

CIVIL WAR STORIES

After hearing these stories what is your gut level reaction? History is a mix of facts and interpretation, write a short 500 word essay that is your immediate response to a single story or the theme of the entire program. What is the theme? What detail hooked you? What are the facts in the story that support your ideas? What did you learn?

One of the wisest historians I have met said this, “The reason we study history is to help us make better choices in the future.” What can we learn from the Civil War that will help us face the challenges of modern history? How has the Civil War shaped America? Quote the facts and ideas you learned from the performance to support your thesis. What is your thesis?

There are many great Civil War era writers who were an eye witness to history. Read some of the short stories by Ambrose Bearce, Drum Taps by Walt Whitman, or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

As a writer and researcher, the challenge I face in every story is complex: How do you convey the truth of history in an entertaining manner? Allow me to let you in on two secrets to success: Research, research, research and rewriting, rewriting, rewriting!

Your challenge: How do you tell a truthful story with real drama?

RESEARCH: My Civil War stories often start with a name. Visit a cemetery or talk to your grandparents; what is the name of a local Civil War soldier? Go on-line, visit your library or genealogy research center to find an obituary. This synopsis of their life will give you the beginning of a good story. Dig deeper! Find what unit they were in and you have found a rich vein of information. Go on-line to find the ***regimental history*** and you have the big picture of what battles they fought in, who they fought against and where they travelled throughout the



war. If you can find a few letters written by the soldier or from the family back home you have found a gold nugget! A journal or diary is a goldmine of details! To avoid plagiarism simply write down the facts: Born in ____, joined in ____, parents ____, and so on.

For example, the obituary of Mathias Stritt gave me his birth and death dates, information about his birth in Germany and immigration to Wisconsin. Most importantly this is where I learned that he was in the 11th

Illinois Cavalry. I could then trace which battles the 11th Cavalry fought by reading the reports of officers who were involved!

WRITING & REWRITING: Make an outline of the story that is as simple as birth, childhood, joined the war in what year and fought in which battles, then after the war did this or that. Where do you want to begin the story? It might be the start of the war or the moment of the most important battle or an old man waking up with a nightmare memory.

Flesh out the outline with an engaging story. Focus on one or two key moments or how they survived a difficult battle. Tell the story to a friend then rewrite it. Tell it to a parent and rewrite it again. Close your eyes and watch it like a movie in your forehead then rewrite it again, adding these visual details. Double check your spelling and grammar. With a few simple props, a hat or uniform, step into the shoes of the character and perform for your class!

HER-STORY, TOO! And for the young women, yes, there were women who dressed as men to fight! Or you could tell the story from the point of view of the mother or sister or sweetheart back home. Or you could research a Civil War nurse or female spy. Or simply narrate the story of a male soldier, or ancestor.

The stories are out there for those willing to dig and polish!