



**ARMISTICE
100 DAYS**

HOW TO WRITE A CENTENA
WITH 26 AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR
CENTENARY PARTNERSHIP

WORDS | FILM | MUSIC



LED BY IWM

How to write a centena

The centena is a new poetic form invented for the centenary partnership project between Imperial War Museums and the writers' group 26 www.26.org.uk. We asked John Simmons, founder director of 26 and creator of the centena form, and Ed Prichard, one of the project's writers and editors, to tell us more about it – with the hope that others in our community might try it. They conducted the following conversation.

John to Ed

Ed, it's surprising how quickly the idea of writing centenars for the project between 26 and IWM became established. Can you remember how you first heard of the idea? What was your reaction?

Ed to John

I was intrigued by it and excited by the idea of commemorating a centenary with a new form that reflects the passing years. I love the way a restriction - whether it's number of words or starting every sentence with the same letter for example - really focuses your writing. The three repeated words at the start and end give the form a satisfying symmetry too - another chance to test your creativity. It gives you a different way in - you almost have to start at the end.

John to Ed

I've long believed in the liberating power of constraints, and have even written books on it. Counter-intuitive as it sounds, it's a creative release because your mind, having been hemmed in, finds a way to break out. So when I came to think about the brief, I was looking for a creative constraint that would be appropriate for a centenary. 100 words was obvious but I thought it also needed a structural device to encourage a complete piece – so beginning and ending with the same three words came into my head.

In the case of my own centena, the words 'He looked up' were my starting point, as I thought about my grandfather (killed by bullets fired from a German plane in 1917). It just seemed right, and would work as an ending too. I then had 94 words to get from the beginning of the story to its ending.

Did you have a similar process? Did the first three words come first? I'm sure different writers will approach it in different ways.

Ed to John

Often it's a phrase that sticks in your head that kicks off the writing. I wanted to write in the first person and I had an idea about my great grandmother, Catherine, looking back from thirty years after the war ended through a fog of dementia. She lost two sons and the third was wounded and died the year before she did in 1952. As a widow, the consequences for her family weren't great – my great aunt and grandmother were sent into service, which was pretty grim.

Catherine lived in a mining village called Abertridwr in the valleys, so I had the idea that she was thinking about the two places. Her eldest son, Benjamin John, died at

Gallipoli in the Dardanelles, a long way from home, which gave me another contrast to play with.

I let it all sit for a while and the first words came from a bit of word play on the Dardanelles. If you repeat it over and over, it starts to lose meaning and, to me, it sounds a bit like a train. Then something clicked – in her confusion, she's going to catch a train to bring him home. So my opening and closing three words are: 'Dardanelles-denelles-denelles he never...' Because of the dementia aspect, I wanted the end to trail off as her mind wanders.

I think the three words are a good place to start – especially as you want to start strongly to grab the reader's attention and aim to end on the same note. The challenge is then to tell the story with so few words, so every word has to count. How did you go about editing your centena?

John to Ed

Well, of course, to edit you need to have written something. My advice is to start writing without worrying about the word count for the first draft. You can, for example, start with a piece of automatic writing in which you just put words down, almost in a stream of consciousness way, with no editing while you write. If you write non-stop for five minutes you will almost certainly have more than 100 words – which gives you something to work with.

Or you might, as I did, have a few phrases that pop into your head. In my case it was 'he was listening to the birds' and 'the last thing he was thinking of'. These came from imagining my grandfather writing a letter home just before he was killed. I have some of his letters to my Nan so I know this was something he did. I imagined him engrossed in distractions such as birds singing and thoughts of home – so engrossed that he didn't see the German plane overhead. All I knew of my grandad's death was that he was strafed by bullets from a plane. It was still such an unusual event that he might not have considered a plane a threat.

So I was putting together the pieces of the story. Now I needed to write a draft. I did this while flying from Singapore to New Zealand – I find travelling conducive to writing. My first draft was much more than 100 words but that was OK – editing is an essential part of writing and now I had something to edit.

At this point other aspects of writing kick in – the shape of the poem on the page, decisions about lines and rhymes (yes or no), the rhythm of the words. Because I imagined the words as coming from my grandmother's mouth I wanted them to sound spoken –but also to have an incantatory effect, as if spoken to herself, to give herself some comfort. At this point I decided to put most of the verbs into the present tense, with the –ing ending of verbs to make it sound more immediate, in the moment. It also meant that these were, if not rhymes, then half-rhymes which would give a fractured intensity to the words. Then to emphasise some of these by placing them as single words on a line.

All of this meant that the centena was taking shape. It was now close to its intended number of words. The final stages of drafting (after the plane trip was done)

whittled down from 108 to 100 words, and was the most time-consuming stage. To cut out words but leave everything essential. But in many ways the most enjoyable because by then you know you have something. You just need to work at getting the final form, like one of those puzzles where you push squares around until everything fits in the right places.

Then you live with it for a while – days or weeks –until you're convinced it can be shown more widely: first to my wife and daughter, then to my editor Richard. They were positive, indicating that I had made an emotional connection. A relief. All writers allow their work out into the world with some trepidation. You never quite get over that, do you? There's always a bit of bravery needed.

Ed to John

You're right, there's always a moment when you know it's ready but it's still nerve-racking letting it out there. I shared an earlier draft at a writing workshop, which I found helpful – the combination of reading it out loud and hearing other people's reactions was good. Fortunately, the feedback was positive. Once it's out there, it takes on another life as people read and share it.

I've been through a similar journey to you while writing mine, trying to put myself inside my great grandmother's head. The final poem came out as a stream of consciousness that meanders over the page, reflecting her confused state of mind. Once I realised that was how it would look on paper, it made writing the rest a bit easier.

I found researching the background helped me a lot too – finding information online about the world in 1918 and how people lived was really useful. Then cross-referencing it back to my family story made it feel more real. I used an ancestry website to research the family tree and found lots of documents on there that were fascinating. For example, my great uncle Gwilym's service records show when he was wounded in Gallipoli and then again in Flanders, where he was in hospital and all sorts of details.

I also searched in the newspaper archives online. It's easy to fall down the rabbit hole and get sidetracked (which was brilliant for getting a feel of the world at that time). But I did find a newspaper article that mentioned my great grandmother and her sons, which added flesh to some of things I'd found elsewhere.

Once you get going, it's amazing what you find in the strangest places. I searched for my great grandmother's house in Abertridwr and found it on a property site. There were photos and a floor plan; somehow two adults and 10 children, from the age of 3 up to 25, all rubbed along together in a tiny three-bedroom cottage. It doesn't appear in the poem, but it gave me context.

The archive recommended by IWM was very helpful too. They couldn't give me specific information about Catherine or the family, but the background was very useful. They also gave me some clues about where else to look. It seems there are lots of local projects all over the country that have built websites and collections from people's personal submissions about their families.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, websites and archives out there. So if you can start with general searches and then get more specific, that's a good way in. Local archives are a good place to start or even your local library. One thing I found useful was to keep careful notes on where I found things – I lost the sources of a couple of things as I got a bit overexcited when I found them!

John to Ed

The wonderful thing about this kind of research is that you never know where it will lead you. There will be surprises – welcome them. The other resources we have are inside our heads in the form of imagination and memory, those close cousins. As well as your own memory, tap into the memories of friends and family members – but know that, in the end, it's your perspective that counts. Be brave – an essential quality for a writer – and trust that if the subject moves you, it will also move the reader.