

Battle of the Somme Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?

Materials:

- Battle of the Somme PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-C
- Copies of Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Overview of the Battle of the Somme. Use the PowerPoint presentation to provide an overview of the battle as it occurred between July 1, 1916, and November 18, 1916, and to introduce the day's Central Historical Question.
 - a. Slide 2: Overview. *When Europe marched toward war in 1914, many were optimistic that the conflict would be quick and glorious. Instead, the war dragged on for years and saw gruesome battles with astounding death tolls. Fighting on the Western Front—with Allied French and British forces on one side against German forces on the other—quickly descended into a stalemate with both sides facing each other in elaborate trench lines. Battles on the Western Front resulted in thousands of deaths, but neither side made significant progress toward victory.*

The Battle of the Somme—the largest on the Western Front—started on July 1, 1916, when British and French forces attacked German lines in Northern France. The Allies hoped to break through German lines and bring a quick end to the war. However, the battle dragged on for over four and a half months and over one million people were killed or wounded (420,000 British, 200,000 French, and 500,000 Germans).
 - b. Slide 3: Trench Warfare Tactics. *The British commanders used standard trench warfare tactics when launching the offensive. They first shelled the enemy trenches heavily with artillery and then sent thousands of British and French soldiers “over the top” and across “no man’s land” between the trenches to attack opposing fortifications.*
 - c. Slide 4: Technology and Death Toll. *These tactics were extremely costly in the face of new weapons technology. Thousands of British and French soldiers were slaughtered by machine guns, flame throwers, and grenades as they crossed “no man’s land.” Thousands were also killed in the trenches as both sides launched heavy artillery fire and chemical weapons—including chlorine and mustard gas.*

- d. Slide 5: Outcomes: *In the end, Allied forces only gained a small amount of territory for all of the carnage suffered. And although some historians have argued that the Battle of the Somme turned the tide in the war toward the Allies and may have ultimately contributed to their victory, the deadly stalemate on the Western Front continued for nearly two more years.*
 - e. Slide 6: Central Historical Question: *Today we will investigate three historical accounts to determine what happened on the first day of the battle—July 1, 1916. In particular, we will investigate the question: Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*
2. Hand out Document A: *The Daily Express* along with the Graphic Organizer for the lesson.
 - a. Students read document and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - b. Share out and discuss responses.

Points to note:

- a. The generally cheery tone of the article and its optimistic assessment of the British advance.
 - b. Although written on July 1, this article appeared in the newspaper on July 3.
 - c. The author notes that he was not actually at the battle.
 - d. The author claims that British troops were advancing and that German troops were surrendering.
3. Hand out Documents B and C.
 - a. Students read documents and answer Guiding Questions in Graphic Organizer.

4. Share out and discuss responses

Points to note:

- a. There is a big difference in tone between Coppard and *The Daily Express*.
- b. These are first-hand accounts, but they are memoirs, written long after the battle.
- c. Both Coppard and Lais report very different outcomes on the first day than *The Daily Express*.
- d. Coppard's and Lais' accounts include reasons for the high number of British casualties – namely, how the British artillery bombardment preceding the battle failed to adequately destroy German machine gun positions and the massive lines of barbed wire used to protect them.

5. Final Claim

Students use evidence from the three documents to address the question: *Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*

6. Discussion

- a. *Why are Documents B and C so different from Document A?*
- b. *Which of these documents is most trustworthy? Why?*
- c. *Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*

Sources

Document A

Irvine, J. D. "Special Account of the Fighting in Our New Offensive," *The Daily Express*, July 3, 1916.

Document B

Coppard, G. (1969). *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*. London: Cassell Military Paperbooks.

Document C

Lais, U.O. (Date unknown). In Sheldon, J. (2007). *The German Army on the Somme: 1914-1916* (142-143). South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books.