



About *Four Steps to Death*

It is 1942. The Battle of Stalingrad, one of the bloodiest in history, is underway. Three participants — two fighters and a boy — are caught in its horrors. Vasily is a patriotic Russian soldier determined to rid his country of the hated Nazi invaders — if he can stay alive long enough. Conrad is a German tank officer, part of the seemingly unstoppable force sweeping eastward over the steppe, expecting a quick victory over Stalin's ill-trained and badly equipped army. Between them is eight-year-old Sergei, whose home is the maze of rubble that used to be Stalingrad.

None of them can know that their fates will be intertwined as the cataclysm engulfs them.

About the Author

John Wilson is the author of *And in the Morning*, *Flags of War*, *Battle Scars* and more than a dozen historical fiction and non-fiction books for young people and adults. He lives on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, with his wife and their three children.

Discussion Questions and Activities

The following discussion questions and activities are suitable for classes in language and literature, social studies, history, media, visual arts and science and technology.

Please note that some of the activities in this learning resource require students to visit their local library or use the Internet for research.

Before Reading Questions and Activities

1. Using features of the book such as the title, the cover and the description on the flap, ask students to predict what they think will happen in the story and write down three to five predictions in point form. Then, either while they are reading or after they have finished reading the novel, they should refer back to their predictions to see how accurate they were.

2. The setting of *Four Steps to Death* is Stalingrad, Russia during the Second World War. Ask students to make a list of three to five things they know about World War II or Russia, but would like to learn more about. For example, if they would like to learn more about World War II, they can list the countries involved; types of planes, submarines, boats or tanks used; or historical figures. If they would like to learn more about Russia, they can list leaders; historical battles or revolutions; or cultural values and beliefs.

Once they have created a list, ask students to choose one item that interests them the most and research it, either at their local library or using the Internet, and write a detailed paragraph about that item.

During Reading Questions and Activities

1. While students are reading the novel, ask them to refer back to question 2 in the Before Reading section and review their list of things they wanted to learn more about, which they created before they started reading the book. When they find something that teaches them more about what they wanted to know, ask them to mark the page with a sticky note or write it down in their notebook and include a note that says "I wanted to know this!"

2. Explain to students that rereading is an important tool to help them understand what they are reading. Whenever they come across a passage that they don't understand or have a question about the story, ask them to stop and place a sticky note on the page or pages that seem unclear and mark the note(s) with a question mark. Next, ask students to reread the passage. If the passage still seems unclear, encourage them to introduce it or their question about the story in class. Explain that other students may have the same question or may be able to provide an answer to their question. Once the passage or question seems clear, ask students to place the letter A on the sticky note to show that it has been answered.

3. Developing Vocabulary

While reading the novel, ask students to write down a minimum of two to three unfamiliar words per chapter on the vocabulary chart, located at the end of this guide.

Students will be responsible for filling in the following information on the vocabulary chart: the word, the page number, the student's own definition and a definition from a dictionary. Remind students to first create their own definition of the word using only the context of the novel, then look up the word in the dictionary and write down the meaning. For each word, students should compare their meaning to the meaning found in the dictionary to see how accurate their definition was.

For example:

Word	Page #	Student's Definition	Dictionary Definition
Platitudes	9		
Charade	10		
Assails	24		
Cacophony	27		
Perfunctorily	60		

As an extra challenge, ask students to list and define as many war-related words as they can find throughout the novel.



4. Fact Check

In the novel *Four Steps to Death*, John Wilson includes many historical events and characters in an attempt to present a realistic depiction of the Battle of Stalingrad. Ask students to pay close attention to the names of people, battles and dates that are mentioned throughout the novel. Students should record as many details as they can, such as names of soldiers, names of armies, names of battles and names of geographical locations.

Once they have listed at least eight specific details about the battle, ask students to choose a minimum of three and fact check them to find out whether each is an historical fact or a piece of fiction. For example, “Sergei has pictures of famous snipers under his mattress on the cellar floor — Zaitsev, Zikan, Chekov and the others. His favorite is Yelena Pavlova.” (page 150). A fact check of this detail about the battle will reveal that Yelena Pavlova is a fictional character, whereas Zaitsev, Zikan and Chekov are actual Russian snipers who became famous for the number of Germans they killed during the Battle of Stalingrad.

If the detail about the battle is historical, ask students to write at least one paragraph explaining its historical significance. If the detail about the battle is fictional, ask students to write at least one paragraph explaining its significance in the story.

After Reading Questions and Activities

Thematic Connections in *Four Steps to Death*

1. Community

Using examples from the story, ask students to write at least one paragraph describing how the people of Stalingrad reacted to the outbreak of the battle in the city. For example, did they flee the city? Did they leave their homes and belongings to seek other shelter in the city? Did they join the war effort? In their answers, students should explain how the people living in Stalingrad continued to survive as a community.

2. What Is a Hero?

Ask students to define the word “hero” in their own words. Students should give examples of people in their lives that they feel fit this definition. In the novel *Four Steps to Death*, Sergei, along with many other Russians, looks up to Yelena Pavlova as a war hero. Why? Ask students to refer back to their definition and decide whether they think Yelena should be considered a hero? Why or why not?

3. Courage

Throughout the war each soldier attempts to muster enough courage to make it through to the next day. Some soldiers keep journals and write letters to their loved ones, while others carry around lucky tokens and keepsakes that were given to them by their loved ones. Using examples from the novel, ask students to choose two characters and describe how they maintained their courage throughout the Battle of Stalingrad. Students should

answer the following question: Does their courage ever falter? Why or why not?

4. Moral Dilemma

Sergei is surprised and grateful when a German soldier rescues him from possible death. This rescue later causes him to experience a moral dilemma when he is confronted with the decision to use a weapon to kill an unknown German soldier in order to save his idol, Yelena, and her assistant sniper Vasily. Ask students to compare Sergei’s feelings about his actions during the battle as a young civilian and later as an aged police constable. Do his feelings change over time? Why or why not?

Curriculum Connections in *Four Steps to Death*

1. Social Studies (Forms of Government)

Communism (page 30), Fascism (page 24) and Capitalism (page 9) are each mentioned in the novel *Four Steps to Death*. As part of a class activity, reproduce the following four headings on the board: Movement, System, Form of Government and Ideology. Ask students to discuss and clearly define each heading in point form, and then have them provide a minimum of three examples for each heading.

To help students get started, categorize the above-mentioned examples from the novel under the appropriate headings.

For example:

Movement	System	Form of Government	Ideology
Fascism	Capitalism	Democracy	Communism

Please note that some may be classified under more than one heading. For example, Fascism can be classified under the headings Movement and Ideology and Communism can be classified under the headings Movement, System, Form of Government and Ideology. Discuss with your class the reasons why some can be classified under more than one heading.

Once each heading has been filled with a minimum of three examples, ask students to choose one and research its definition and origin, and identify the world societies that employ it.

As an extension to this activity, ask students to write a minimum one-page report about their local government by researching the political party currently in power. Students should find out how the party came into power and the structure of the political party. As part of their research, students should refer to daily local newspapers as well as their local library and the Internet.

2. Science and Technology (Flight Versus Land Warfare)

The battle of Stalingrad was fought in the air by planes such as the German Stuka bomber (page 61) and the German Heinkel 111 (page 62); and on the land by tanks such as the German Skoda tank and the T-34 Russian tank (page 133–134). Ask students to go back through the book and list as many Russian and German planes and tanks as they can find. Then ask students to choose at least one German plane and one Russian tank (or vice versa) and research them. In their research,

explain the importance of the machinery during the war, its special features, how it performed and its origin. As part of their assignment, students should also compare the benefits and disadvantages of fighting from the air with planes in comparison to fighting on the ground with tanks during the Battle of Stalingrad. In their opinion, which do they feel was the most successful form of warfare? Why?

3. Point of View

In *Four Steps to Death*, the story of the Battle of Stalingrad is narrated by three different characters: Conrad, Vasily and Sergei. This allows the reader to experience the battle through three different perspectives: a German officer, a Russian soldier and a young Russian civilian.

In class, ask students to discuss the effect of multiple points of view in the novel. Is this an effective literary technique? Why or why not? Ask students to provide examples from the novel to back up their answers. As part of a class assignment, divide students into groups of four or five and ask them to write a minimum of three details about the battle of Stalingrad through the point of view of each of the characters mentioned above. What are some of the differences between each of the characters' descriptions of the battle? What are some of the similarities between each of the characters' descriptions of the battle? Once they are complete, ask each group to present their findings to the class.

4. Analyze a Map

A map of the area of conflict on a day during the Battle of Stalingrad begins each main section in the novel. As part of an individual research assignment, ask students to choose one of the maps in the novel and analyze it. Students should think about what the map reveals about the war (for example, plan of attack and positioning) and about Russia during the battle (for example the terrain and landscape).

As an extension of this activity, divide students into groups of three or four (make sure that the total number of groups works out to an even number), and ask each group to choose a country. Have them find a map of their chosen country and reproduce it (either by photocopying it or tracing it using tracing paper). Students can refer to a class atlas, atlases in the library or maps on the Internet. Ask each group to analyze their map and list the following details about the land: surrounding bodies of water, neighboring countries, size, terrain, boundaries, etc.

If time permits, have each group partner up with another group and create a mock battle. Assign a military for each country consisting of 200 foot soldiers, 100 tanks, 75 navy boats and 50 planes. Designate one group the attacker and the other the defender.

Explain to students that they will have to prepare a written report explaining their military strategy to either defend their country or attack another country. Their strategies should describe positioning of troops and answer the following questions: Which troops would you employ and why? Which territories would you attack or defend and why? Once their military strategies are complete, assign students another time limit of ten minutes to test their strategies on each other. Remind students that the idea of this activity is not to engage in war, but to set up and then test their military strategies using knowledge of their land.

5. Create a Timeline

For this activity, photocopy the activity page titled 'Battle of Stalingrad Timeline' located at the end of this guide, and hand out a copy to each student in your class.

Divide your class into three groups and assign each group a character (Conrad, Vasily or Sergei). Ask each group to go back through the book again, this time only referring to the chapters with the name of their assigned character. Each group will then be responsible for filling in the dates on their characters' timeline with a point-form summary of the main events or details that occurred during battle. Once each group completes their timeline, ask them to reproduce it on chart paper or on the blackboard and present it to the class. During each presentation the rest of the class will be responsible for filling in the timelines that they did not work on.

As an individual assignment, ask each student to compare and contrast each characters' timeline and write a report about the similarities and differences of the events that occurred on each day of the timeline during the Battle of Stalingrad.

6. New Ending

Imagine the novel ended differently, and instead of Vasily and Yelena dying in the cave, and Conrad and Josef dying from gunshot wounds, they all survive the battle of Stalingrad and World War II. Based on this new ending, ask students to write a one-page report describing what they think these characters would be like today. Students should ask themselves the following questions: Would they be married? Where would they be living today? Where would they be working today? Etc.

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Vocabulary Chart

While reading the novel, write down a minimum of two to three unfamiliar words per chapter on the vocabulary chart below. Fill in each column with the appropriate information.

If you find that you are running out of space before you reach the end of the book, extend the vocabulary list onto another page using the same headings.

Here are a few examples already listed for you:

Word	Page #	Student's Definition	Dictionary Definition
Platitudes	9		
Charade	10		
Assails	24		
Cacophony	27		
Perfunctorily	60		

***As an extra challenge, list and define as many war-related words as you can find throughout the novel.

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Battle of Stalingrad Timeline

Once you have been assigned a character and a group, go back through the novel only referring to the chapters of your assigned character. With your group, create point-form summaries of the main events or details that occurred during the battle on each date on the timeline. As a group, present your research to the class. During other presentations make sure to fill the timelines for the other characters that you were not responsible for.

Once you have filled in each of the characters' timelines, write a report about the similarities and differences of the events that occurred on each day of the timeline during the battle of Stalingrad.

Timeline	Conrad	Vasily	Sergei
DAY 1 Friday, June 19, 1942			
DAY 30 Saturday, July 18, 1942			
DAY 66 Sunday, August 23, 1942			
DAY 88 Monday, September 14, 1942			
DAY 131 Tuesday, October 27, 1942			
DAY 160 Wednesday, November 25, 1942			
DAYS 189–190 Thursday–Friday, December 24–25, 1942			

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