

Topic/Title

Twenty-One Steps/Guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

Target Grade/Age Group

Middle School

Objectives/Learning Outcomes

1. **Comprehension:** Students will summarize the main events and themes of *Twenty-One Steps* by Jeff Gottesfeld, demonstrating an understanding of the narrative and its historical context.
2. **Historical Reflection:** Students will investigate the real-life events noted in the book and discuss their significance and relevance to the story.
3. **Theme Exploration:** Students will identify and discuss the major themes of the book.

Assessment of Student Outcomes

This lesson will use the following criteria to assess learning:

- Class discussion using brain dump/sketchnotes
- ELA: Word image
- Social Studies: Topic slides, timeline, or paragraph

Materials Needed

The book, *Twenty-One Steps* by Jeff Gottesfeld or video

Paper for brain dump/sketchnotes/word image

Technology for social studies option

Instructional Strategies

1. Define and discuss the meaning of the word "memorial." Ask students to name some famous memorial sites in Washington, DC, and list them on the board. Explain to them that they will listen to a story about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.
2. Read aloud the book *Twenty-One Steps* by Jeff Gottesfeld or watch the video in which the author reads the story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7Gyf4x1qkE>
3. Brain Dump. Ask the students to write down what they remember about the story on a piece of paper. Have students share their dumps in small groups, then discuss as a whole group. Or try sketchnotes!

4. Language Arts: The book uses first-person voice, using “I” and “we.” Who is speaking? Why do you think the author chose that voice instead of third-person? Discuss examples of the book’s use of figurative language, like “stinging sleet” and “birds don’t dare to sing.” Discuss the author’s word choice. Have students draw an image for the words that made the strongest impression on them.
5. Social Studies: The first Unknown Soldier was from WWI, so some of the book reflects that, in particular, images on the opening pages and noted battles. The text also references “mustard gas, barbed wire, bayonet charges.” Have the students dig deeper into these terms and complete a short slide show, visual timeline, or research paragraph. (Possible topics: Argonne Forest, Somme, Belleau Wood, trench warfare, pebbles on headstones, lay in state, the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour, Taps, the number 21, Bunker Hill, Heartbreak Ridge, etc). Discuss their findings.
6. Discuss themes of the story, such as bravery, sacrifice, perfection, and resilience, and how these themes resonate in today’s world.

Enrichment

Vocabulary: sacrifice, anointed, desecration, reverence, discipline, fidelity, devotion