We often gain valuable information through reading, watching television, and listening to people share their knowledge. But sometimes experience can be the most powerful teacher. In the following poems by Walt Whitman, you will meet two men who learn very different lessons through their life experiences.

**QUICKWRITE** Think about a time in which experiencing something firsthand helped you to learn about it. For example, maybe you gained appreciation for a distant city by actually visiting it. Or perhaps breaking a leg made you aware of some barriers to the disabled. Explain to a classmate how experience fostered your new understanding.
**TEXT ANALYSIS: WHITMAN’S STYLE**

Like other poets of his day, Walt Whitman was deeply committed to celebrating the beauty and richness of America. Yet, while many of his contemporaries relied on conventional poetic forms such as sonnets and ballads, Whitman did not. Instead, he invented a new form to capture the spirit of the nation. Called free verse, this poetic form lacks traditional prosody—the regular patterns of rhyme and meter. As a result, the lines in free verse flow easily, resembling natural speech. Other aspects of style that distinguish Whitman’s work are as follows:

- repetition—or repeated words and phrases
- parallelism—or ideas phrased in similar ways
- onomatopoeia—or words that imitate sounds
- catalogs—or lists of things, people, or attributes

As you read each poem, notice how Whitman’s choice of form and stylistic devices help convey the speaker’s experience.

**READING SKILL: ANALYZE SENSORY DETAILS**

In his poetry, Whitman praised life in all of its diversity. He often relied on sensory details to communicate a wealth of experiences to readers. You probably remember that sensory details are words and phrases that appeal to the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. As you read Whitman’s poetry, record various examples of sensory details and analyze their effectiveness. For each poem, use a chart like the one shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Sense(s)</th>
<th>Why Effective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“When I heard . . . When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me” (lines 1–2)</td>
<td>hearing and sight</td>
<td>They clearly place the speaker in a lecture hall.</td>
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**Meet the Author**

**Walt Whitman**

1819–1892

**Jack-of-All-Trades**

Born in 1819, Walt Whitman grew up in a hurry. He left school at age 11, and within a few years he was living on his own in New York City. He drifted from job to job, working as a printer, journalist, and carpenter. He loved to stroll around the city, taking in sights and sounds that he would later use in his poetry.

**Pioneer of Poetry**

In 1855, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*, a volume of poems that captured the variety and tumult of 19th-century American life. Upon receiving a copy, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson declared, “It is the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” However, other writers denounced the book for its unorthodox form and content. Over the years, Whitman added to, revised, and rearranged the poems in *Leaves of Grass*, producing nine editions in total. Today, it is often regarded as the most influential collection of poetry in American literature.

**Whitman and the Civil War**

When Whitman learned that his younger brother had been wounded in Fredericksburg, Virginia, he immediately traveled to the front. There he saw the aftermath of one of the war’s bloodiest battles. This experience convinced him to work in Washington, D.C., as a volunteer nurse. In caring for the wounded, Whitman witnessed the effects of war on men’s bodies and minds. During this time, he wrote numerous poems, including the poignant “The Artilleryman’s Vision.” His years of nursing, he once wrote, were “the greatest privilege and satisfaction . . . and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life.”
When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

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1. proofs: formal scientific statements of evidence.

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A WHITMAN’S STYLE
Notice Whitman’s use of **parallelism** in lines 1–4. What other distinctive features of his style can you see in this poem?

B SENSORY DETAILS
Of the various sensory details, which most effectively conveys the speaker’s enjoyment of the night sky?
While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long, 
And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the vacant midnight passes, 
And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the breath of my infant, 
There in the room as I wake from sleep this vision presses upon me; 
The engagement\(^1\) opens there and then in fantasy unreal, 
The skirmishers\(^2\) begin, they crawl cautiously ahead, I hear the irregular snap! snap! 
I hear the sounds of the different missiles, the short \(t-h-t! t-h-t!\) of the rifle balls, 
I see the shells exploding leaving small white clouds, I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass, 
The grape\(^3\) like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees, 
(tumultuous now the contest rages,) 
All the scenes at the batteries\(^4\) rise in detail before me again, 
The crashing and smoking, the pride of the men in their pieces, 
The chief-gunner ranges and sights his piece and selects a fuse of the right time, 
After firing I see him lean aside and look eagerly off to note the effect; 
Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging, (the young colonel leads himself this time with brandish’d\(^5\) sword,)

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1. **engagement**: battle. 
2. **skirmishers**: soldiers sent out in advance of a main attack. 
3. **grape**: grapeshot—small iron balls shot in a bunch from a cannon. 
4. **batteries**: groups of cannons. 
5. **brandish’d**: raised and waving.
I see the gaps cut by the enemy’s volleys,\(^6\) (quickly fill’d up, no delay,)

I breathe the suffocating smoke, then the flat clouds hover low concealing all;

Now a strange lull for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side,

Then resumed the chaos louder than ever, with eager calls and orders of officers,

While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts to my ears a shout of applause, (some special success,)

And ever the sound of the cannon far or near, (rousing even in dreams a devilish exultation and all the old mad joy in the depths of my soul,)

And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions, batteries, cavalry, moving hither and thither,

(\nThe falling, dying, I heed not, the wounded dripping and red I heed not, some to the rear are hobbling,\)

Grime, heat, rush, aide-de-camps\(^7\) galloping by or on a full run,

With the patter of small arms, the warning s-s-s of the rifles, (these in my vision I hear or see,)

And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color’d rockets.\(^8\)

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6. *volleys:* groups of cannonballs fired at the same time.
7. *aide-de-camps* (ā’dī-ˈdē-kāmz’): assistants to military commanders.
January 29, 1865

Dear Mother—

Here is a case of a soldier I found among the crowded cots in the Patent hospital — (they have removed most of the men of late and broken up that hospital). He likes to have some one to talk to, and we will listen to him. He got badly wounded in the leg and side at Fredericksburg that eventful Saturday, 13th December. He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and those grim batteries, for his company and his regiment had been compelled to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, he lay with his head slightly down hill, and could not help himself. At the end of some fifty hours he was brought off, with other wounded, under a flag of truce.

We ask him how the Rebels treated him during those two days and nights within reach of them — whether they came to him — whether they abused him? He answers that several of the Rebels, soldiers and others, came to him, at one time and another. A couple of them, who were together, spoke roughly and sarcastically, but did no act. One middle-aged man, however, who seemed to be moving around the field among the dead and wounded for benevolent purposes, came to him in a way he will never forget. This man treated our soldier kindly, bound up his wounds, cheered him, gave him a couple of biscuits, gave him a drink and water, asked him if he could eat some beef. This good Secesh, however, did not change our soldier’s position, for it might have caused the blood to burst from the wounds where they were clotted and stagnated. Our soldier is from Pennsylvania; has had a pretty severe time; the wounds proved to be bad ones. But he retains a good heart, and is at present on the gain.

Walt

1. Secesh (sē-shè): a secessionist from the Union; a Confederate.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” what methods does the astronomer use to teach about the stars?

2. **Recall** In “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” where is the artilleryman when he experiences his vision?

3. **Summarize** Describe the sequence of events in “The Artilleryman’s Vision.”

Text Analysis

4. **Interpret Mood** Reread “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” At what point does the mood, or atmosphere, of the poem change? Explain which words and phrases signal this shift.

5. **Understand Whitman’s Style** In his poetry, Whitman often celebrates nature and its beauty. Which aspects of Whitman’s style in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” help communicate the beauty of nature? If necessary, review the list of aspects of Whitman’s style on page 879.

6. **Examine Diction and Tone** Reread lines 18–22 of “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” reviewing Whitman’s diction, or choice of words. Considering phrases such as “devilish exultation” and “old mad joy,” describe Whitman’s tone, or attitude, toward war.

7. **Analyze Sensory Details** Review the charts that you created and your conclusions about Whitman’s use of sensory details. Select one poem and explain how sensory details help make the speaker’s firsthand experience vivid and engaging. Use examples from the poem to support your answer.

8. **Generalize About Poetic Form** Whitman uses free verse in both selections. How might your sense of the speakers and their experiences be different if the poems had been written in a form with a conventional metrical pattern and rhyme scheme?

9. **Compare Literary Works** Compare Whitman’s depictions of Civil War soldiers in “The Artilleryman’s Vision” and in his letter to his mother on page 884. Which offers a more disturbing view of the after-effects of war—the poem or the personal letter? Use information from both pieces to support your response.

Text Criticism

10. **Historical Context** When Whitman wrote “The Artilleryman’s Vision” in the mid-1860s, psychology had yet to become a modern science. What does this fact reveal about Whitman and his handling of the poem’s subject?

What do we learn from EXPERIENCE?

What could your life experiences teach someone else?