Objectives

1. Engage students in reading a letter written from a World War I soldier to his cousin and explore the writer's perspective, as well as his choice of words and the imagery found within the letter, so that they are prepared to discuss and write about the excerpt.

2. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 9-10 ELA Common Core Standards for reading informational text, writing, language, speaking and listening:

   - **READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXT** - RI.9-10.1-8, 10
   - **WRITING** - W.9-10.1-10
   - **LANGUAGE** - L.9-10.4
   - **SPEAKING AND LISTENING** - SL.9-10.1-4, 6

Time

160 minutes (with up to an additional 120 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on “View from the Western Front” by Dr. Eugene Curtin

Overview

This letter, written by Dr. Eugene Curtin to his cousin Clare, depicts a soldier's desire to protect the freedoms his country enjoys as well as his feeling of horror toward the war that threatens those freedoms. In reading this letter, students will be exposed to a first-hand account of wartime, as told by a soldier to his cousin. Close examination of this letter will offer students the opportunity to engage with informative writing and the author’s point-of-view, and to write thoughtful, informed, and textually-rooted responses, consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for grades 9–10.

Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview (SL.9–10.1–2).** As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. Use the following questions to spur discussion following the preview:
a. What prior knowledge, if any, do you have of World War I? Why do you think World War I is referred to as “the great war?”

b. Based on the images you see in the preview, what conclusions can you make about World War I and how war was fought in 1917?

c. What do the images and the words “amazement and horror” convey about Dr. Curtin’s experience on the Western front?

Extension (additional 30 minutes)

d. **Discuss** *(L.9–10.4; SL.9–10.1)* In the preview, the narrator says that one thing that Dr. Eugene Curtin knows for certain is that there is “no grandeur in war.” Ask: What do you think the word “grandeur” means? (definition: the state of being grand or splendid; magnificence) How or why might some people apply this term to a war?

e. **Research** *(W.9–10.7-9; SL.9–10.2, 4-6)* Have students work individually or in pairs to research other images, words, and phrases that represent World War I. Students can create a presentation of images (e.g., battleground scenes, airplanes, recruitment posters) and read explanatory captions.

Engaging the Text (110 minutes)

2. **Read the Text (20 minutes)**

   a. **Read and Annotate** *(RI.9–10.1–6, 10)*. Have students read and annotate the introduction and text. If students are completing as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

   b. **Discuss** *(RI.9–10.1–4; SL.9–10.1)*. Have students meet in small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and insights they had while reading. As a class, discuss the following: Considering the conditions described in Dr. Curtin’s letter, is it surprising that he hopes they can “stick it out until the claws of the old Hun are clipped” and the Germans are “made powerless to start anything like this again.” What feelings do you imagine Clare has as she reads Dr. Curtin’s description of the war and the setting he and the other soldiers are in?

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

c. **Listen and Discuss** *(SL.9–10.1-4)*. As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Did students gain any new insights into the state of mind that Dr. Curtin is in at the time he writes this letter? What specific words or passages stand out in his descriptions of the conditions of war? Would it be hard or reassuring, as a relative or close friend of a soldier, to read a similar letter from a soldier stationed far away?

d. **Comprehend** *(RI.9–10.1-4)*. Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

3. **Watch SyncTV (20 minutes)**

   a. **Watch**. Either watch the SyncTV discussion associated with “View from the
Western Front” as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

b. **Focus (SL.9–10.1, 3)** Re-watch the portion of the episode beginning at 1:10, where the two students discuss the amount of detail Dr. Curtin includes. Would students want to receive a detailed description of war conditions, or a more general description without many specific details? Why would it be hard to receive either type of letter from a loved one?

c. **Focus (SL.9–10.1, 3)** Re-watch the section beginning around 2:40 in which the two students discuss Captain Curtin’s conflicting attitudes about the war. Have students compare his feelings of the war’s futility and its necessity.

d. **Focus (SL.9–10.1, 3)** Focus on the contribution of Corporal Shane Hart to the Skype conversation (6:30). What perspective does the experience of a modern soldier add to Curtin’s account of World War I?

e. **Discuss (SL.9–10.1, 3)** How is it possible to have conflicting emotions over a war? Does the fact that Curtin is a participant and not a civilian contribute to the multiple emotions he displays toward the war? What emotions do students think he is feeling, and what from the letter or SyncTV episode discussion cause them to think that?

f. **Discuss (SL.9–10.1, 3)** After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode that stood out the most. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Corporal Hart’s perspective? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring the groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

1. Corporal Hart stated that the tone and content of his letters differed based on whether he was writing to his family or his friends. What reasoning do you think that this soldier and others might have behind changing their tone based on their audience?

2. How might a letter from Captain Curtin to one of his medical colleagues in the United States sound different from the one written to Cousin Clare?

3. What does the statement “there is no grandeur in war” mean in the context of a large-scale event like World War I? Compare it to how war is often portrayed in film.

4. Captain Curtin talks about how war changes things negatively, while Corporal Hart describes a positive change. What do these accounts say about the effects of war?

5. In the second-to-last paragraph, Captain Curtin begins, “Oh, it’s a great war, Clare.” He concludes by referring to horror, sadness, and destruction. How can you reconcile these apparent contradictions?

6. What specific sentences or words stand out to you throughout the letter? Why? What do these parts of the letter mean to you?

**Extension (additional 30 minutes)**

g. **Write (W.9–10.2–5)**. As seen in the letter written by Captain Curtin, unpleasant events can bring about a multitude of different emotions. Have students think about a time in their life when they were faced with doing something unpleasant
but necessary. Students should write about the action they had to take, as well as conflicting feelings they experienced, such as anxiety and dread, but also courage and relief. After students have had time to write, have several share with the class.

h. **Write (ELL)**. Have students re-read Captain Curtin’s letter, noting specific places where they feel language suggests specific emotions. Have students write one- to two-sentence quotes from the letter, underlining the words or images that show how Captain Curtin is feeling. Then have students go back through the quotes they have selected and explain what he is feeling in that part of the letter and why.

4. **Think (10 minutes)**
   a. **Respond** *(RI.9–10.1–2; W.9–10.1, 4, 9)*. Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. **Write (50 minutes)**
   a. **Discuss** *(SL.9–10.1)*. Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and allow time for questions regarding the prompt and the assignment expectations. Use this short discussion time to make sure students have a clear understanding of the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.
   b. **Organize** *(RI.9–10.1-6, 10; W.9–10.1-5)*. Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. They should apply any outlining or organizational tools you have been working on as a class.
   c. **Write** *(W.9–10.1-6, 9–10)*. Have students go through the writing process of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.
   d. **Review** *(W.9–10.4-6)*. Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. If time allows, have students write a final revised version of their essays based on the suggestions their peers have given them, as well as any new ideas they might have for what their essays need.

**Extension (additional 40 minutes)**

   e. **Write** *(W.9–10.1-6, 9–10)*. For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.
   f. **Write** *(W.9–10.1-4)*. For homework, have students write a letter in response to Captain Curtin’s letter. They should focus on how his descriptions of conditions in the war made them feel, and what thoughts they had as they read.
   g. **Diagram and Discuss** *(SL.9–10.1-3; RI.9–10.1-3, 8; W.9–10.2)*. Create a Venn diagram in a central location in the classroom. Have students compare and contrast what they know about WWI and the war in Afghanistan. Discuss what a communication from a soldier stationed in Afghanistan might contain, and how it might be different from the letter written by Captain Curtin, a soldier during WWI. What might the two messages have in common? What do the similarities and differences say about war and history?
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. grandeur (n.) – the state of being grand or splendid; magnificence
2. drone (n.) – a low-pitched hum or buzz
3. liberal (adj.) – generous, bountiful
4. gallant (adj.) – brave, valiant, honorable, grand, noble
5. chateau (n.) – any stately residence imitating a distinctively French castle
6. Hun (n.) – a derogatory term for German soldiers during WWI

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What was the reason for Captain Curtin’s delay in writing to Clare?
   a. He had forgotten her.
   b. He didn’t have a pen or pencil.
   c. Conditions were poor for writing.
   d. She was pestering him.

2. Captain Curtin and the other soldiers were housed in:
   a. chateaus
   b. apartments
   c. trenches
   d. tents

3. Captain Curtin rejects the idea of:
   a. the grandeur of war.
   b. hope for the new year.
   c. the horror of war.
   d. the change war brings.

4. Which statement does not use wry humor?
   a. “My, but don’t war change things?”
   b. “At present we hope they are all friends above.”
   c. “…the fun I can assure you is all his.”
   d. “From the woods now comes the strain of a bag-pipe band…”

5. The phrase “graceful and gallant birds” refers to:
   a. planes
   b. bombs
   c. eagles
   d. dancers

6. By “old Fritz,” Captain Curtin means:
   a. Clare’s father.
   b. German soldiers.
   c. his captain.
   d. his weapon.
7. Captain Curtin is writing to Clare in order to
   a. describe his situation.
   b. calm her fears for his safety.
   c. express his feelings about the war.
   d. All of the above

8. What is Captain Curtin referring to in “...it is nicer to have it behind you than before you.”?
   a. bagpipes
   b. mud
   c. being in a battle
   d. writing a letter

9. What is a nickname for the English soldiers?
   a. Yorkies
   b. Tommies
   c. Royals
   d. Brits

10. What part of the war most affects Captain Curtin?
    a. The horror
    b. The destruction
    c. The death of fellow soldiers
    d. All of the above

Answer Key

1. C
2. D
3. A
4. D
5. A
6. B
7. D
8. C
9. B
10. D
Further Assignments

1. Have students write Captain Curtin a letter from Clare in response to his. They should include thoughts or a question relating to his letter as well as news from home, both fictional events and at least one factual event in the U.S. at the time Captain Curtin’s letter was written (1917). (RI.9–10.1-3 and W.9–10.2-4, 7–9)

2. Have students do research and write Captain Curtin a letter from their perspective as American students in the 2010s. Students might let Captain Curtin know how “the Great War” ended and how subsequent events impacted the future for Germany, Britain, France and America, with reference to such developments as World War II, the Cold War, cultural changes, and other world events. (W.9–10.2-4, 7-9)

3. Those who stayed behind on American soil also made sacrifices during World War I. Have students research what life was typically like for Americans during this time (1914-1918) and write or orally present a report that includes several ways (at least five) that life changed for civilians on the home front during WWI. (RI.9–10.7; W.9–10.2-4, 7–9; SL.9–10.4)

4. “It is, I am afraid, going to be a long job but it must be done some time, so why not now?” Have students apply this quote from Captain Curtin to an instance in their own lives when determination prevailed over a difficult task. Students should describe in a personal narrative what made the task seem so hard and why they felt they needed to see it through. (RI.9–10.5-6; W.9–10.2-4)

5. Have students go through the letter and pick out any words that are unfamiliar to them. Work together to define the words. Students should then write a letter of their own on the topic of their choosing that correctly includes all of the newly defined words. (ELL)

6. Have students use the Venn diagram created by the class to write a letter from the point of view of an American soldier stationed in Afghanistan. They may use other forms of research if more information is needed. They should choose to write to either a family member or close friend, keeping in mind who their audience is when deciding on tone and language to use. (RI.9–10.8; W.9–10.2-4)