Focus and Motivate

COMMON CORE FOCUS

RL 3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story.

RL 5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning, as well as its aesthetic impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Have students read about O’Brien and summarize key points about his life. Ask students in what ways O’Brien, as a young man, was directly affected by the Vietnam War. Possible answer: He was drafted, had to choose whether to serve, and spent two years in combat in Vietnam. Then, discuss the ways his experiences in Vietnam have had a lasting impact on his life and writing.

NOTABLE QUOTE

“It’s daunting to... invent fully realized characters. Having said all that, it’s also fun to do it.”—Tim O’Brien

Ask students how Tim O’Brien’s remark summarizes the challenges and rewards of fiction writing.

Selection Resources

See resources on the Teacher One Stop DVD-ROM and on thinkcentral.com.

resource manager unit 6
Plan and Teach, pp. 45–52
Summary, pp. 53–54†+
Text Analysis and Reading Skill, pp. 55–58*+ 
Diagnostic and selection tests
Selection Tests, pp. 317–320

best practices toolkit
New Word Analysis, p. E8
Three-Column Journal, p. B10

technology
Teacher One Stop DVD-ROM
Student One Stop DVD-ROM
Audio Anthology CD
ExamView Test Generator on the Teacher One Stop

* Resources for Differentiation  † Also in Spanish  ‡ In Haitian Creole and Vietnamese
How does the past affect the present?
Perhaps more than any group in society, war veterans carry a difficult past. Some remember combat experiences vividly, some block them out entirely. The lucky ones find a way to reconcile their past with the present, to use the lessons of battle to inform their present perceptions and choices.

QUICKWRITE
Think about war veterans you know or have heard about. They might have served in Vietnam, in the Persian Gulf, or in an international peacekeeping mission. Imagine one specific way in which a veteran’s past experiences might affect his or her present life. How might they affect a father’s relationship with his children, for example? Write down your thoughts and discuss them in a group.

TEXT ANALYSIS: CONFLICT
A story’s conflict is the struggle between opposing forces that is the basis of the story’s plot. External conflict—a struggle between a character and some outside force—is usually easy to identify in a work of fiction. Internal conflict—a struggle within a character—may be more subtle and complex. For example, an internal conflict may revolve around a decision a character has to make, or it may be reflected in behavior that is contradictory. As you read this story, watch for the development of internal conflicts in the main character.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE
The structure of a literary work is the way in which it is put together—the arrangement of its parts. Tim O’Brien’s story “Ambush” includes a frame story, or a story within a story. The first paragraph provides a frame—the narrator recalls answering a question his daughter once asked him. In the second paragraph, he begins to recount in a flashback an experience he had earlier, during the war. As you read, use a chart like the one below to summarize what happens within the outer story and the inner story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginning of Story 1</th>
<th>Beginning of Story 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle of Story 1</td>
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<td>End of Story 1</td>
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<td>End of Story 2</td>
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Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION
FOR STRUGGLING READERS
Vocabulary Support
- **subtle**, “slight and thus difficult to recognize”
- **contradictory**, “seeming to go in opposite directions, inconsistent”
- **flashback**, “a break in the typical time order sequence of a story, during which a scene showing past events is inserted”
- **international peacekeeping mission**, “soldiers from many nations sent into an area of conflict by an international organization such as the United Nations to keep peace but often not authorized to fight”

MODEL THE SKILL: CONFLICT
To identify a story’s conflict, write this passage on the board:

Carl could still remember the exact moment, nearly 40 years ago, as though it had occurred only yesterday. His best friend, Greg Loomis, was less than 70 yards behind him on the road when Carl saw the flash. It happened so fast, though it seemed like slow motion at the time. One second Greg was there, the next, he was gone. Forever. “Nothing you could’ve done,” the sergeant insisted. But the voice inside Carl’s head disagreed. You should have spotted that sniper, the voice told him again and again and again.

Ask students what internal conflict Carl is experiencing. Possible answer: Carl feels responsible for the death of his friend because he failed to spot the sniper.

GUIDED PRACTICE
Ask students for other examples of internal conflicts from fiction or real life.

MODEL THE SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE
To model this reading skill, have students reread the posted passage and explain its structure. Possible answer: The passage is set in the present but built around Carl’s flashback to the past.

RESOURCE MANAGER—Copy Master
Analyze Structure p. 57 (for student use while reading the selection)
SUMMARY
In this short story, the narrator’s young daughter, knowing that her father writes war stories, asks him if he has ever killed anyone. He says no, but resolves to tell her the truth one day. He then recalls that he did kill someone in Vietnam. While he was standing guard in the jungle, a young Vietnamese soldier approached. Instinctively, the narrator threw a grenade, killing the soldier. The narrator realizes that he could have let the man pass unharmed. Years later, the incident still haunts him.

READ WITH A PURPOSE
Help students set a purpose for reading. Tell them to read this story to learn what is haunting the narrator.

TEXT ANALYSIS
Possible answer: The conflict that the narrator faces is deciding what answer to give his daughter. That is, he doesn’t want to tell her that he killed someone, but at the same time he is reluctant to lie to her.

READING SKILL
Model the Skill: ANALYZE STRUCTURE
Point out to students that the colon the author placed at the end of line 8 signals a shift in setting. The paragraph beginning with line 9 is an explanation or example. Have students record the frame story in the chart on page 1195.
Possible answer: The setting shifts from the narrator’s home in the present to a trail in Vietnam in the past.

BACKGROUND “Ambush” is a short story based upon the writer’s combat experiences in Vietnam. The Vietnam War lasted nine years, left 58,000 Americans dead, and left another 365,000 Americans wounded. Although they were better equipped and trained than the enemy, American troops fought in an unfamiliar landscape for a cause that many of them did not support or understand. Vietnamese Communists were skilled guerilla fighters whose tactics created a climate of frustration, confusion, and fear. American soldiers never knew when an attack might come and were haunted by their memories long after the war.

When she was nine, my daughter Kathleen asked if I had ever killed anyone. She knew about the war; she knew I’d been a soldier. “You keep writing these war stories,” she said, “so I guess you must’ve killed somebody.” It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right, which was to say, “Of course not,” and then to take her onto my lap and hold her for a while. Someday, I hope, she’ll ask again. But here I want to pretend she’s a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories:

He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him—afraid of something—and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him.

Analyze Visuals
What tone is conveyed by this image?

CONFLICT
Possible answer: The conflict that the narrator faces is deciding what answer to give his daughter. That is, he doesn’t want to tell her that he killed someone, but at the same time he is reluctant to lie to her.

ANALYZE STRUCTURE
Possible answer: The setting shifts from the narrator’s home in the present to a trail in Vietnam in the past.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION
FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
Vocabulary Support Have students skim the story and make a list of any words that are unfamiliar to them. Tell students to use a dictionary to find the definitions for the words they listed. Have students practice using each of their words in a sentence.

FOR STRUGGLING READERS
In combination with the Audio Anthology CD, use one or both Targeted Passages (pp. 1196, 1199) to ensure that students focus on key story events and concepts. Targeted Passages are also good for English language learners.

Targeted Passage [Lines 1–11] This passage introduces the narrator, identifies the key event, and establishes the frame story.
• Who is the narrator of the story? (lines 1–2)
• Why does Kathleen think he “must’ve killed somebody”? (lines 2–3)
• Who does the narrator tell his story to? (lines 6–8)
• What happened to the “short, slender young man of about twenty”? (lines 10–11)
• When did this happen? (lines 9–10)

FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS/AP

Evaluate  Lead the class in a discussion about the ways people deal with haunting issues from their past. Tell students to write a short story about a person who learns how to effectively deal with an issue that has been haunting him or her for many years. Have students read their stories to the class.

Analyze Visuals

Possible answer: The image conveys a serious tone as it depicts an alert, ready-for-action soldier.

About the Art  Like Tim O’Brien, Frank Dahmer (born 1938) served in Vietnam, though as a commander. This screenprint shows the face of a combat soldier in the jungle, a soldier who could easily be Tim O’Brien’s narrator.

BACKGROUND

Grenade  A grenade is a small bomb that can be thrown by hand or projected by a special launcher. Soldiers in Vietnam often carried grenades, even though doing so could be dangerous. The pin that detonated a grenade could accidentally get caught on jungle shrubs, causing an unintentional explosion.

REVISIT THE BIG QUESTION

How does the PAST affect the present?

Discuss  In lines 6–11, the narrator says, “This is why I keep writing war stories.” What does this comment say about the impact of the past? Explain. Possible answer: The comment suggests that the past has a profound impact. The narrator is still struggling to come to terms with events in his past.
In lines 13–53, the narrator recalls being on guard in the jungle when a young Vietnamese soldier walked down the trail. Acting reflexively, the narrator threw a grenade at the soldier, killing him. These lines relate to lines 1–11 by describing the narrator’s memory in response to his daughter’s question.

For English Language Learners
Vocabulary Support Use New Word Analysis to teach this word: site (line 13).

For Struggling Readers
Develop Reading Fluency Read aloud the passage in lines 38–53. Tell students to note the inflections and tone of your speech. Next, read the first sentence of the passage and have students repeat it back to you in unison. Continue until students have “echoed” each sentence in the passage. Conclude this activity by asking for a volunteer to read the entire passage aloud to the class.
It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way.

Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me that it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed.

None of it mattered. The words seemed far too complicated. All I could do was gape at the fact of the young man's body.

Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog.

**CONFLICT**

Reread lines 54–61. What internal conflict does the narrator express?

**Targeted Passage**

How does the vision the narrator imagines in lines 63–68 help resolve his conflict?

**Model the Skill:**

Tell students that the narrator’s internal conflict comes from his second-guessing his decision and debating what he should, or should not, have done.

Possible answer: The narrator feels deep ambivalence over killing the Vietnamese soldier. He reacted reflexively and, as Kiowa assured him, made “a good kill,” one the Vietnamese soldier would likely have made in the reverse situation. However, there was no immediate danger, and the soldier might have walked past without incident.

**CONFLICT**

Possible answer: The narrator's vision allows him to imagine that he did not throw the grenade, and the Vietnamese soldier continued up the trail unharmed.

**SELECTION WRAP-UP**

**READ WITH A PURPOSE** Ask students if they think the narrator would be free of internal conflict if he hadn’t killed the Vietnamese soldier. Possible answer: It’s possible that the narrator would be free of internal conflict, but had the Vietnamese soldier lived, he might have later killed one of the narrator’s friends, causing the narrator to be even more intensely haunted.

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**FOR STRUGGLING READERS**

**Targeted Passage** [lines 56–68]

This concluding passage shows clearly that the narrator’s wartime act continues to trouble him in the present.

- In what ways does Kiowa respond to the narrator’s actions? (lines 56–59)
- What does the narrator feel about what he did? (lines 62–63)
- What image lingers in the narrator’s mind? (lines 64–68)

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**FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS/AP**

**Analyze Author’s Tone** Have students work in small groups to discuss the author’s tone in the story. Ask whether the author appears to approve or disapprove of the narrator’s actions, or whether he remains neutral.

Extend the discussion by asking students if they think that author and narrator share one mind. If not, in what ways do they differ? Have groups share and compare their conclusions.
**Interactive Selection Test**

For preliminary support of post-reading questions, use these copy masters:

- **RESOURCE MANAGER—Copy Masters**
  - Reading Check p. 59
  - Conflict p. 55
  - Question Support p. 60
  - Additional selection questions are provided for teachers on page 49.

**ANSWERS**

1. The narrator tells his daughter, “Of course not.”
2. He was on guard in the jungle when a Vietnamese soldier approached. The narrator threw a grenade at the soldier, killing him.
3. He sees the soldier walking toward him, passing by, smiling, and walking on up the trail.

Possible answers:

4. **COMMON CORE FOCUS** Conflict The narrator feels conflicted about whether or not to tell his young daughter he killed someone. He tells her no, but hopes to tell her the truth “someday” (line 5). The narrator also feels conflicted about whether his war killing was acceptable. He writes war stories to try to resolve his several internal conflicts.

5. **COMMON CORE FOCUS** Analyze Structure The frame shows the ways the wartime incident affected the narrator and continues to affect him.

6. The title refers to the narrator’s fear of attack and to his surprise attack on the soldier. It also refers to the way his memory affects him unexpectedly in the present.

**Assess and Reteach**

**Assess**

**DIAGNOSTIC AND SELECTION TESTS**
- Selection Test A pp. 317–318
- Selection Test B/C pp. 319–320

**Interactive Selection Test on** thinkcentral.com

**Reteach**

**Level Up Online Tutorials on** thinkcentral.com

**Reteaching Worksheets on** thinkcentral.com
- Literature Lesson 6: Conflict and Suspense
- Literature Lesson 8: Foreshadowing and Flashback

**Comprehension**

1. **Recall** What does the narrator tell his daughter when she asks if he ever killed someone?
2. **Summarize** What happened to the narrator outside My Khe?
3. **Clarify** What vision does the narrator sometimes see in his mind?

**Text Analysis**

4. **Examine Conflicts** Identify the internal conflicts the narrator experiences in this story. How would you describe the way he resolves or tries to resolve them? Explain your answer.

5. **Analyze Structure** What does the frame contribute to the impact of this story? Consider what would be lost without the first and last paragraphs.

6. **Interpret Title** In what ways does the title “Ambush” relate to the events of the story? Think about the frame as well as the inner story.

7. **Evaluate a Character’s Actions** Kiowa tells the narrator that this “was a good kill.” Do you agree? In your opinion, can there be a “good kill”?

8. **Apply Theme** What does this story suggest about the effects of the past on the present?

9. **Compare Texts** Compare “Ambush” and “Why Soldiers Won’t Talk” (page 1172) as portrayals of a soldier’s experience. On a chart, note what each presents as the physical sensations and emotional aftereffects of war. Which piece—the story or the essay—had more impact on you? Why?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Sensations</th>
<th>Emotional Aftereffects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Ambush”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Why Soldiers Won’t Talk”</td>
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**Text Criticism**

10. **Author’s Style** “Ambush” is a work of fiction, but the story reads like a nonfiction account of a true event. To readers who wonder how much of his work is actually true, O’Brien responds, “The literal truth is ... irrelevant.” Do you agree? Does it matter that O’Brien the writer does not have a daughter and does not know whether he ever killed anyone?

**Interpret Title**

How does the PAST affect the present?

How does O’Brien’s story convey the effects of the past on the present? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.

**Answers will vary. Students should support their opinions with clear reasons.**

**The story suggests that past experiences never stop impacting people in the present.**

**“Ambush”: Physical:** feeling of fear in stomach, “fruity and sour” taste in mouth (lines 32, 35–37). **Emotional:** continued inner conflict over actions (lines 62–63). **“Why Soldiers Won’t Talk”: Physical:** “skin feels thick and insensitive”; “salty taste”; “hard, painful knot” in stomach; “objects are slightly blurred” (lines 22–25). **Emotional:** details of combat become dreamlike, and soldiers’ memory fades (lines 10–11).

**Students should support their choice of which piece had more impact.**

**Accept all thoughtful responses.**

**How does the PAST affect the present? Possible answer:** The story shows that the past can influence what a person does many years later. For example, the narrator is haunted by a wartime experience, so he continues to write war stories.
The Literary Legacy of War

Modernist writer Gertrude Stein once said, “War is never fatal but always lost. Always lost.” One after another, the wars of the 20th century forced Americans to reconcile their sense of patriotism with the disillusionment that naturally comes from facing the realities of modern warfare. If it is an artist’s job to find meaning, what meaning can be discerned from the act of war?

Writing to Synthesize

Each of the texts you have just read presents a variety of ideas and images in response to World War II and the Vietnam War. What do these pieces have in common? Reread the selections, pulling words or phrases from each that you find especially compelling—whether beautiful, ugly, moving, or surprising. When you have gathered 15–30 phrases, combine them artfully to create a poem that delivers a coherent impression about war. Your poem might tell a story, describe an image, or deliver a set of thoughts or pronouncements. It can take place on the battlefield or on the home front.

Consider
• what primary thought or feeling you were left with after reading all of the texts
• which parts of each selection had the strongest impact on you
• how to arrange the phrases in a way that communicates your own response to the texts

American soldiers in Vietnam