

**Lesson
One**

Autobiography

Aims

By the end of this lesson you should know more about:

- adjectives
- what autobiography is
- how older texts differ from modern ones
- using adjectives to describe a scene

Context

This module looks at several types of literary non-fiction. The first, autobiography, was covered in the final module of the Year 7 course. This lesson, however, covers new material. The lesson starter is on a part of speech that you will need in every kind of writing – adjectives.



Oxford Home Schooling

Lesson starter: using adjectives

You should already know that **adjectives** are *describing words*. For example:

- pleasant fine Russian terrible slight pretty

The words the adjectives describe are **nouns** – the words for *things*:

When you are writing, it is important to choose the best possible adjective. In English there are many adjectives that mean almost the same as other adjectives, but not quite. For example, what alternatives can you think of for the adjectives given as examples above?

If you'd painted a picture, would you rather someone said that it was *pretty* or *beautiful*? Would you prefer to be described as *pleasant* or *delightful*? Here, the differences between the pairs of words is mostly that one is stronger than the other. In some cases, however, one adjective may be more appropriate than another. The words *lovely* and *delicious* could both describe a good meal. Could they both be used to describe a nice person?

Activity One

Underline the adjectives in the passage below. (Some are given in the examples above.) Then circle the nouns that each adjective describes. Finally, try to find adjectives that could replace those used. If you cannot find exact replacements, how would yours change the meaning slightly?

My first experience of battle was pleasant enough. Before we had been long at Spring Hill, Omar Pasha got something for his Turks to do, and one fine morning they were marched away towards the Russian outposts on the road to Baidar. I accompanied them on horse-back, and enjoyed the sight amazingly. English and French cavalry preceded the Turkish infantry over the plain yet full of memorials of the terrible Light Cavalry charge a few months before; and while one detachment of the Turks made a reconnaissance to the right of the Tchernaya, another pushed their way up the hill, towards Kamara, driving in the Russian outposts, after what seemed but a slight resistance. It was very pretty to see them advance, and to watch how every now and then little clouds of white smoke puffed up from behind bushes and the crests of hills, and were answered by similar puffs from the long line of busy skirmishers that preceded the main body. This was my first experience of actual battle, and I felt that strange excitement which I do not remember on future occasions, coupled with an earnest longing to see more of warfare, and to share in its hazards.

(from *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*)

What literary non-fiction is

If you did the Oxford Home Learning Year 7 English course, you may remember that **non-fiction** is writing based on real things or events, and that **literary non-fiction** is reality-based writing in which the style is meant to be enjoyable in itself. By comparison, an instruction manual for using an electric drill just aims to be clear and to cover all necessary details. It is not literary.

What autobiography is

Again, if you did the Year 7 course, you should know that autobiography is the story of someone's life – or part of it – told by that person. People usually write an autobiography when they have had a long and interesting life and have become famous. This lesson focuses on Mary Seacole, who was a nurse in the Crimean War, fought between Russia and an alliance of Britain, France and Turkey in 1854–6. The Crimea (pronounced Cry-mea) is an area that juts out into the Black Sea, between the Ukraine (formerly part of Russia) and Turkey.



This is a portrait of Mary Seacole in oils, around 1869, by the obscure London artist Albert Charles Challen (1847–81).

Seacole was a Jamaican woman who had learned herbal medicine from her mother and was convinced that her knowledge would help soldiers in war. She was turned away by the British government at first because women were not allowed any involvement in the war.

Later, when Florence Nightingale was allowed to take a party of nurses to the Crimea, she rejected Mary Seacole, who therefore borrowed money and travelled the 4,000 miles there on her own.

Activity Two

Reread the passage used in Activity 1, Mary Seacole's account of her first battle. Then answer the questions below.

1. Which army does she accompany?
2. What do you think is meant by the word *preceded* in the line 'English and French cavalry preceded the Turkish infantry'?
3. What is meant by 'made a reconnaissance'?
4. Seacole writes: '... little clouds of white smoke puffed up from behind bushes and the crests of hills'. What does this suggest about how close to the fighting she was?
5. How would you sum up her first experience of war? Write down four phrases that help to show how she felt about it.

The autobiographer's responses

Naturally, people who write about their lives want to tell us about the things they have done, or witnessed, that they think we will find interesting. Think for a minute about three exciting or interesting events in your own life that you might describe in your autobiography.

Few of Mary Seacole's readers would have witnessed war – and virtually none of her women readers. They would, of course, have been interested in what she saw happening. But what else would interest them – or *you*?

Most readers would be interested in Mary Seacole's response to what she experienced, especially as she was a woman in what is even now regarded as a male world – the world of battle. The account we have read suggests that battle seemed to her to be a colourful spectacle.

Task 5 of Activity 2 asked you to sum up Mary Seacole's experience. The key phrases in the passage are:

- pleasant enough
- enjoyed the sight amazingly
- It was very pretty to see them advance
- felt that strange excitement
- an earnest longing to see more of warfare

You can see from these phrases that Seacole enjoyed her first sight of battle – perhaps because it was from a distance. (We know this from how she describes the 'little clouds of white smoke'.) It was a colourful spectacle that made her want to see more.

Compare this with the following passage from later in the book:

It was a fearful scene; but why repeat this remark? All death is trying [painful] to witness – even that of the good man who lays down his life hopefully and peacefully; but on the battlefield, when the poor body is torn and rent in hideous ways, and the scared spirit struggles to loose itself from the still strong frame that holds it tightly to the last, death is fearful indeed. It had come peacefully enough to some. They lay with half-opened eyes, and a quiet smile about the lips that showed their end to have been painless; others it had arrested in the heat of passion, and frozen on their pallid [pale] faces a glare of hatred and defiance that made your warm blood run cold. But little time had we to think of the dead, whose

business it was to see after the dying, who might yet be saved. The ground was thickly cumbered with the wounded, some of them calm and resigned, others impatient and restless, a few filling the air with their cries of pain – all wanting water, and grateful to those who administered it, and more substantial comforts. You might see officers and strangers, visitors to the camp, riding about the field on this errand of mercy. And this, although surely it could not have been intentional – Russian guns still played upon the scene of action. There were many others there, bent on a more selfish task. The plunderers were busy everywhere. It was marvellous to see how eagerly the French stripped the dead of what was valuable, not always, in their brutal work, paying much regard to the presence of a lady.

Activity Three

Read the passage above, in which Mary Seacole gives an account of war very different from her first, then answer the questions.

1. Put into your own words the line 'others it had arrested in the heat of passion'.
2. What do you think is meant by the old-fashioned word *cumbered* in 'The ground was thickly cumbered with the wounded'?
3. In what two different ways, according to Seacole, had the dead soldiers met their deaths?
4. What two different attitudes does she describe in the wounded?
5. What is surprising about the Russian guns?
6. What do the 'plunderers' do?

7. What does Seacole think of the plunderers?
8. How would you sum up how Seacole's attitude to war has changed?
9. What do you think has changed her attitude?

How writers show their responses

Mary Seacole does not *say* any of the following:

- War is terrible
- I felt very sorry for the dead
- I felt shocked by the hatred on the faces of some of the dead
- Some officers were very kind
- I found the plunderers disgusting.

However, we know from her language that she felt these things.

Show, don't tell

It is usually more interesting to readers if a writer shows their response to something by their choice of words. This also applies to things they are describing. For example, Seacole expresses all of the ideas in the bullet list above, but she doesn't 'spell them out'.

For example, in the phrase 'when the poor body is torn and rent in hideous ways', the word 'poor' shows her sympathy, 'torn and rent' are violent verbs that show how destructive war really is, and the word 'hideous' shows that she now sees war as an ugly thing. Similarly, we know that she is shocked by the looks of hatred on some of the faces of the dead (see the second bullet point above), by her saying that they 'made your warm blood run cold'.

**Activity
Four**

Think again about Mary Seacole's attitude to war, as shown in the second extract.

1. Write down all the examples of words and phrases that Seacole has chosen in the extract that show her feelings about war. For example, how do we know that she disapproved of the 'plunderers'?
2. Write about something that you strongly disapprove of – for example, vandalism, fox-hunting, crime, pollution, cars, speeding. Show your feelings not by 'spelling them out' ('I really hate cars ...'), but by your choice of words ('These gas-guzzling death traps on wheels ...').
3. Mary Seacole refers in the first extract (in Activity 1) to '... the terrible Light Cavalry charge a few months before'. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote a famous poem about this: 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. It begins:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Find it online or elsewhere. Read it and compare Tennyson's attitude to war with Mary Seacole's.

**Self-
assessment
test**

This test is on autobiography, adjectives, Mary Seacole, and how authors 'show' their responses to events and sights.

1. What is autobiography?
2. Choose the more appropriate adjective in the following:
 - (a) He's an ancient/old/antique friend of mine.
 - (b) Theseus is a character in an ancient/old/antique myth.
 - (c) My ancient/old/antique pistol was valued at £2,000!
3. What war was Mary Seacole involved in, and who fought it?
4. How did her attitude to war change?
5. In writing, what does 'Show, don't tell' mean?
6. What are readers of autobiography generally interested in, apart from the actual events of the writer's life?
7. Quote one phrase that shows Mary Seacole's later feelings about war.