

# PRIMARY SOURCES: A LETTER FROM THE BRITISH TRENCHES DURING WWI

By U.K. National Archives, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.02.17 Word Count 491 Level 1100L

British troops are pictured in a trench in France during World War I in this photo published in 1917. Photo by: Bain News Service →

**Editor's Note:** This is one of many letters sent by workers of the Great Western Railway, at Paddington train station in London. They had enlisted to fight in World War I. Britain was allied with France, against Germany and Austria-Hungary. The German army had invaded France, so Britain sent its army to support France.



Jonathan George Symons wrote this letter on November 10, 1915, in France. He was a member of the County of London Regiment, the King's Royal Rifle Corps. Symons lived through World War I.

Dear Bert,

Just a few lines to let you know I am alright, hoping you are the same. At the present time, we are in dugouts. The weather is simply awful, raining day after day and especially night after night. To tell you the truth, while writing this letter I am wet through to the skin with nothing dry to change into. We have got our winter fur coats and rubber boots, but the boots cause more curses than you can imagine.

For instance, last night I was sent off to select dugouts for our group, which is number 37. It was pitch dark, no light allowed and in a strange place, well honestly I fell over at least 20 times and got smothered in mud from head to feet. On top of that, I got wet because it rained in buckets. While I was inspecting the dugouts this morning, to see if they were "comfortable" enough for the men, I was surrounded by people saying "Sergeant this" and "Sergeant that." Some people said, "How can you expect people to live in this?" Even worse, they had occupied a shelter that had collapsed overnight. They took shelter under a tree from 2 a.m. after looking for me for about half an hour, but couldn't find me, because the only thing that could get me up after settling down, if you can call it that, would be a German shell and then I'd have no other option but to move.

While in the trenches last week John and I were up to our knees in water and got our rubber boots half full. The line is a bit quiet lately and only now and again do we get a shelling, but one gets used to it. That, to give you an idea, is like sitting at Paddington and hearing the engines screech.

After our stretch this time I shall be looking forward to a short leave for I have been here nearly three months now and we stand a good chance. Well I must now conclude.

Yours sincerely,

*Jack Symons*

P.S. Every other home down near the rest camp is an estaminet (small French café) where they sell what they call "beer." As much as I like a drop of good beer, this stuff is awful muck.

# READING QUESTIONS

**Directions:** read the letter from the trenches on the previous page. Fill out the following primary source analysis chart.

<p>Who wrote it? When? Where? What kind of document is it?</p>	<p>What else is going on? Locally? Nationally? Globally?</p>	<p>Main Idea: what important things is this document trying to say? Write in your own words.</p>
<p>Why was this document written? What is its purpose? What is the author's point of view?</p>	<p>What words did you have trouble with? Look them up - what do they mean? What questions do you still have about the document?</p>	<p>Use everything you know so far: Do you think that trenches were a good idea or a bad idea? Explain why?</p>