Reports from *The Times*:   
‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’

Read the following extracts taken from William Howard Russell’s reports in *The Times*, published on 13 and 14 November 1854 respectively. He was the war correspondent for the newspaper and it was these accounts that inspired Tennyson to write his poem.

Causeless and fruitless, it stands by itself as a grand heroic deed, surpassing even that spectacle of a shipwrecked regiment, setting down into the waves, each man still in his rank. The British soldier will do his duty, even to certain death, and is not paralyzed by feeling that he is the victim of some hideous blunder.

And now occurred the melancholy catastrophe which fills us all with sorrow. It appears that the Quartermaster General, Brigadier Airey, thinking that the Light Cavalry had not gone far enough in front when the enemy’s horse had fled, gave an order in writing to Captain Nolan, 15th Hussars, to take to Lord Lucan, directing His Lordship ‘to advance’ his cavalry near to the enemy. A braver soldier than Captain Nolan the army did not possess…He rode off with his orders to Lord Lucan. He is now dead and gone.

God forbid I should cast a shade on the brightness of his honour, but I am bound to state what I am told occurred when he reached His Lordship. I should premise that, as the Russian cavalry retired, their infantry fell back towards the head of the valley, leaving men in three of the redoubts they had taken and abandoning the fourth. They had also placed some guns on the heights over their position, on the left of the gorge. Their cavalry joined the reserves, and drew up in six solid divisions, in an oblique line, across the entrance to the gorge. Six battalions of infantry were placed behind them, and about thirty guns were drawn up along their line, while masses of infantry were also collected on the hills behind the redoubts on our right.

When Lord Lucan received the order from Captain Nolan and had read it, he asked, we are told, ‘Where are we to advance to?’ Captain Nolan pointed with his finger to the line of the Russians, and said, ‘There are the enemy, and there are the guns, sir before them. It is your duty to take them,’ or words to that effect, according to the statements made since his death.

Lord Lucan with reluctance gave the order to Lord Cardigan to advance upon the guns, conceiving that his orders compelled him to do so. The noble Earl…also saw the fearful odds against him. Don Quixote in his tilt against the windmill was not near so rash and reckless as the gallant fellows who prepared without a thought to rush on almost certain death.

It is a maxim of war that ‘cavalry never act without support’…and that it is necessary to have on the flank of a line of cavalry some squadrons in column, the attack on the flank being the most dangerous…There were no squadrons in column at all, and there was a plain to charge over before the enemy’s guns were reached of a mile and a half in length.

At ten past eleven our Light Cavalry Brigade rushed to the front.…The whole brigade scarcely made one effective regiment, according to the numbers of continental armies; and yet it was more than we could spare. As they passed towards the front, the Russians opened on them from the guns in the redoubts on the right, with volleys of musketry and rifles.

They swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendour of war. We could hardly believe the evidence of our senses! Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position? Alas! it was too true – their desperate valour knew no bounds, and far indeed was it removed from its so called better part – discretion. They advanced in two lines, quickening their pace as they closed towards the enemy. A more fearful spectacle was never witnessed than by those who, without the power to aid, beheld their heroic countrymen rushing to the arms of death. At the distance of 1200 yards the whole line of the enemy belched forth, from thirty iron mouths, a flood of smoke and flame, through which hissed the deadly balls. Their flight was marked by instant gaps in our ranks, by dead men and horses, by steeds flying wounded or riderless across the plain. The first line was broken – it was joined by the second, they never halted or checked their speed an instant. With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer which was many a noble fellow’s death cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewed with their bodies and with the carcasses of horses. They were exposed to an oblique fire from the batteries on the hills on both sides, as well as to a direct fire of musketry.

Through the clouds of smoke we could see their sabres flashing as they rode up to the guns and dashed between them, cutting down the gunners as they stood. The blaze of their steel, as an officer standing near me said, was ‘like the turn of a shoal of mackerel’. We saw them riding through the guns, as I have said; to our delight we saw them returning, after breaking through a column of Russian infantry, and scattering them like chaff, when the flank fire of the battery on the hill swept them down, scattered and broken as they were. Wounded men and dismounted troopers flying towards us told the sad tale – demigods could not have done what they had failed to do.

At the very moment when they were about to retreat, an enormous mass of lancers was hurled upon their flank…With courage too great almost for credence, they were breaking their way through the columns which enveloped them, when there took place an act of atrocity without parallel in the modern warfare of civilized nations. The Russian gunners, when the storm of cavalry passed, returned to their guns. They saw their own cavalry mingled with the troopers who had just ridden over them, and to the eternal disgrace of the Russian name the miscreants poured a murderous volley of grape and canister on the mass of struggling men and horses, mingling friend and foe in one common ruin…At twenty five to twelve not a British soldier, except the dead and dying, was left in front of these bloody Muscovite guns. Our loss, as far as it could be ascertained in killed, wounded and missing at two o’clock today, was as follows:

**Went into Action Strong** **Returned from Action** **Loss**

607 198 409

**Initial Discussion Questions:**

In groups, compare Russell’s eye-witness account of the charge with the way that the charge is portrayed in Tennyson’s poem.

You will need to consider:

* What is the **purpose** of each account?
* Who is the **audience** for each account?
* How would you describe the writer’s **attitude** towards the event that took place?
* Which details do both accounts have in common?
* Which details are different?
* How has each writer used language for effect?
* Which account do you find the most dramatic and powerful?
* What impact do you think the newspaper report would have had on its audience?
* What impact do you think Tennyson’s poem would have had on its audience?
* Why do you think that Tennyson’s poem is the best known account of the event?

Summarise the main points of your discussion and prepare to share your ideas with the rest of the class.

**English Language Paper 2 Section A**

Read the sources carefully.

**Sample Question 1:**

Re-read the first three paragraphs of the text.

Choose **four** statements below which are TRUE.

• Shade the statements that you think are true

• Choose a maximum of four statements.

A The order was given verbally.

B Captain Nolan was a coward.

C Three hundred guns were drawn up along the Russian line.

D The order was given to Captain Nolan.

E The order was to be given to Lord Cardigan.

F Captain Nolan died in the battle.

G Brigadier Airey did not think that the Light Cavalry had gone far enough in front.

H The Russians placed some guns on the heights over their position, on the left of the gorge.

**[4 marks]**

**Sample Question 3:**

Re-read the rest of the text.

**This question assesses Language** i.e. Words / Phrases / Language Features / Language Techniques / Sentence Forms

**How does William Howard Russell use language to make you, the reader, feel proud of the soldiers?**

**[12 marks]**

