

Nonfiction Comprehension *Cliffhangers*

by Tom Conklin

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Introduction

The hero is in peril . . .

The team is down by a touchdown with a minute left to play . . .

The baffling mystery leaves the brilliant detective stumped . . .

Who doesn't love a cliffhanger? Everyone enjoys a good story that poses questions and has readers eagerly turning the pages.

This collection of stories presents 15 very special cliffhangers. What makes them so special? Every one of them is true!

Not only are these exciting stories of mystery and heroics true but they span the curriculum, providing your students with valuable reading in the content areas.

These cliffhangers are ideal for group reading situations. Each one is prefaced with suggested discussion topics to activate students' prior knowledge, vocabulary lists, follow-up questions to assess student comprehension, and enrichment activities to develop their writing skills. Plus, look at the "Hot Web-Links" section at the end of the Introduction for a list of online resources that will let your students expand their reading experience online.

Now, buckle up and get ready for some of the most amazing-but-true cliffhangers of all time . . .

How to Use the Nonfiction Comprehension Cliffhangers

Here is a suggested lesson-plan template to use with each story:

1. Prereading

- ✓ Provide a photocopy of the story for each participating student.
- ✓ Write the vocabulary words on the board and brainstorm with students to come up with definitions of each word. Use the definitions given on the teaching guide page to direct the discussion. Challenge students to watch for the words as they read.
- ✓ Lead students in the discussion activities suggested before each story to activate prior knowledge.

2. Group Reading

- ✓ Have groups of students read the stories collectively. Let students take turns reading one or two paragraphs aloud as the rest read along silently. Encourage students to visualize the story's settings, characters, and actions as they read.
- ✓ As individual students finish reading paragraphs aloud, you may wish to apply the "cliffhanger" prediction strategy (see the next page) by asking students to briefly describe what they think is going to happen next in the story.

3. The Cliffhanger

- ✓ As students reach the Cliffhanger for each story, lead a discussion on what has happened in the story so far. Encourage students to summarize. Have students infer what will happen next based on what they have read to that point. Invite each student to predict what will happen next. If students disagree in their predictions, have individual students defend their predictions by citing information in the story.
- ✓ After students have made their predictions, have them read The Rest of the Story section for each story.

4. Follow-Up/Assessment

- ✓ Ask students the Talk About It question(s) provided for each story.
- ✓ Review the vocabulary words for each story. Ask students if they would revise their definitions after reading the words in the context. Encourage students to use a dictionary to find the definition for each word.
- ✓ Provide students with the URLs from the Hot Web-Links section below in order to extend their “cliffhanger” experience online.
- ✓ Have students complete the Write About It enrichment activity provided for each story.

Hot Web-Links

Special Note: Please keep in mind that Internet locations and content can change over time. Be sure to preview each Web site first to determine if its intended content is still available and appropriate for the level of your students.

THE BROWN BOMBER

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/fight/index.html>
“The Fight,” an episode of the PBS series *The American Experience*, focuses on the Louis-Schmeling bouts. The supporting Web site contains background information on Louis and Schmeling along with loads of source material, including vintage radio broadcasts of both boxing matches.

(You can also find films of the Louis-Schmeling bouts on the site youtube.com. Simply type “schmeling” in the search field there.)

BREAKING THE BARRIER

<http://www.chuckyeager.org>

An in-depth profile of Chuck Yeager’s career, including film clips of the Bell X-1 in flight and an audio clip in which Yeager recounts his historic flight in his own words.

SCHOOLS: BLACK AND WHITE

<http://www.nps.gov/bvrb/index.htm>

The official Web site for the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. The Historic Site is housed in the old Monroe School, which Linda Brown was forced to attend. The Web site includes fascinating multimedia background material on the case.

GOING FOR THE GOLD

<http://www.strug.org>

Kerri Strug’s official Web site contains lots of personal information, along with Kerri’s own perspective on her efforts to achieve Olympic success.

Hot Web-Links (continued)**SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC**

<http://www.antarcticconnection.com>

An excellent site providing information on weather and wildlife on Antarctica (including the current temperature at the South Pole). It also has a good section on Antarctic exploration, including an overview of Scott and Amundsen.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/hil0pro-1>

The Academy of Achievement Web site provides an excellent in-depth profile of Sir Edmund, along with photos from his historic climb of Mount Everest.

JANE OF THE APES

<http://www.janegoodall.com>

The Web site of the Jane Goodall Institute, it presents a great deal of material on Goodall's life and work, with many resources for students and teachers.

THE SPECKLED MONSTER

<http://www.jennermuseum.com>

An in-depth look at Jenner's life and career presented by the charitable trust that maintains a museum in the Jenner family home.

NOVA: EINSTEIN'S BIG IDEA

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/einstein/>
"Einstein's Big Idea," an episode of the PBS series *Nova*, presents loads of background information on Einstein, his theory of relativity, and the theory's impact on the world.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MESSY DESK

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/tryit/doctor/>
Doctor Over Time, an activity from the PBS series *A Science Odyssey*, gives students an interactive chance to see how medicine has improved since 1900, including the development of antibiotics. This Web site also provides a brief biography of Alexander Fleming.

TWO GUYS NAMED STEVE

<http://www.apple.com>

Check out the latest innovations from the company founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak by visiting Apple's home page.

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE FAIRY PHOTOS

<http://www.cottingley.net/fairies.shtml>

Cottingley.net, the Web site of the town of Cottingley, presents the story of the Cottingley Fairies, including the faked photos and pictures of the locations and people surrounding the controversy.

MARS ATTACKS!

<http://members.aol.com/jeff1070/wotw.html>

This Web site, dedicated to "The War of the Worlds" broadcast, presents transcripts of news reports on the broadcast and panic, a link to the show's scripts, and some interesting book excerpts on the event.

(You can also hear a complete mp3 of the broadcast here: <http://sounds.mercurytheatre.info/mercury/381030.mp3>)

THE GREATEST FISH STORY EVER TOLD

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/fish/>
"Ancient Creature of the Deep," an episode of PBS's *Nova*, looked at the coelacanth and its discovery in 1938. The Web site supporting the episode is full of great information on the fish and the story of its discovery, including copies of all the letters between Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer and Dr. J. L. B. Smith.

"THE PLAY"

http://alumni.berkeley.edu/KCAA_Multimedia/theplay_long.ram

The University of California's alumni Web site features two videos of "The Play." The shorter version shows only the kickoff itself. The longer version includes Stanford's great last-minute comeback drive, which set up "The Play."

The Brown Bomber

Curriculum Connections: Social Studies, Physical Education

African American Joe Louis, born in poverty in the segregated South and raised in industrial Detroit, becomes the world's greatest boxer in the 1930s. When German Max Schmeling defeats Joe, Nazi propagandists claim this proves the superiority of the white race. Joe Louis then soundly defeats Schmeling in a rematch.

The Cliffhanger: Joe Louis, humiliated by Max Schmeling in their first fight, takes the ring for their rematch. Can he defeat Schmeling and reclaim the world championship?

Answer: Louis knocks Schmeling out in the first round, proving his earlier defeat was a fluke.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Have students who have seen a boxing match or movies about boxing describe what happens in a bout.

Have students who are familiar with World War II talk about the conflict. Ask what they know about Germany's Nazi regime. Elicit that Nazi Germany was a racist state which believed that whites are a "master race" and have a right to rule the earth, and that the United States fought the Nazis, defeating them and their ideology.

Talk About It

- ☞ Why did Joe Louis lose to Max Schmeling in their first fight? *(Joe did not train hard for the fight, Max did. Also, Max studied Joe's boxing style and found a weakness.)*
- ☞ Why did so many people around the world pay such close attention to the rematch between Joe and Max? *(The Nazis were using the fight in their propaganda.)*

Write About It

- ✍ Create a poster to promote the rematch between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. Be sure to include the fight's date and place. Also include slogans to highlight why the fight is sure to be exciting.

VOCABULARY WORDS



- amateur** a person who does something for love, not money
- canvas** thick fabric, used as the surface of a boxing ring
- cautiously** carefully, watchfully
- confronted** to have come face to face with
- peppered** to be hit with a series of small blows
- propaganda** untrustworthy information spread to promote a cause
- superior** to be better than

The Brown Bomber

Joseph Louis Barrow was a powerful man.

Joe was born in Chambers County, Alabama, on May 13, 1914. His father was a poor farmer named Munroe Barrow, who died when Joe was only 4 years old. Joe's mother, Lillie, washed clothes to earn the money to feed Joe and his seven brothers and sisters. When Joe was 7 years old, his mother married a man named Patrick Brooks, who had eight children of his own. Soon, Lillie and Patrick took their 16 kids and left the farms of Alabama. The family moved north to the big city of Detroit.

Life was hard for Joe and his family. When he was 12 years old, Joe got his first jobs. Before going to school he worked in Detroit's Eastern Market, selling fruits and vegetables. After school, Joe delivered huge blocks of ice for people to use in their ice boxes. Joe later said that hauling 50-pound blocks of ice built up his muscles. He would put that strength to good use.

Joe's mother had dreams that her son would be a musician. She gave him money for violin lessons. But Joe wasn't a very good musician. Instead, he loved the thrills and challenges of boxing. So Joe used the money to rent a locker at the Brewster Recreation Center, where boxers trained. After a few weeks, Joe's violin teacher came to his house, looking for him. That night, Joe's mother confronted Joe. At first, she was mad because he had been sneaking behind her back. But after Joe told her how much he loved boxing, she gave in. "Whatever you do, Joe, just give it your best," she said.

Joe began fighting amateur matches as a teenager. Before one of his first fights, Joe had to fill out some forms. Joe wrote his first and middle names in the blank. There wasn't enough space for him to add his last name, Barrow. So from that moment on, Joe Barrow was known as Joe Louis.

At first, Joe won some fights and lost some fights. He took a job building cars at Ford Motors. But he never gave up. Joe found good trainers, who taught him how to use his strength in the ring. By the time he was 20 years old, Joe had fought 58 bouts, and won 54 of them. He decided it was time to turn pro.

Once he turned pro, Joe became a star. He worked very hard and fought every chance he got. He earned only \$50 in his first fight. But a year and a half later, Joe had won more than \$370,000—back when the average yearly salary was only \$1,250! Joe won his first 27 bouts—23 of them by knockouts. People began calling him "the Brown Bomber." One sportswriter wrote that Joe was "the greatest fighter of all time." People said that Joe Louis was unbeatable. American boxers were afraid to fight him.

REAL-LIFE HEROES

One fighter, though, was eager to take on Joe Louis.

Max Schmeling was the European champion. Born in Germany on September 28, 1905, Max was almost as big as Joe Louis. He also worked as hard as Joe. But Max didn't have Joe's speed or strength. When it was announced that Max Schmeling was going to fight Joe Louis, no one thought Max stood a chance.

Max worked hard to prepare for the fight. He trained hard. And he studied movies of Joe's fights. He noticed that Joe lowered his guard after throwing a jab. Max planned to take advantage of that weakness.

Joe, on the other hand, didn't work very hard to prepare for the fight. He played golf every day, even though his trainers told him that a good golf swing wouldn't help him in the ring. Still, Joe was confident that he would beat Max.

Joe Louis and Max Schmeling got into the ring on June 19, 1936. The fight took place in Yankee Stadium. People were certain that Joe would beat Max. Many of the seats were empty. No one was expecting much of a fight.

That night, Max Schmeling shocked Joe Louis—and the world.

For the first three rounds, Max and Joe fought cautiously. But in the fourth round, Joe threw a jab and lowered his guard for a split second. Max pounced, landing a hard punch on Joe's chin. Joe staggered, then fell. He managed to get back to his feet and go on. But after the fourth round, Max took over the fight. Every time Joe lowered his guard, Max was ready. He rocked Joe with 91 hard punches with his right hand. In the 12th round, Max Schmeling knocked out Joe Louis.

Americans were stunned. They were certain that Joe Louis would beat Schmeling. People in Germany were surprised, too. And some very, very evil people were happy to see Joe Louis get knocked out.

Three years before Max beat Joe, Adolf Hitler had become the leader of Germany. Hitler and his supporters in the Nazi party were racists. They thought that black people were inferior to white people. Seeing Max Schmeling beat Joe Louis, they claimed that it proved that their views were correct. They used the fight as propaganda. "Schmeling knocks out the negro," wrote one Nazi leader. "Wonderful . . . the white man defeats the black man, and the white man is a German!"

After the fight, Joe learned a lesson. He would never again take an opponent lightly.

A year later, Joe Louis beat James J. Braddock to win the heavyweight title. After he became champion, Joe fought anyone who wanted a shot at the title. Even though he beat anyone who fought him, there was one fighter Joe wanted to take on: Max Schmeling.

REAL-LIFE HEROES

A rematch between Joe and Max was scheduled. They were to fight exactly two years after their first battle, on June 22, 1938.

As Joe and Max climbed into the ring that night, Yankee Stadium was packed. In one corner stood Joe Louis—a poor American, born in a shack, who through hard work and dedication had become the top fighter in the world. In the other corner was the great German, Max Schmeling, backed by Nazi Germany. The Nazis said that the first fight showed that white people were superior to black people. If Schmeling beat Joe Louis for a second time, they claimed that it would prove once and for all that the Nazis were right.

People all over the world listened to the fight over the radio. As the opening bell rang, and Joe and Max skipped into the ring, fists raised, ready to fight. Who would win? America's Brown Bomber, or Hitler's favorite fighter? The world held its breath . . .

Who do you think won this battle? Turn the page to see if you were right!

The Brown Bomber

the rest of the story

In the first fight, it took Max Schmeling 12 rounds to knock out Joe Louis. The rematch didn't last nearly as long!

Joe Louis came out swinging. He was in peak condition and peppered Max Schmeling with punches. Two minutes and four seconds into the fight, Joe hit Max with a powerful punch. Max dropped to the canvas and did not get up. Joe Louis won the rematch with a first-round knockout!

Years later, Joe remembered the fight. "I had nothing personally against Max, but in my mind, I wasn't champion until I beat him," Joe said. "The rest of it—black against white—was somebody's talk. I had nothing against the man, except I had to beat him for myself."