?	
WHAT? What is communicated in the letter?	
WHY? Why do you think the letter was written?	

EXTENSION: Are there any gaps in your answers? Where might you look for more information?

CONTEXT

Contextualizing a primary source involves trying to place the source in space and time. Examining the context of a source helps us situate one piece of evidence into the wider picture of history. To analyze Francis Bathe's letter as a piece of evidence from the past, it is important to conduct additional research about what else was happening around the time the letter was written.

Francis Bathe was born in England in 1895 but moved to Oshawa, Ontario, as a boy. At the age of 20, Bathe enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in March 1916. He sailed for England in July 1916, where he began training. In February 1917, he saw military action in France as part of the 116th Battalion. Francis Bathe was one of nearly 100,000 Canadians who participated in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, and was one of more than 7,000 soldiers wounded in the battle. Though he suffered a wound to his neck, Bathe recovered quickly. He returned to Canada in 1919 and married. After the war, Francis Bathe started a building supply company in Oshawa, Ontario, which is still in the Bathe family four generations later. For more information, visit <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/3152:transcript-from-letter/>.

More than 3,000 Canadian nurses served during the First World War. They cared for the wounded at the front, on the ambulance train journey to the coast of France, and on the hospital ships that brought the wounded to England. Yet the stories of these nurses are often unknown.



Portrait of Francis Bathe in uniform (courtesy of the Bathe family/The Memory Project/Historica Canada).

STUDENT ACTIVITY

- ▶ Working in pairs or small groups, explore the experiences of nursing sisters during the war.
- ▶ Read **Nursing Sisters** and **Canadian Army Medical Corps Nursing Sisters** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, taking notes on your research. Francis Bathe would have been cared for by nurses on the front and on the journey to England.
- ▶ Keep in mind the stories that are not told in his letter. Brainstorm a list of other stories and perspectives that are left out (e.g., commanders at the front, other wounded soldiers, family at home).
- ▶ Discuss the results of your brainstorm as a class and write the ideas on the board.



A Canadian nurse (courtesy Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Archival Collection/CWM 19920085-353).

MODIFICATION: Watch the “Nursing Sisters” Heritage Minute. Take notes on the perspective of the main character. What does this add to your understanding of Francis Bathe's experience as a wounded soldier at the front?

EXPLORING

Investigating the details of a letter can reveal important clues about the time and place it was written. Soldiers often used trench slang and metaphors to describe their experiences. To explore the details of the letter and interpret its full meaning, we need to decode the language in its historical context. Exploring primary sources often leads to more questions, as a single primary source may not answer all of the questions we ask of it.

NOTE TO EDUCATORS: Students should work in pairs to define the slang terms below. A matching vocabulary worksheet for students can be found on the final page of this worksheets package. Once the vocabulary chart worksheets have been completed, discuss them as a class and proceed to the student activity below.

ANSWER KEY

Blighty or blightys	=	England and/or non-fatal wound	Severed	=	Cut off
Fritz	=	Germans	Bavarians	=	Germans
My bean	=	My head	Go over the top	=	To leave the safety of a trench and go into battle
By gee	=	Mild exclamation	Rabbit holes	=	Shell holes
Napooed	=	Dead	Sam Hill	=	Mild swear word
Shrapnel	=	Metal shards from an explosive shell	Shake paws	=	Shake hands
Chum	=	Friend	Left the rent on the mantelshelf	=	Left behind artillery and other weapons
Stretcher bearers	=	Military personnel who carried the injured from a battlefield on a stretcher	Beat it	=	Retreated

STUDENT ACTIVITY:

1. Read Francis Bathe's letter in the "Primary Sources" section of thinklikeahistorian.ca.
2. Highlight or underline words or phrases you are unfamiliar with or do not know.
3. Use the vocabulary chart to "decode" some of the slang terms used.
4. What questions does this letter spark?
5. What would you ask Francis Bathe if you could speak with him?

ALTERNATE ACTIVITY: What is the letter about?
Summarize the basic details.

Detail of the letter Francis Bathe sent to his sister one week after the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 1917 (courtesy of the Bathe family/The Memory Project/Historica Canada).

REACHING CONCLUSIONS

As you gather information about a primary source, start to develop an interpretation based on what you can infer from your observations. Consider the following questions when arriving at your conclusions:

- ▶ What can this source reveal about the Battle of Vimy Ridge?
- ▶ What does this letter tell us about what it was like to be a soldier at the Battle of Vimy Ridge?

STUDENT ACTIVITY:

1. Working individually, make a list of five conclusions you have reached based on your analysis.
2. Working in pairs, share your findings with your partner. Compare your conclusions. In your pair, come to a yes or no answer about the following question: Does this letter represent the common experience of a soldier at the Battle of Vimy Ridge?
3. Come together as a class and take a vote on the above question. Be prepared to defend your decision!



An improvised desk (courtesy Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Archival Collection/CWM 19920044-504).



On the way to Blighty. Soldiers say goodbye to wounded comrades leaving a casualty clearing station (courtesy Canadian War Museum/George Metcalf Archival Collection/CWM 19920044-819).

FINDING PROOF

Before a final conclusion can be drawn about the experience of soldiers at the Battle of Vimy Ridge, we need to corroborate our inferences about Francis Bathe's letter by comparing our conclusions with other primary and secondary sources.

- ▶ Compare Francis Bathe's letter to the article on the **Battle of Vimy Ridge** on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.
- ▶ Create a T-chart. On one side, make a list of the conclusions you have drawn about Francis Bathe's experience. On the other side, create a list of facts from the article that support your conclusions. Can your conclusions be corroborated?



Canadian Byng Boys returning after beating the Germans at Vimy Ridge (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/PA-001451).

CORROBORATION: Evidence that confirms a conclusion.

FRANCIS BATHE LETTER - CONCLUSIONS	THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE - CORROBORATION

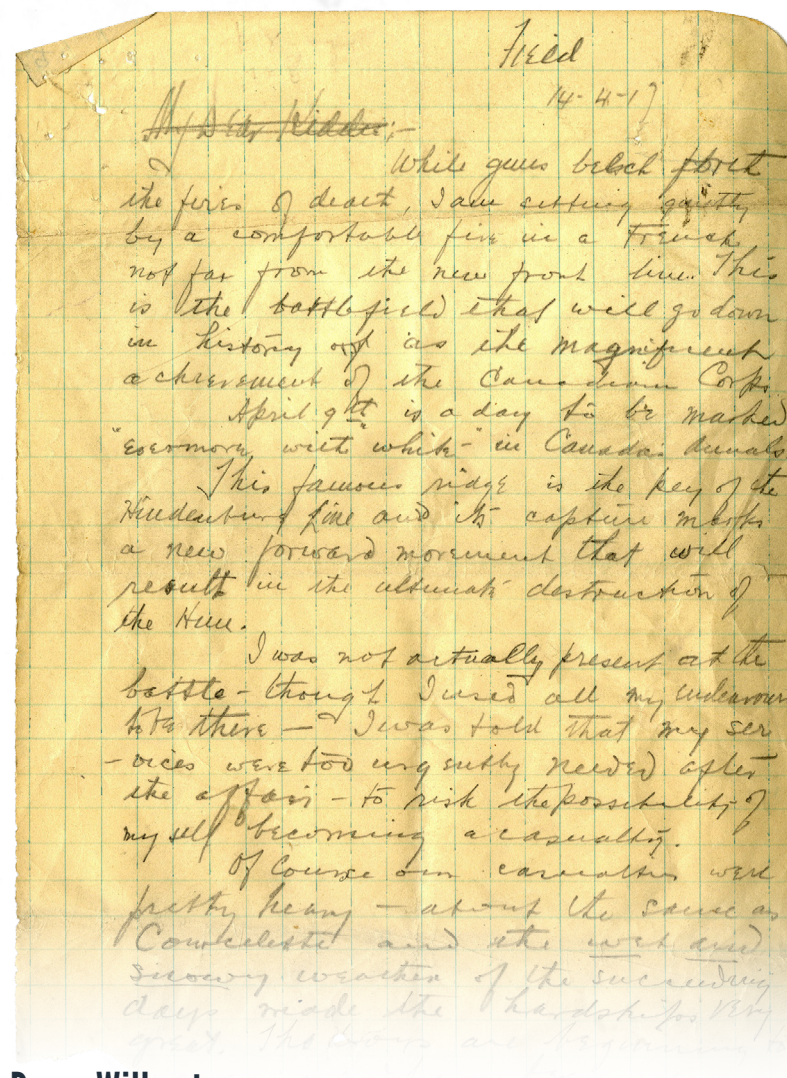
- ▶ Write a half-page summary that assesses the benefits and challenges of working with personal letters as a primary source.
- ▶ Using examples from the **Battle of Vimy Ridge** article, write a half-page reflection on whether you were able to confirm your conclusions from Francis Bathe's letter.
- ▶ Discuss the findings as a class.

ALTERNATE ACTIVITY: Create a T-chart listing the strengths and limitations of working with letters as a primary source.

FINDING PROOF (continued)

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Compare Francis Bathe's letter to the letter of another soldier (**see below**) at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. What is similar about these letters? What is different? What can this tell us about whether Francis Bathe's experience was common of soldiers during the war?



Percy Willmot

Born in Birmingham, England in 1887, Willmot came to Canada in 1895 as one of hundreds of “home children” sent across the Atlantic as a way to flee urban industrial poverty. While living in Sydney, Cape Breton, he felt the call of duty to empire, and enlisted in the CEF in 1914. He served with the 25th Battalion, a unit of recruits from Nova Scotia, though many were British-born. After some military training in Halifax, he shipped out for England in May 1915, becoming a part of the Second Division of the Canadian Corps on arrival. While Willmot arrived at the front that September, his role as a staff sergeant meant he did not see combat. Nevertheless, he saw much of the destruction that the war brought, including the devastation at the Somme. He became an officer in 1918, though did not return to the front until August. Wounded by friendly fire at Cambrai, he was sent to a hospital in England, where he stayed for the duration of the war. Although he was able to return to Nova Scotia in the summer of 1919, he stayed in a Halifax hospital as his health deteriorated. He died 27 December 1919.

Percy Willmot to Dorothy Willmot, 16 April 1917

“While guns belch forth the fires of death, I am sitting quietly by a comfortable fire in a trench not far from the new front line. This is the battlefield that will go down in history as the magnificent achievement of the Canadian Corps.

During 18 mos of warfare I have become more or less deadened to feeling & emotion but I could not prevent the tears from rolling down my cheeks, and the choking in my throat for the cheery lads who were marching away, many of them never to return. At 5:28 AM on the morning of the ninth our lads were at their appointed places. At 5:30 thousands of guns of all calibres belched forth a fire such as was never before seen in all the war. Nothing human could stand it. As the guns spoke, over the bags they went – men of CB, sons of NS & NB – FC’s [French Canadians] & westerners – all Canucks.”

Letter from Percy Willmot to Dorothy Willmot, 14 April 1917 (courtesy of the Beaton Institute/Cape Breton University/MG 20.15.1 B).

FINDING PROOF (continued)

Harold Panabaker to Emily Hager, 7 May 1917

"As you know our Canadian Infantry stormed and captured Vimy Ridge on the morning of the 9th of April.

[...] at 5.30 the barrage was opened up. Even down in the tunnel, which was close to 60 feet deep, the sound was like a vast roll of thunder. We hurried out and I do not think I shall ever forget the sight which met our eyes as we reached the lip of the crater into which the tunnel ran.

A couple hundred yards in front of us was the first wave of the attack, the figures of the men were outlined against the murk and the smoke of the most stupendous barrage the war has seen. The greyness of the early dawn was increased by a thin misty drizzle of rain which was gradually turning the powdered and broken ground into sticky wet clayey mud."

Harold Panabaker

Born in Hespeler, Waterloo, Ontario in 1897, Panabaker was a bookkeeper at the R. Forbes Company, Limited and a member of "C" Battery in the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery before enlisting in the war at the age of 18 in 1915. As a sergeant, he fought in the trenches throughout the war, including at the Battles of Ypres and Vimy Ridge, where he won a Military Medal for bravery. Following the war, he was for a short time a Methodist Church minister before pursuing a long career as an educator in Alberta, culminating with his role as Assistant Superintendent of Schools for the Calgary Board of Education. He died in 1977.

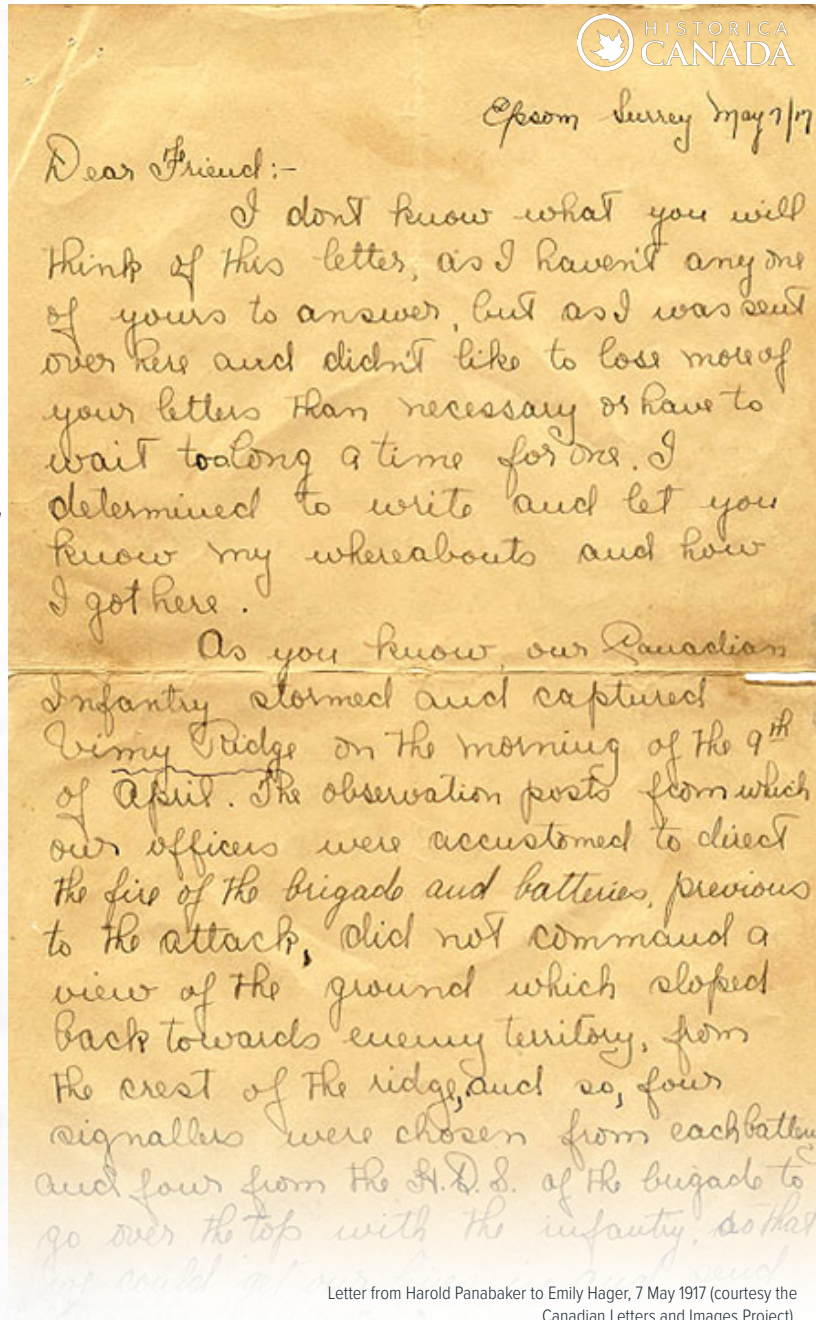
EXTENSION: Compare Francis Bathe's letter with the other sources in this series, including photographs and newspapers. Do these other sources confirm or challenge the inferences and conclusions you have drawn from this letter? Do you notice any differences or discrepancies?

SUMMATIVE ACTIVITY

Communications have changed drastically in the past 100 years. How would a Canadian soldier today communicate with family and friends? How might this be similar to 1917? In what ways would this be different than in 1917? Discuss as a class.

EXIT CARD: 3-2-1

- ▶ What are three new things that you learned about the Battle of Vimy Ridge?
- ▶ What are two new things that you learned about primary sources?
- ▶ What is one question that you have now?



Letter from Harold Panabaker to Emily Hager, 7 May 1917 (courtesy the Canadian Letters and Images Project).

EXPLORING (Matching Vocabulary Worksheet)

STUDENT INSTRUCTION: Work in pairs to define the slang terms below. Draw a line between Column A and Column B to connect the words with their definitions.

COLUMN A

Blighty or blightys

Fritz

My bean

By gee

Napooed

Shrapnel

Chum

Stretcher bearers

Severed

Bavarians

Go over the top

Rabbit holes

Sam Hill

Shake paws

Left the rent on the mantelshelf

Beat it

COLUMN B

Left behind artillery and other weapons

Retreated

England and/or non-fatal wound

Germans

Mild swear word

My head

Shake hands

Germans

Metal shards from an explosive shell

Military personnel who carried the injured from a battlefield on a stretcher

Mild exclamation

Friend

Cut off

Shell holes

To leave the safety of a trench and go into battle

Dead