

MEMBERSHIP

ROBERT



About this activity

A superlative picture-telling activity

- ▶ **Language level:** A2/B1
- ▶ **Main tasks:** Listening; asking questions; researching
- ▶ **Topic:** Gigantism and disabilities
- ▶ **Language focus:** Words and phrases associated with photography; a superlative structure

For this activity, you will need the following:

- **A photograph** (see below)
- **The picture-telling text** on page 3



Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

<http://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/robert/>

The photograph

Robert Pershing Wadlow (1918 – 1940) holds the record for being the tallest person in medical history. He was born and raised in Alton, a small city in Midwest Illinois, USA. He died at the age of 22 years old and the height of 2.72 metres. He was well-known for his gentle demeanour, his tailored suits, and his round-rimmed spectacles – an iconic appearance that was captured in many photographs. This activity features a family photograph that was taken shortly before the end of his life. You can access the image at the accompanying page in the Resources section.

The picture-telling text

This activity makes use of a picture-telling text on page 3 that captures a personal relationship between myself and the photograph of Robert Pershing Wadlow. I would encourage you to make changes to the text or even rewrite it in any way that you like.

Activity outline

1. Write the following story pathway on the board:

- Stamp collecting
- And although you probably don't know his name ...
- A family snapshot
- Somewhere in Midwest USA, shortly before 1940
- Lined up for the camera
- To focus on something
- His iconic round glasses
- A graceful smile
- By all accounts
- But surely he must have wished that ...
- In the foreground of the picture

2. Tell students that all of the phrases relate to a photograph. Go over the phrases and make sure that students are familiar with them.

- **Photography:** Find out if students know the different stress patterns between the words *photography* (oOoo), *photographer* (oOoo), and *photograph* (Ooo)
- **Stamp collecting:** This is something that young people did before the internet!
- **And although you probably don't know his name ...:** Ask students to guess how this sentence could be completed.
- **A snapshot:** A quick photograph, usually one of family and friends. (This word is probably used less in the days of Instagram.)
- **Midwest USA:** The northern central part of the United States
- **Lined up:** Standing in a line
- **To focus on something:** If you do this, you give that thing your full attention.
- **Iconic:** Visually famous
- **Graceful:** Polite, kind and pleasant – especially in a difficult situation
- **By all accounts:** According to what has been written and said
- **Surely:** Use this word to show that you believe something is very likely or probably true.
- **In the foreground:** The opposite of “in the background”

3. It's time for the picture-telling (see the **Picture-telling text** on the next page).

About picture-telling

For this, you should stand at the front of the class with the image in hand. The image can be displayed on a mobile device or you can make a print copy. It is important that your students cannot see the image but know that it is there. You then have to communicate the narrative of the image as a storyteller would.

The secret to picture-telling success is to prepare the text beforehand. Then, when you do the picture-telling, you can cheat by placing the text or story pathway over the image. Your students need never know!

Picture-telling text



So, before I show you this photograph, I'm going to tell you about it.

It's a black and white family photograph. And there are seven people in it. One of them is called Robert. Let me tell you about Robert.

In many ways, Robert was a regular young man. He loved photography, stamp collecting and his family. And although you probably don't know his name, I am quite sure you will recognise him as soon as you see this photograph.

I have seen many photos of Robert but this one is my favourite. It's a family snapshot that was taken in a garden somewhere in Midwest USA, shortly before 1940.

In the picture, Robert's mother and father, brothers and sisters are all lined up for the camera. Everyone is smiling. Robert is standing proudly behind them all. He's got his left hand on his father's shoulder and his right hand on his brother Eugene's shoulder.

When I look at this photograph, I always focus on Robert's face: his iconic round glasses and his graceful smile. I try to imagine what his life was like and whether or not he suffered. By all accounts, he never complained and did everything he could to enjoy the few years he had in this world. But surely he must have wished that he could join his family in the foreground of this picture like any typical boy.

Robert died when he was just 22 years old.

4. Ask students if they can guess who Robert was and why he is famous. Then repeat the picture-telling a second and even a third time and encourage students to keep guessing.

Notes:

- There are some clues in the text. It is implied that Robert was not a typical boy. Ask students to guess why he had to stand in the background of the picture behind his family.
- I have used this activity many times and very rarely does anyone ever guess that Robert is Robert Pershing Wadlow – the tallest person in medical history. But even if some clever student does guess the answer, the group will not know this until you confirm it one way or another. So listen to students' answers, entertain their ideas, and ask follow-up questions. But keep things open for as long as you can.

5. Show students the photograph and tell students about Robert Pershing Wadlow.

- He lived from 1918–1940.
- He was born and raised in Alton, a small city in Midwest Illinois, USA.
- He holds the record for being the tallest person in medical history.

6. Put students into pairs or small groups and ask them to work together. Their task is to write a list of questions about Robert's life and the historical context in which he lived. Once they have done that, gather the best questions and write them on the board. You can also add any important questions that you think are missing. Here are some suggestions:

- How tall was he?
- How did he die?
- Why was he so tall?
- What sort of childhood did he have?
- Did he have a job?
- What challenges did he face as a result of his height?
- Did he get support from his family, friends and community?
- Did he receive any medical treatment for his condition?
- Was he considered to be disabled?
- What is his legacy and how is he remembered today?



7. Ask students to go online and research answers to these questions. Alternatively, allow groups to focus on different aspects of the story. (Note that there are many informative online videos about Robert Pershing Wadlow and YouTube would be a good resource for this.)

8. Ask students to form new groups or pairs and ask them to share their answers to the questions. Then go over the questions and answers with the whole class. Alternatively, ask students to share what they have discovered by creating posters or giving short presentations on their chosen aspect of the story.

About Robert's condition

Gigantism is a condition characterized by excessive growth and height due to an overproduction of growth hormone during childhood and adolescence. Its effects can vary widely from person to person. Although it is generally considered a medical condition rather than a disability, different individuals may experience physical challenges and health issues such as joint problems, cardiovascular issues, and vision problems.

Robert Pershing Wadlow's gigantism was exceptionally severe. He required custom made clothing, walking aids, and faced various medical complications. In his lifetime, the understanding of disabilities and medical conditions was different from today. He was considered a medical curiosity and a public figure due to his extraordinary height. But the term "disabled" might not have been commonly used to describe him.

Today, Robert Pershing Wadlow's condition might be classified as a disability due to the significant limitations it imposed on his physical functioning including a limited mobility. Having said that, advances in medical science mean that we will probably never see another individual like Robert.