



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2026 Winner | Victoria

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‘Evaluate the usefulness of diary entries, letters, and photographs for providing evidence about the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in either the First World War or the Second World War’

Discuss with reference to World War 1.

The First World War (1914–1918) exposed Australian servicemen and women to experiences of immense scale, diversity, and trauma that reshaped the nation’s identity and memory. To explore these contrasting experiences and perspectives, from the courage and hardship of front-line soldiers to the compassion and exhaustion of nurses, and from early patriotic enthusiasm to deep disillusionment, historians rely heavily on primary sources such as diary entries, letters, and photographs. Each of these forms offers a unique lens into the Australian wartime experience: diaries reveal personal emotions and reflections, letters capture the vital connection between the front and home front, and photographs document the visual realities and representations of war. Yet, each source also carries limitations, including bias, censorship, selective memory, and photographic staging. Therefore, to understand the full complexity of Australians’ experiences, these sources must be interpreted within the broader historical context and supported by additional evidence. By analysing their strengths, weaknesses, reliability, and intended audiences alongside broader historical research we can evaluate how effectively these sources together construct a fuller and more nuanced picture of Australians’ contrasting experiences and perspectives in the First World War.

Diary entries are one of the most valuable forms of evidence for understanding the contrasting experiences of Australians during the First World War. A diary entry written by Lieutenant S. R. Traill on the Western Front in March 1918, offers a vivid account of life and danger in the trenches. Traill recorded, “off we started armed to the teeth with revolvers and bombs at 1.30 am... We waited a while and shivered on the wet cold ground and then started off, found the possy... [three of us] rushed the post and found the birds had flown.” (Gammage, 2010, p. 198; Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source F) This passage demonstrates the immediacy and authenticity of personal records, showing the exhaustion, frustration, and unpredictability of front-line operations. Such entries are highly useful for historians as they capture raw emotions and experiences that official reports often omit. However, their usefulness to some degree depends on the author’s perspective and audience. Traill’s diary, written privately, was likely intended for personal reflection rather than persuasion, making it more candid but also limited in scope. His perspective as an officer differs from the experiences of lower-ranked soldiers, reflecting his own mindset, rank, and circumstances. The diaries of Alice Ross-King, an Australian nurse serving in Egypt and later in France, provide a contrasting viewpoint that highlights the diversity of wartime experiences. She described the relentless pressure of treating the wounded, writing, “soon all our beds were full and new ones were being brought in and put in every available corner.” (Ross-

King, 1915–1919; Australian War Memorial, C2073770) While Traill’s account conveys the chaos of combat, Ross-King’s reveals the emotional toll of care and compassion amid overwhelming loss. Together, these diaries demonstrate the usefulness of such sources in revealing the human dimension of war, though they must be balanced with broader historical research—such as the Australian War Memorial (2024a) findings on soldiers’ personal writings—to build a fuller and more representative picture of Australians’ contrasting experiences and perspectives in the First World War.

Letters written by Australians during the First World War provide a powerful yet sometimes filtered insight into their thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of the conflict. Unlike diaries written for private reflection, letters were intended for a specific audience—usually family or friends—and were often shaped by what the writer wanted others to believe. Nurse Laura Grubb’s letter from the Western Front in November 1917 captures both frustration and patriotism as she criticizes those at home who failed to understand the soldiers’ suffering: “I do wish one half of these agitators could be compelled to come out here and live under the conditions the men simply have to put up with.” (Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source G) Her words reveal a deep resentment toward civilians living in “luxury,” contrasting sharply with the hardships faced by those serving overseas. Similarly, Lieutenant J. T. Hampson’s 1918 letter conveys the emotional toll of endless fighting: “Men have fallen & died every hour of the day... every man feels that there is a limit to his endurance.” (Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source E) His tone of despair and exhaustion exposes the mental strain endured by soldiers in the final months of the war. However, as shown in *Why Anzac* with Sam Neill, (Stenders, 2015) letters home could also conceal the harsher truths of war—some were softened or ‘romanticised’ to protect families from grief. This highlights both the emotional and historical value of letters: while they offer authentic glimpses into the human experience of war, their usefulness as evidence depends on recognising the bias created by audience and compassion, as well as by censorship, which shaped what could be shared. For instance, military postal censors regularly removed descriptions of battle locations and casualty numbers from soldiers’ correspondence to maintain morale and protect military secrecy (Imperial War Museums, 2025) — demonstrating how external control shaped what could be shared with those on the home front.

Photographs are a valuable source for visualizing the experiences and perspectives of Australians who served during the First World War. One example is a photograph of Australian infantrymen and light horsemen on the Gallipoli Peninsula, featuring a father—Trooper Andrew Powell Yeates— and his son—Private James August Yeates— both of whom served in world war one (Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source D) The

image accentuates the strong emotional connections and bonds maintained despite the harsh living conditions of war, symbolizing the spirit of mateship and family unity that persisted even on the battlefield. Photographs are useful for historians because they visually communicate the resilience, camaraderie, and shared sacrifice of Australian troops, offering insights that written sources alone cannot provide. For instance, Frank Hurley's composite image 'Over the Top' (Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source A) combines several negatives to create a single dramatic battle scene. Hurley argued that this technique enhanced the 'truth' of war by capturing its intensity and chaos, even though the specific moment depicted never actually occurred. Therefore, while Hurley's photograph powerfully conveys the emotional experience of combat, its constructed nature limits its reliability as factual evidence of a specific event. This highlights that photographs can be both valuable interpretive sources and problematic as literal records of history. Furthermore, the usefulness of photographs must be carefully assessed, as many wartime images were staged, censored, or selectively published to promote national pride or morale rather than show the full realities of battle. For instance, the Australian War Memorial's digital archive *Contact: Photographs and the Modern Experience of War* (2021) notes that photographs were often used to shape public perception of the war, highlighting courage and sacrifice while demonstrating the influence of censorship and selective composition. Therefore, while photographs provide a powerful visual record of the Australian wartime experience, their usefulness as evidence depends on recognizing how these factors shaped what was captured and disseminated. On balance, such personal and visual records not only document individual experiences but also contribute to Australia's broader understanding of the war — shaping the nation's enduring memory of sacrifice, resilience, and mateship that continues to define its identity today.

Despite their value diaries, letters, and photographs are not entirely reliable for understanding Australians' experiences during the First World War. Personal writings are highly subjective, influenced by the author's emotions, rank, and intended audience. Soldiers' letters often downplayed fear or suffering to reassure families, while diaries could highlight certain events or feelings over others, reflecting the writer's personal perspective rather than a universal experience. Photographs, too, were frequently staged, censored, or selectively published to promote patriotic sentiment and maintain morale, meaning they may present an idealized view of life at the front rather than the full reality. (Australian War Memorial, 2026, Source D) Additionally, these sources primarily represent literate individuals—often officers, nurses, or those able to write extensively—leaving the experiences of soldiers from a lower socio-economic background, Indigenous servicemen, or other marginalized voices largely absent from the historical record. Consequently, while diaries, letters, and photographs offer valuable insights into personal experiences and emotions, their usefulness depends on careful cross-referencing with official records, oral histories, and broader historical

research. Without this, there is a risk of overgeneralizing or misrepresenting the diversity of Australians' experiences and perspectives during the First World War. Ultimately, this analysis highlights the importance of questioning whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced—an insight that remains vital today when interpreting information shaped by bias, censorship, or digital manipulation in modern media and global conflicts.

Primary Sources (Simpson Prize Sources):

Frank Hurley, 'Over the Top', Western Front, France, 1918. Source A (AWM EO5988B)
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026>

Australian infantrymen and light horsemen on the Gallipoli Peninsula, including Trooper Andrew Powell Yeates and Private James August Yeates, May 1915. Source D (AWM C00667)
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026>

Extract from a letter written by Lieutenant J.T. Hampson from the Western Front, 15 August 1918. Source E (AWM 1DRL/0331)
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026>

Diary entry written by Lieutenant S.R. Traill, the Western Front, March 1918. (Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 2010, p.198). Source F (AWM)
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026>

Extract from a letter written by Nurse Laura Grubb from the Western Front, 14 November 1917. Source G (AWM PR83/040)
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026>

Secondary Sources (External Sources):

Ross-King, A. (1915–1919). *Diary entries of Alice Ross-King*. Australian War Memorial, C2073770. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2073770>

Why Anzac with Sam Neill, (Stenders, 2015)

Imperial War Museums, 2025

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/letters-to-loved-ones>

Contact: Photographs and the Modern Experience of War (2021):
<https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/publications/contact>

Research (Credible Websites):

Australian War Memorial – First World War collections:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>

National Archives of Australia – WW1 records: [Army – First World War: 1914–18 | naa.gov.au](#)

Australian Government – Department of Veterans' Affairs, WW1 resources:

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au>

Australian National Library – Trove WW1 collection: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>