# The Unknown Soldier: Drama



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## Learning objectives

Young people will:

* Have increased understanding of the humanitarian impact of armed conflict
* Explore feelings and emotions of people involved in, and affected by, armed conflict
* Have greater respect for human life and dignity

Age range: 14–19-year-olds

## Introduction

­This resource is based on the short film [*The Unknown Soldier*](https://vimeo.com/144877010) and has been designed to support humanitarian learning through the teaching of drama.

We recommend you read the [introductory sheet](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/49D044650D154F3D8591220B17D6357A.ashx) before using this resource.

This resource has been designed for delivery over two sessions but the structure can be adapted to suite your own teaching needs.

The two sessions guide young people to explore the humanitarian impact of armed conflict using drama as a means for exploring the feelings and emotions of those involved.

The film *The Unknown Soldier* provides the initial stimulus for learning that will enable young people to:

* Respond to the film and identify and empathise with the characters in it
* Consider the intent of the film’s creators
* Critically analyse the original screenplay considering context, language, form, and structure
* Devise and perform their own interpretation of ‘*The Unknown Soldier*’
* Reflect on their performances and representations of the humanitarian impact of armed conflict

Additional [supporting activities](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/D678FD21EB2A441AAA779EF14D29ABAB.ashx) also accompany this session plan.

## Curriculum links

Additionally, learners will also cover the following specific aspects of Drama as identified in the relevant curriculum or specification documents:

**England:**

* acquire, develop and apply skills in: creating and communicating meaning and realising artistic intention, in a live theatre context for an audience, through:
* research, developing ideas, interpreting texts, devising, rehearsing, refining and amending work in progress; their contribution to the final performance; analysing and evaluating their own process of creating live theatre; analysis and evaluation of live theatre work by others

**Scotland:**

* topics or areas of study: responding to stimuli; using improvisation and role play; using voice, movement and characterisation skills; portraying character; exploring drama form and structure; exploring production skills, selecting from lighting, sound, props; costume and make-up; using routine problem solving, planning and reflective skills as part of the creative process

**Northern Ireland** *(from GCSE Specification)*

Students should be able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of:

* the ways in which meaning is communicated through drama;
* the social, cultural and historical context of costume, including style, colour, shape and materials used;
* how to create, interpret and develop a character through rehearsal work, including improvisation;
* a range of specific performance skills and an ability to evaluate from a personal perspective;
* how to work collaboratively and creatively to achieve shared dramatic intentions

**Wales** *(from WJEC assessment outline for teaching from 2016)*

Learners participate in the creation, development and performance of a piece of devised theatre using either the techniques of an influential theatre practitioner or a genre, in response to a stimulus.

## Session one: The character(s) of war

1. Explain to young people that over the next two sessions they will analyse and interpret a short film and devise and present a performance of a short, emotive play set in WWI, based on the film.

**Session one**: learners will view the film and then participate in activities that help them to understand the storyline and to connect and empathise with the characters involved.

**Session two**: learners will build on their insights and ideas to bring a script to life through a short dramatisation.

Across the two sessions they will be able to develop their own understanding of armed conflict and the humanitarian impact on those involved, at the same time as working through many core Drama skills (see above curriculum links).

1. Show the film *The Unknown Soldier.* Explaining to learners that they will only see it once during this session so it is important to fully engage with it as it is only short (less than 3 mins).
2. Use the [ten still-frames from the film](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/2926B359123B4704871FA0754E9832CF.ashx) to set up ten stations around the room, placing each still frame in the centre of a large piece of paper (A3 minimum, preferably A2). Introduce the ten images as ‘response stations’ and explain that these will be used to record initial responses to the film.

Organise learners into pairs or threes so that each station has a group. Give them two minutes to respond to the moment portrayed from the film at their response station. [They should write their responses around the still frames. Their responses might include: how it made them feel, what they think the character was thinking or feeling, views on behaviour or actions of the characters, their response to the conditions in the trenches, any language or sounds they can remember from their image, etc.]

Once they have had two minutes ask the group to move on to the next response station and a new moment from the film. Repeat the task until all groups have visited all stations and built up a collective picture of the groups initial responses to the film. The aim of the activity is to help build an understanding of the story and the characters from the film.

You may wish to conclude this response activity by doing a ’quick thoughts’ circle of the room getting one word from each young person that they feel summarises their response to the film. These could be recorded onto a whiteboard or flip chart and saved to assist in session two.

1. Re-organise learners into performance groups of seven or eight as the next activity will begin forming the characters that they will develop in session two. The eight members of the cast from the film are below. If you need to miss one out you could remove soldier W.

* **The unknown soldier (the film is shot from this character’s perspective)**
* **officer**
* **non-commissioning officer (the one who shouts at the soldiers to climb)**
* rum runner
* soldier W
* **soldier X**
* **soldier Y**
* **soldier Z**

For most group sizes this means there will probably be three or four groups, but this can of course be adapted to suit your group size.

1. Provide each performance group with a copy of [the screenplay](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/5FA2997EEB7148B5A343989468C4679F.ashx) and ask them to first identify where the brief dialogue occurs.

They should do a quick reading without allocating parts - turn-taking to familiarise themselves with the existing dialogue. A second reading should be done with highlighter pens picking out key director notes and stage directions that can help build the context for the characters, and develop understanding of the feelings of the characters they will portray.

Examples of director notes from the first page might be where soldier X says a prayer “over and over”, or where the match going out is a dramatic moment, “plunging the tunnel back into darkness”.

Stage directions provide emotional context as well as practical descriptions, such as the following: “Mud is a bad description; the soil is more like a thick slime. As the soldiers walk they sink several inches, and then the suction makes it difficult to withdraw their feet. Hell is not fire; hell is mud.”

Draw young people’s attention to these elements if they do not immediately get picked out.

Explain that this should be a critical reading and that if they wish to add to or amend elements of the screenplay based on their own reactions to the film and how they think the characters would have felt, they are free to do so. The next activity supports this.

1. Provide each performance group with a [character-profiling sheet](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/1F5E3F898CF14507BAAB19AF18117A24.ashx) that they can use to record their thinking at this stage.

Using the sheet ask them to allocate parts within the group, and then individually record as much as they can about each character they will be portraying, ready for the next session.

This will be their understanding, gained through their own responses and others’, as well as the analysis and interpretation of the screenplay. It will include imaginative work too, considering the following:

* a back-story such as family, school, job before signing up
* what kind of language they use or they might use
* what they are like as a person
* their likes and dislikes
* how their character might be feeling now
* what the defining moments in their life might have been, e.g. what they are proud of, what they think about before they go over the top.

These sheets should be kept as a learning record and made available in the next session along with the highlighted screenplays for each group.

The response station notes and the quick thoughts words should also be kept to be used as a reminder and resource in session two.

1. Close session one by considering the following words of Joe Higgins, the director and writer of *The Unknown Soldier*:

*“It was important to us to make a film that told the story of one individual’s experiences. The casualty statistics for WWI were so huge (17m killed and 20m wounded) it is easy to overlook the smaller details of what life was like for one person.”*

Ask the group to consider the individual characters that they have each been developing, and see if they can think of one word to describe that person’s experience.

Then stand in a circle, and in turn ask young people to say their words out loud, ending the session with a picture of life in the trenches for all characters in the film / play.

For example: “fear, determination, nausea …”

Thank young people for their contributions, and be sure to break what is likely to be a sombre mood or atmosphere by focusing on the skills they have shown, and the mature way that they have hopefully grappled with complex ideas around the humanitarian impact of conflict.

This should allow them to ‘exit’ the atmosphere of the session well, and move on to other parts of their day, and can be important when dealing with subject matter / stimuli as serious as this.

## Session two: Portraying humanitarian impact

1. Begin by providing a brief recap of previous session and provide or signpost the learning objectives as a stimulus to their activities in this session.

Explain that the learning has practical objectives in terms of devising a piece and performing it, as well as humanitarian objectives – to use the process to develop further their understanding of the impacts of conflict.

The humanitarian perspective will feed in to their performances, allowing them to develop their characters and piece further.

1. To help re-engage learners with the story and learning, work through the original storyboards provided by the film production company available as a [PowerPoint presentation.](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/99051609C0B34C81B2B40A9E0555A4DA.ashx)

Support the learners to draw out what they think are the key moments shown in the storyboard and creators’ annotations, to review the story of the film as a group, inviting contributions and observations from learners. [An alternative would be to print the slides and provide a set to each of the performance groups – as set in the previous session – and allow them to work through them in their groups].

1. The penultimate slide in the power-point presentation shares the director’s aim in making the film:

*“One of the main reasons we made this film was to try and give young people today an understanding of an event that may have seemed distant or even irrelevant. We made the film in the hope it would spark an interest and inspire young people to learn more about the war and question what place conflict has in society both 100 years ago and today.”*

Share this with learners, inviting brief responses as to whether they agree with his viewpoint.

Explain that the drama they create and perform should meet the same aims as those expressed by the director, Joe Higgins, and that they will evaluate their own and others’ performances against this aim using a performance framework (next slide).

1. Groups will now devise and rehearse a dramatic performance of *The Unknown Soldier* using the screenplay and their character profiles.

Give performance groups a few minutes to revisit their character profiles from the last session.

Once they have done this ask them to use 30 minutes to devise and rehearse a short performance (max 3 mins) to share with the group.

They can use [the screenplay](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/5FA2997EEB7148B5A343989468C4679F.ashx) as a starting point and can either:

* + closely match the dialogue and filmmakers’ approach, or
  + adapt it to reflect their own interpretations of the characters, story and feelings.

Support groups by providing regular time checks and reminding them of different aspects of performance that they may wish to include, such as using their voices, body language, facial expression, and movement or freeze-frames of the whole scene. [If breakout spaces are available, then it may be appropriate to allocate these to different performance groups for this stage of the activity]

1. After 30 minutes bring the whole group back together to share their performances.

Ask the audience to respond using the [performance framework](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~/media/51B1F3B1E5AA4AB2BD40870EE8A97740.ashx) below, which can be displayed on a whole whiteboard screen, a flip chart, or as a visual aid for discussion.

Give each group the responsibility for critically analysing one performance and leading that critical evaluative discussion - others can then add to this, invited by the lead group.

Ensure that young people explain the specifics of how particular performances built their understanding of, and empathy with, the characters and the humanitarian impact of armed conflict.

Performance framework

How did the choices each group made about characterisation through voice, movement, body language and facial expressions help an audience to:

* understand a distant historical event (what did you understand about WW1 through viewing?)
* have their interest sparked (which parts engaged you and had you most interested?)
* be inspired to know more (what do we now want to know?)
* feel engaged and moved by the characters and their situation (what was the impact of WWI on people?)
* ask questions about conflict then and now (what questions do we have?)

1. Show the film again and ask learners to compare their own performances with those in the film itself. Consider the choices that they made and how they were similar or different to those of the actors and director. How did their artistic choices change how effective the performances were at portraying the humanitarian impact of conflict?
2. To close the learning engage learners in a short reflective dialogue (either as a whole group or in smaller sub-groups) using the following prompts:

* Does engaging with *The Unknown Soldier* help young people to better understand the humanitarian impacts of armed conflict? Why and how?
* Why might drama, theatre and/or film be particularly powerful in educating young people about the effects of armed conflict?

## Extension

Adding **technical aspects** such as set, lighting, costume, sound effects and special effects could increase the effectiveness of a performance in meeting its aims. You could support learners to develop their performances further using these skills and re-evaluate the results against their earlier performance.

An example of technical considerations to share with young people: the script is one continuous scene, which could be enacted in a number of ways.

You might choose to have different parts on different sections of the stage (what kind of stage shape would you choose?)

Perhaps you would have a promenade performance where audience followed the action as it unfolded, how would this affect the action? Or deepen the impact of a play?