



# BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

## Lesson 1

### Teenage Refugees: Comparing Life Experiences

**Subject areas addressed:** Government, Sociology/Social Problems, International Relations, Language Arts

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Estimated Time Required for Lesson:** 2-3 class periods (50-60 minutes per period).

*When I was three and a half years old, that's when the war started in Yugoslavia. During that time I didn't know much. I sensed that something was wrong... We all came to a point well, if we were all meant to die, you know it's going to happen, so we kind of accepted it. We tried to see it as it could happen to us, so we should prepare ourselves to deal with it. When it hits you, when somebody that you knew or someone you're close to or their family or somebody, had just died. Seeing that scene, that loss, it's really unbearable. You understand war and you're forced to grow up sooner than most kids do.*

—Jelena Serenac, Bosnia (BEYOND THE FIRE)

#### Introduction:

While Jelena's comment may be typical of many teenagers who flee war to immigrate to the United States, it is a world that most American teenagers have never experienced, nor could ever imagine.

This lesson gives students an opportunity to look at the world of war refugees and explore the life experiences of refugee teens. Students will seek out the stories of war refugees—either from the BEYOND THE FIRE site or from other sources—and look for common themes in these stories. At the same time, students will be asked to look at their own life experiences, comparing and contrasting them with the lives of their peers who have survived war and immigrated to the United States. While there will clearly be many differences, students may be surprised to learn that they also have some things in common with these teens—whether that is a shared interest in sports, or a shared experience of family hardships.

Students will fill out a chart comparing the experiences of teen war refugees with their own experiences, and use this chart as the basis for writing essays, or for group discussions and presentations.



## BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

### Suggested resources for the lesson:

Many related resources exist for students to research first person accounts of refugees who fled war to come to the United States. While this is a representative list, the teacher should also encourage students to do follow-up research on stories, either through conventional resources such as magazines, books and newspapers, or by doing Web searches using a search engine such as Google. (<http://www.google.com>)

BEYOND THE FIRE website (<http://www.beyondthefire.net>) includes various text and audio stories of teenage refugees, as well as a Resources section.

USA for UNHCR (<http://www.usaforunhcr.org>) includes a large number of educational resources that can be used for the lesson, as well as several related refugee stories.

Tolerance.org story on teenage refugees (<http://www.tolerance.org/teens/stories/article.jsp?p=0&ar=67>)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) site contains a large number of resources including refugee stories. (<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/teaxis/vtx/home>)

U.S. Committee for Refugees (<http://www.refugees.org/>)

International Rescue Committee Student Plus Program (<http://www.theirc.org/index.cfm?section=where&locationID=32&wwwID=479&parentID=517&ppID=517>)

AJA Project, San Diego (<http://ajaproject.org/sandiegoproject.html>) followed refugee students from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sierra Leone. Includes various resources and sound interviews.

World Refugee (<http://www.worldrefugee.com/>) contains various resources, including news stories and various photo resources.

Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights page relating the story of Liberian refugee "Mekabou Fofana." (<http://www.lchr.org/asylum/stories/storie-05.htm>) (Note: the subject's name in this story was changed to protect confidentiality.)



## BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children page contains many resources and quotes from teenage refugees. (<http://www.womenscommission.org/>)

### Relevant Standards for the Lesson:

This lesson addresses national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

#### Civics:

- Understands the impact of major demographic trends on the United States (e.g., population growth, increase in immigration and refugees)

#### Geography:

- Knows examples of world conflict or cooperation (e.g., countries in trade pacts, areas of the world with refugee problems)
- Understands the ways in which physical and human features have influenced the evolution of significant historic events and movements (e.g., the effects of imperialism, colonization and decolonization on the economic and political developments of the 19th and 20th centuries; the geographical forces responsible for the industrial revolution in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; physical and human factors that have led to famines and large-scale refugee movements)

#### Language Arts:

- Prewriting: Uses a variety of prewriting strategies (e.g., develops a focus, plans a sequence of ideas, uses structured overviews, uses speed writing, creates diagrams)
- Writes expository compositions (e.g., synthesizes and organizes information from first- and second-hand sources, including books, magazines, computer data banks and the community; uses a variety of techniques to develop the main idea [names, describes, or differentiates parts; compares or contrasts; examines the history of a subject; cites an anecdote to provide an example; illustrates through a scenario; provides interesting facts about the subject]; distinguishes relative importance of facts, data, and ideas; uses appropriate technical terms and notations)
- Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical and observational narrative compositions (e.g., narrates a sequence of events; evaluates the significance of the incident; provides a specific setting for scenes and incidents; provides supporting descriptive detail [specific names for people, objects, and places; visual details of scenes, objects and places; descriptions of sounds, smells, specific actions, movements and gestures; the interior



## BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

- monologue or feelings of the characters]; paces the actions to accommodate time or mood changes; creates a unifying theme or tone; uses literary devices to enhance style and tone)
- Writes descriptive compositions (e.g., uses concrete details to provide a perspective on the subject being described; uses supporting detail [concrete images, shifting perspectives and vantage points, sensory detail and factual descriptions of appearance])

### Strategy for the Lesson:

The teacher may wish to open the lesson by having students listen to one or more of the refugee stories from the BEYOND THE FIRE website. Ask students to consider what social and political conditions caused these teens to flee their homeland and come to the United States.

Next, introduce the actual lesson by asking students to consider the type of life experience that the typical American teenager might have compared to that of the refugee. The teacher can then announce to the class that they will be writing essays comparing and contrasting their lives with those of teenagers who have come to the United States as refugees.

The teacher next distributes “Life Experience Comparison Sheets” to students and instructs the students to fill in each space on the sheet. (NOTE: Space for three nations/refugees is included on the sample sheet provided here. The teacher may wish to increase or decrease the number of comparison countries based on time allotted for the lesson or depth of the lesson desired.)

It’s also suggested that the teacher collect and evaluate the “Life Experience Comparison Sheets” as part of the evaluation for the lesson.

The teacher should explain each part of the comparison sheet to students.

- 1) Name: The name of the refugee and his/her nationality.
- 2) Information source: Students should state where they found the related information. The teacher may elect to simply have the student state the name of the resource or site (for example, the BEYOND THE FIRE site), or may require the student to also provide the URL for web sites, and/or other bibliographic information for traditional resources.
- 3) Home life: How conditions in the refugee’s home country, or here in the U.S., have affected the family structure and relationships within the family.



## **BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War**

- 4) Education: How being a refugee has impacted schooling, regular attendance at school, types of educational opportunities.
- 5) Economic conditions: How the experience of living through war and being a refugee has impacted the family's financial situation, access to jobs, etc .
- 6) Social life: How the refugee's experience has affected his/her friends, boyfriend or girlfriend, social life or social status (for example, rights of females in Afghanistan as controlled by the Taliban).
- 7) Other information: This space can be used if the student finds other topics they wish to use in their essay, or the teacher may use it to add extra comparisons.

In order to comprehend the life experience and problems facing refugees with some depth, it is recommended that the teacher require students to look at refugees from at least three different nations. It is possible that not every story will address every category on the comparison sheet. In order for the students to have enough information to write the essay, the teacher might suggest seeking out refugee stories that share at least two or three of the categories of comparison. Again, the teacher may wish to change the breadth of the assignment based on the time allotted for the work.

Once students have been given the overview of the lesson as well as the "Life Experience Comparison Sheet," they can begin researching materials to complete the sheet. Teachers can determine if they want students to do their research completely online, or if they should mix web-based resources and conventional resources such as magazines, books, and newspapers.

The teacher may also wish to take into consideration the amount of time desired to actually do research. For example, if the class is doing some/all of the research online, the teacher must consider the availability of classroom computers or computer lab time.



## **BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War**

### **Writing the essay:**

It is suggested that while the teacher should have a specific format in mind for the essay, student creativity should also be considered in the assignment. For example, a student may wish to role-play one of the teens they research, and write a diary entry comparing his or her life to that of a typical American with whom they are “e-pals” or “pen pals.” Or, the student might consider writing the essay as a letter directly to their American “cousin,” or reversing the roles and having the student act as the refugee writing the letter.

The teacher can also determine the length of the essay, depending on the ability of the student and the amount of research conducted.

### **Evaluation:**

Each teacher will certainly wish to evaluate the finished work based on their own criteria and standards. However, most teachers will want to evaluate based on common criteria, including spelling and grammar, whether the student followed the assignment requirements as set in the lesson and/or modified by the teacher, accuracy, research (based on the completed “Life experience Comparison Sheet”), creativity and organization.

A sample rubric for evaluation is provided, and may be adapted for individual classes.

### **Extensions:**

This lesson plan could easily be adapted for small group work, either in place of or in addition to writing the essay. Students might share the task of researching teen refugees and present their findings as a group, perhaps role-playing each of the teens discussing their experiences. Following each presentation, the teacher could lead the class in a discussion about how these teens experiences are different from the experiences of students in the class, and what parts of their stories sound familiar.

Teachers might also search for organizations in their area that serve war refugees, and inquire about having a guest speaker come to the class. Some organizations working with refugees may also have volunteer opportunities for students to extend the lesson outside of the classroom.



# BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

## Sample “Life Experience Comparison Sheet”

	Refugee #1	Refugee #2	Refugee #3	Me
<b>Name/nationality</b>				
<b>Information source</b> (Where I found this information)				
<b>Home life</b> (Family structure and relationships)				
<b>Education</b> (Condition of schools and access to education)				
<b>Economic conditions</b> (Financial stability, access to jobs)				
<b>Social life</b> (Relationships with friends, quality of social life, social status)				
<b>Other information</b> (Anything else that is interesting to compare)				



# BEYOND THE FIRE: Teen Experiences of War

## Sample Rubric

Criteria (15 points maximum)	Excellent (15-11 points)	Good (10- 6 points)	Poor (5-0 points)
Spelling/grammar			
Did the student follow the “rules” of the assignment?			
Accuracy of research			
Creativity			
Organization			
<b>Total</b>			
<b>(60 points total)</b>			

Teacher comments about essay: