

Reading for Information

Civil War Journal



Video link at thinkcentral.com

What's the Connection?

Historical fiction such as “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh” can give you an idea about what it was like during the Civil War, but reading about the time period from someone who was actually there can be even more revealing. Louisa May Alcott, who wrote the famous novel *Little Women*, kept a journal during the war years.

Standards Focus: Read a Primary Source

One of the best ways to learn about past events is through **primary sources**, materials that were written or made by people who took part in the events. Journals, photographs, and even personal letters are all examples of primary sources. When you study them, you get direct knowledge, rather than someone else’s interpretation, of people, places, and events.

When gathering information from a primary source, it’s important to consider what the source is and how its form might limit or affect what it conveys. For example, a business letter is not likely to contain colorful details or gossip. You should also think about other factors that would have shaped the source’s contents, such as when and where it was created, for whom, and the creator’s position in society.

As you read Alcott’s journal entries, keep these considerations in mind. Also note what her journal entries tell you about life during the Civil War. Completing a chart such as the one started here can help.



Use with “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh,” page 330.

COMMON CORE

- RI 1** Cite textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text.
- RI 3** Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events.
- W 8** Gather relevant information from multiple print sources.

<i>What is the form and purpose of this text?</i>	<i>The text is a journal. It was most likely written to reflect on experiences.</i>
<i>Who was its author? What do you know about her?</i>	<i>Louisa May Alcott; she was the author of <u>Little Women</u> and other novels.</i>
<i>When and where was it written?</i>	
<i>What do you already know about life at that time and place?</i>	
<i>Who was its intended audience?</i>	
<i>What does this document reveal about life at the time it was written?</i>	

Civil War Journal



Portrait of the author

Louisa May Alcott

1861 **A**

April.—War declared with the South, and our Concord company went to Washington. A busy time getting them ready, and a sad day seeing them off; for in a little town like this we all seem like one family in times like these. At the station the scene was very dramatic, as the brave boys went away perhaps never to come back again.

I've often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man; but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can. . . .

1862 **B**

September, October.—War news bad. Anxious faces, beating hearts, and busy minds.

10 I like the stir in the air, and long for battle like a warhorse when he smells powder. The blood of the Mays is up!

November.—Thirty years old. Decided to go to Washington as a nurse if I could find a place. Help needed, and I love nursing, and *must* let out my pent-up energy in some new way. Winter is always a hard and a dull time, and if I am away there is one less to feed and warm and worry over.

FOCUS ON FORM

A **journal** is a personal record of thoughts, activities, observations, and feelings. It usually consists of separate, dated entries that appear in chronological order.

A JOURNAL

Preview the journal entries' headings. In what years were they written?

B READ A PRIMARY SOURCE

What do you already know about the times in which these entries were written? Add this information to your chart.

I want new experiences, and am sure to get 'em if I go. So I've sent in my name, and bide my time writing tales, to leave all snug behind me, and mending up my old clothes,—for nurses don't need nice things, thank Heaven!



Patients in a military hospital, 1865 **C**

C VIEW A PRIMARY SOURCE

What do you learn about Civil War hospitals from this photograph?

December.—On the 11th I received a note from Miss H[annah] M. Stevenson
20 telling me to start for Georgetown next day to fill a place in the Union Hotel
Hospital. Mrs. Ropes of Boston was matron, and Miss Kendall of Plymouth was
a nurse there, and though a hard place, help was needed. I was ready, and when
my commander said “March!” I marched. Packed my trunk, and reported in
B[oston] that same evening.

We had all been full of courage till the last moment came; then we all broke
down. I realized that I had taken my life in my hand, and might never see them
all again. I said, “Shall I stay, Mother?” as I hugged her close. “No, go! and the
Lord be with you!” answered the Spartan woman; and till I turned the corner she
bravely smiled and waved her wet handkerchief on the doorstep. Shall I ever see
30 that dear old face again?

D READ A PRIMARY SOURCE

Reread lines 33–38.
How does Alcott spend
her last day in Boston?
What do her activities
suggest about her needs
and values?

So I set forth in the December twilight, with May and Julian Hawthorne as
escort, feeling as if I was the son of the house going to war.

Friday, the 12th, was a very memorable day, spent in running all over Boston
to get my pass, etc., calling for parcels, getting a tooth filled, and buying a veil,—
my only purchase. A. C. gave me some old clothes, the dear Sewalls money for
myself and boys, lots of love and help; and at 5 P.M., saying “good-by” to a group
of tearful faces at the station, I started on my long journey, full of hope and
sorrow, courage and plans. **D**

A most interesting journey into a new world full of stirring sights and sounds,
40 new adventures, and an evergrowing sense of the great task I had undertaken.

I said my prayers as I went rushing through the country white with tents, all
alive with patriotism, and already red with blood.

A solemn time, but I'm glad to live in it; and am sure it will do me good
whether I come out alive or dead.

All went well, and I got to Georgetown one evening very tired. Was kindly
welcomed, slept in my narrow bed with two other roommates, and on the morrow
began my new life by seeing a poor man die at dawn, and sitting all day between
a boy with pneumonia and a man shot through the lungs. A strange day, but I did
my best; and when I put mother's little black shawl round the boy while he sat up
50 panting for breath, he smiled and said, "You are real motherly, ma'am." I felt as
if I was getting on. The man only lay and stared with his big black eyes, and made
me very nervous. But all were well behaved; and I sat looking at the twenty strong
faces as they looked back at me,—hoping that I looked "motherly" to them; for
my thirty years made me feel old, and the suffering round me made me long to
comfort every one. . . . **E**

1863

January.—I never began the year in a stranger place than this; five hundred miles
from home, alone among strangers, doing painful duties all day long, & leading a
life of constant excitement in this greathouse surrounded by 3 or 4 hundred men
in all stages of suffering, disease & death. Though often home sick, heart sick &
60 worn out, I like it—find real pleasure in comforting tending & cheering these poor
souls who seem to love me, to feel my sympathy though unspoken, & acknowledge
my hearty good will in spite of the ignorance, awkwardness, & bashfulness which
I cannot help showing in so new & trying a situation. The men are docile, respectful,
& affectionate, with but few exceptions; truly lovable & manly many of them. John
Suhre a Virginia blacksmith is the prince of patients, & though what we call a
common man, in education & condition, to me is all that I could expect or ask
from the first gentleman in the land. Under his plain speech & unpolished manner
I seem to see a noble character, a heart as warm & tender as a woman's, a nature
fresh & frank as any child's. He is about thirty, I think, tall & handsome, mortally
70 wounded & dying royally, without reproach, repining, or remorse. Mrs. Ropes &
myself love him & feel indignant that such a man should be so early lost, for
though he might never distinguish himself before the world, his influence &
example cannot be without effect, for real goodness is never wasted.

Mon 4th—I shall record the events of a day as a sample of the days I
spend—

Up at six, dress by gas light, run through my ward & fling up the windows
though the men grumble & shiver; but the air is bad enough to breed a pestilence
& as no notice is taken of our frequent appeals for better ventilation I must do what
I can. Poke up the fire, add blankets, joke, coax, & command; but continue to
80 open doors & windows as if life depended on it; mine does, & doubtless many

E JOURNAL

Reread lines 45–55. How
does Alcott spend her
first day as a nurse?
What does she hope and
feel?

another, for a more perfect pestilence-box than this house I never saw—cold, damp, dirty, full of vile odors from wounds, kitchens, wash rooms, & stables. No competent head, male or female, to right matters, & a jumble of good, bad, & indifferent nurses, surgeons & attendants to complicate the Chaos still more.

After this unwelcome progress through my stifling ward I go to breakfast with what appetite I may; find the inevitable fried beef, salt butter, husky bread & washy coffee; listen to the clack of eight women & a dozen men; the first silly, stupid or possessed of but one idea, the last absorbed in their breakfast & themselves to a degree that is both ludicrous and provoking, for all the dishes are
90 ordered down the table *full* & returned *empty*; the conversation is entirely among themselves & each announces his opinion with an air of importance that frequently causes me to choke in my cup or bolt my meals with undignified speed lest a laugh betray to these pompous beings that a “child’s among them takin notes.” Till noon I trot, trot, giving out rations, cutting up food for helpless “boys,” washing faces, teaching my attendants how beds are made or floors swept, dressing wounds, taking Dr. Fitz Patrick’s orders, (privately wishing all the time that he would be more gentle with my big babies,) dusting tables, sewing bandages, keeping my tray tidy, rushing up & down after pillows, bed linen, sponges, books & directions, till it seems as if I would joyfully pay down all I
100 possess for fifteen minutes rest.

At twelve the big bell rings & up comes dinner for the boys who are always ready for it & never entirely satisfied. Soup, meat, potatoes & bread is the bill of fare. Charley Thayer the attendant travels up & down the room serving out the rations, saving little for himself yet always thoughtful of his mates & patient as a woman with their helplessness. When dinner is over some sleep, many read, & others want letters written. This I like to do for they put in such odd things & express their ideas so comically I have great fun interiorally while as grave as possible exteriorally. A few of the men word their paragraphs well & make excellent letters. John’s was the best of all I wrote. The answering of letters from friends
110 after some one has died is the saddest & hardest duty a nurse has to do.

Supper at five sets every one to running that can run & when that flurry is over all settle down for the evening amusements which consist of newspapers, gossip, Drs last round, & for such as need them the final doses for the night. At nine the bell rings, gas is turned down & day nurses go to bed.

Night nurses go on duty, & sleep & death have the house to themselves. . . . **F**

My work is changed to night watching or half night & half day, from twelve to twelve. I like it as it leaves me time for a morning run which is what I need to keep well, for bad air, food, water, work & watching are getting to be too much for me. I trot up & down the streets in all directions, some times to the Heights,
120 then half way to Washington, again to the hill over which the long trains of army wagons are constantly vanishing & ambulances appearing. That way the fighting lies, & I long to follow.

F READ A PRIMARY SOURCE

What do you learn about hospital conditions and the nurses’ routine activities?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** When war is declared, how do the people of Concord respond?
2. **Summarize** Review Alcott's 1861 and 1862 journal entries. Then, in a few sentences, summarize why Alcott wants to serve as a nurse.

Text Analysis

3. **Gather Information from a Primary Source** Reread lines 64–73. Which of John Suhre's qualities does Alcott find most notable? Tell what you learn about her values from her opinions about this soldier.
4. **Identify Characteristics of a Journal** If you had stumbled across the original, handwritten version of this journal in a drawer, what characteristics of it would help you identify it as a journal?

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text. **RI 3** Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events. **W 8** Gather relevant information from multiple print sources. **W 9** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Read for Information: Draw a Conclusion

WRITING PROMPT

By synthesizing historical details from Bradbury's story, your lesson text, and Alcott's journal, you have expanded your ideas about the Civil War. Now draw a **conclusion**—that is, a judgment or belief—about one of the Civil War topics listed here. Then, in a paragraph, state your conclusion and support it with sound reasoning and evidence.

- being a nurse in a military hospital
- Civil War soldiers
- Civil War military hospitals

To answer this prompt, first pick a topic. Then follow these steps:

1. Jot down ideas and information about it.
2. Based on this information, reach a conclusion about the topic.
3. Pick out strong support for your conclusion from Alcott's journal, Bradbury's historical fiction, and/or the lesson text.
4. State your conclusion in a topic sentence. Then present your reasons and evidence for arriving at that conclusion.

