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Genre Comprehension Skills and Strategy
Expository nonfiction
- Sequence
- Generalize
- Inferring

Text Features
- Headings
- Captions
- Glossary

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by Meish Goldish

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Vocabulary

canteen
Confederacy
glory
quarrel
rebellion
stallion
Union

Word count: 2,307
Life was not easy for young Sarah Emma Edmonds. Born in 1841 in New Brunswick, Canada, Emma grew up on a farm. She worked hard gathering crops, chopping wood, and feeding the animals.

Emma’s father was a rough man who would often quarrel with his children. When Emma was fifteen, he tried to force her to marry someone she didn’t know. Emma ran away from home and disguised herself as a man. Calling herself “Frank Thompson,” she eventually moved to the United States and settled in Michigan.

In 1861 the Civil War began. It set Americans in the North against those in the South. Little did Emma know how useful her male disguise was about to become.
A Call for Soldiers

Emma cherished her new life of freedom and was very much against the idea of slavery. She favored the Northern cause in the Civil War. When the Union army put out a call for new soldiers, Emma eagerly volunteered.

Luckily for her, getting into the army was not too difficult. It involved no physical exam, which she surely would have failed since she was posing as a man. Instead, Emma merely had to answer a few questions, and she passed.

The armies of both the North and the South were in desperate need of men to fight in the Civil War.

Her First Assignment

Disguised as “Frank Thompson,” Emma worked in an army unit as a nurse. Trained and stationed in Washington, D.C., she tended to Union soldiers who were ill. Many of them suffered from deadly diseases such as malaria and typhoid fever.

In the army, Emma found it easy to keep up her disguise as a man. She was able to have the privacy she needed for bathing and dressing. She worked closely with her patients, yet none of them realized that “Frank” was really a woman.
A Spy Is Needed

In July 1861, the Union lost a big battle in Virginia at Bull Run near Manassas. The army was reorganized, and Emma’s unit was sent to Virginia. No longer a nurse, she now served as a mail carrier.

Soon a new opportunity came along for Emma. General George McClellan, a leader of the Union army, had lost a spy and needed a replacement. McClellan planned to march into Virginia to battle the Confederacy. Before the attack, a spy would need to learn as much as possible about the enemy there—its position, number of soldiers, and kinds of weapons.

“Frank Thompson” volunteered to spy. Union officers interviewed him and were greatly impressed. None of them guessed that “Frank” was really a female, and all agreed to make him a spy.

Emma’s mission was to sneak into the Confederate camp at Yorktown, Virginia, without giving away her identity. She feared that posing as a white male might arouse suspicion among the enemy. So instead, she disguised herself as an enslaved African-American male. She wore a curly wig and used a chemical powder to darken her skin. She gave this persona the name “Cuff.”

General George McClellan was one of the highest-ranking leaders of the Union army, serving briefly as its general-in-chief.
Getting the Job Done

In disguise and using a fake voice, Emma managed to enter into the Confederate camp. “Cuff” was immediately forced to join a work crew and spent the day digging ditches and building shelters for the Southern soldiers. It was not difficult for her to do the job since she was used to tough manual labor from her childhood.

As she worked, Emma listened carefully to the conversations of the men around her. She learned the number of soldiers that resided in the camp and the kinds of guns they had. She even learned that the Confederates had painted many tree logs black so they would look like cannons from far away.

Emma secretly wrote down all the information that she gathered. She also drew a diagram of the area. She hid the papers in her shoes.

The next evening, “Cuff” was placed on guard duty. When night fell, Emma snuck away and carefully made her way back to the Union camp. Posing once again as “Frank Thompson,” she presented her secret papers to a Union officer. The officer brought the information to General McClellan. He was so impressed that he personally thanked Emma for a job well done. The Union army used her information to approach Yorktown safely.
A New Disguise

Emma did so well her first time as a spy that she was given a second assignment two months later. It required her to slip into the Confederate camp near Richmond, Virginia, to gather information.

Emma chose not to return as “Cuff,” since he had deserted guard duty and might be arrested if recognized.

Sometimes Emma posed as another woman instead of as a man.

Instead, she posed as an Irish woman with goods to sell. She called herself “Bridget O’Shea.” She wore glasses and a large, padded dress as part of her costume. Carrying a basket filled with sewing needles, thread, and other items, Emma set out for Richmond.

Along the way, Emma came to a house where a young Confederate soldier was dying of typhoid fever. Emma comforted the boy, giving him water from his canteen. Before he died, he gave Emma a gold watch to deliver to his commanding officer.

Emma continued on her way to the Confederate lines. Holding the watch, she had little trouble being welcomed into the enemy camp. The commanding officer was grateful to “Bridget.” He asked her to lead his men back to the house with the dead soldier so he could be given a proper burial.

Emma was a good-hearted person who gave comfort even to enemy soldiers in need.
Riding on horseback with the soldiers, Emma learned valuable information. The men told her how they planned to ambush Union soldiers when they approached.

Finally, Emma and the soldiers reached the house. An officer asked “Bridget” to ride ahead to make sure there were no Union soldiers nearby. Emma gladly agreed. It gave her the perfect excuse simply to ride away. With Emma as a guide, the horse raced like a stallion to the Union camp.

Safely back, Emma—posing as “Frank”—shared her stolen information with Union officers. Again, the officers were impressed by Emma’s amazing work. They couldn’t believe she had even captured a Confederate horse! As a result of Emma’s fine work, the Union army was prepared for the Confederate ambush.

Emma’s skill as a horse rider came in very handy during her adventures as a spy.

A Surprise Discovery

Emma’s, or “Frank’s,” success as a spy led to more secret assignments. When working in other parts of Virginia, she felt safe enough to reuse her old disguises. Often she presented herself as “Cuff,” whom she came to admire as a character.

In August 1862, Emma was sent again into a Confederate camp. This time, she chose a new disguise: an African-American washerwoman. She dressed in an old shirt and skirt and wore a kerchief on her head. She also darkened her skin with power, as she did with “Cuff.”

Emma had no trouble getting into an army camp dressed as a washerwoman since soldiers needed workers to do their laundry.
Once inside the enemy camp, Emma got a job doing laundry for the Confederate soldiers. Alone in a tent, she busied herself cleaning an officer’s coat. Suddenly, a bunch of papers fell out of the inside pocket. Seeing that they held important information, Emma quickly hid them in her clothing.

Later that day, Emma found an empty farmhouse. She snuck into the basement without being seen. She waited there quietly, hoping not to be caught. That evening, a battle broke out outside the house. Emma listened to the gunfire and explosions throughout the night.

By morning, the battle was over. Emma peeked outside and saw Union soldiers around the house. She came out of hiding and approached the men. She managed to convince them that she was a Union spy with valuable information. She went to the Union camp, where she handed over the papers she had found in the Confederate officer’s coat.

Once again, the officers were grateful to “Frank Thompson” for the stolen information. Once again, Emma had succeeded at a dangerous job while in disguise.
Spying on the Spies

In late 1862, Emma’s army unit was transferred to Kentucky. The state was mostly under Union control, but Southern spies were in the area. They sent secret information about Union army activity to Confederate leaders. Union officers didn’t know who the spies were, only that they existed.

Once again, “Frank Thompson” was asked to spy. This time, however, there was no need to sneak across enemy lines. Instead, Emma would have to find out who in the city of Louisville was leaking secrets about the North.

Emma created a new identity for this job. She dressed as a white male and used the name “Charles Mayberry.” “Mayberry” let it be known in town that he favored the Confederacy. Eventually, Emma met a businessman named P. N. Aylesworth, who was also known for his pro-Southern feelings.

Gaining his trust, “Mayberry” told Aylesworth that he wished to join the Confederate army. Pleased by this rebellion, Aylesworth arranged for a friend named Hall to take “Mayberry” to a Confederate camp. Emma tipped off Union officers about their trip.

Union soldiers stopped the pair and arrested Hall. They found papers on him with Union secrets that Hall was bringing to the Confederates. The papers also named two other Southern spies. Eventually, those spies—plus Aylesworth—were arrested. All of this was due to Emma’s cleverness and bravery!

Union soldiers arrested both “Mayberry” and Hall, so Hall would not realize that “Mayberry” was a spy. Later, in private, “Mayberry”—really Emma—was released.
Unexpected Trouble

Emma’s demanding work eventually caught up with her physically. In the spring of 1863, she became ill with malaria. She knew that if she checked into the army hospital, her “Frank Thompson” disguise would be discovered. So she secretly left her unit and traveled to Illinois.

Emma checked herself into an Illinois hospital and stayed there until she got better. She had hoped to return to her army unit. However, in an office window she saw an army notice that listed “Frank Thompson” as a deserter. Returning to her army base would surely lead to her arrest.

Emma faced a tough choice. She decided to spend all the money she had on a train ticket to Washington, D.C. There, she worked as a nurse in a Union army hospital under her real name. Her days as a spy in disguise were over.

For the rest of the war, Emma devoted herself to helping wounded and sick Union soldiers. She spoke with them about the battles they had fought. However, she never discussed any of the eleven secret spy missions that she had gone on.
The Secret Is Revealed

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Emma decided to tell her secret to the world. She wrote a book about her spying adventures, called *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*. It became a bestseller. Readers were touched by the true story of a woman who risked her life in such a daring manner to help her country.

As an author, Emma continued to do good deeds for her country. Instead of keeping the money she made on the book, she donated all her profits to the U.S. war relief fund to help needy soldiers.

Emma had to decide what to do next in her life. She grew homesick for her country of birth, Canada. She returned there for a visit and met Linus Seelye, a friend from her childhood. They spent a lot of time together and decided to marry.

In 1867 the couple returned to the United States and married in Ohio. They had three sons, one of whom joined the U.S. Army, “just like Mama did.”

Emma continued to do good deeds, working in homes for orphans. She also helped former slaves get an education and find jobs after the war.

Many homes, such as this one in Iowa, were built after the Civil War to house orphans. After the war, Emma worked in such a home.
Justice at Last

Long after the war ended, one thing about Emma’s past still bothered her. Given all that she had done for her country, she disliked that “Frank Thompson” had been labeled a deserter. Emma contacted officers in her old army unit. They encouraged her to ask the War Department to review her case.

Emma made two requests of the government. One was that the label of “deserter” be removed from her army record. The other was that she receive retirement pay equal to that of male war veterans.

In 1884 the U.S. government granted both of Emma’s requests. They gave her an honorable army report, calling her a hero instead of a deserter. They also gave her money equal to that of male veterans—plus a bonus.

After the war, a group of former Civil War soldiers formed an organization called the Grand Army of the Republic. It had a membership of more than 400,000 veterans. Emma Edmonds was the only female ever voted into the organization.

Emma Edmonds Seelye died in 1898. She is buried in the army section of a cemetery in Texas. She is still remembered for the glory of her work.

Perhaps Emma’s own words sum her up best: “I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic—but patriotism was the true secret of my success.”

Emma is buried at a cemetery in Houston, Texas.
Glossary

canteen  
n. a small container for holding water or other liquids

Confederacy  
n. the group of Southern states that fought the Northern states in the Civil War

glory  
n. great fame or honor

quarrel  
v. to argue or disagree

rebellion  
n. an armed fight against a government

stallion  
n. an adult male horse

Union  
n. the Northern states that remained loyal to the federal government during the Civil War

Reader Response

1. Copy the chart below. Using the story to guide you, put these events in the correct order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dressed as “Frank Thompson”, Emma works as a male nurse.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma meets and marries Linus Seelye.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma works on the family farm.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma poses as an Irish peddler.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Frank Thompson” is listed as a deserter by the Union army.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Based on what you have read, what can you infer about Emma Edmond’s character? What adjectives would you use to describe her? How does this inference help you better understand the story?

3. For each of the following words, determine whether they have a positive or negative meaning. Give reasons for your answers.
   
   rebellion  
   quarrel  
   union

4. Which of Emma’s adventures do you think was the most interesting? Why?