

9.4A Why do we give the 'V sign' as an insult?

Most people know what the 'V sign' is! It is usually when a person puts two fingers up at someone in order to insult them. Believe it or not, people have been sticking up two fingers as an insult for around 700 years. Legend has it that it all started during the Hundred Years War – a long series of battles between England and France that began in 1337. So how did the fighting start? Did the fighting last for exactly one hundred years? Which country finally came out on top? And how is the V sign insult linked to it all?

Mission Objectives

- Identify the causes of the Hundred Years War.
- Summarize the key events of the Hundred Years War.
- Discover how one of Britain's best-known insults reputedly has its origins in the Hundred Years War.

Reasons for war

In 1337, the King of England was Edward III. He was 24 years old and determined to be a stronger ruler than his father, Edward II. The young king enjoyed fighting and viewed a war with France as a way of achieving glory on the battlefield. But there were other reasons why war broke out too:

• England controlled large areas of France (see **Source A**). One of these areas was where a lot of wine was made. When the wine was brought over to England it was taxed, and King Edward made lots of money from this. However, the French threatened to take over this wine-producing area.

England sold lots of wool abroad. Areas near France (for example, Flanders – see **Source A**) turned this wool into cloth. Both the English and the people in places like Flanders made lots of money doing this. But the French threatened to take over these areas. If the wool trade was stopped it would make England poorer... and people wouldn't be able to afford to pay King Edward as much tax.



SOURCE A: England held a lot of land in France at the start of the war, and England traded wool and wine with France and other areas.

There were other reasons why war broke out too:

- Edward III was closely linked to France. His grandfather had been King of France and his mother was the daughter of a French king. He thought he had a better claim to the throne of France than the actual French king at the time, Philip VI.
- Edward was trying to conquer Scotland at the same time. The French promised to help the Scots, which made Edward furious!

FACT!

Every English king between 1199 and 1461 married a French princess or noblewoman.

Fighting the French

In 1337, England and France started fighting. There were battles at sea, but most of the fighting was done on French land. None of the fighting happened in England. The Hundred Years War features one of the most legendary victories in military history, where 10,000 English soldiers beat around 40,000 Frenchmen at the Battle of Agincourt. The war lasted, off and on, until 1453 – a total of 116 years. However, historians chose to call it 'the Hundred Years War', which sounds a bit better than 'the One Hundred and Sixteen Years War'!



SOURCE B: This picture shows Henry V leading the English to victory at the Battle of Agincourt.

Be a Top Historian

Top historians try to judge whether they think some causes of an event are more important (or **significant**) than others. Sometimes they try to put them in order of importance (or **significance**). (See Work activity 1b.)

Work

- 1 a Create a spider diagram that shows each of the causes of the Hundred Years War.
 - b Number the causes on your spider diagram in order of importance – the cause you think was the most significant should be number 1, and so on.
 - c Compare your order of causes with a partner's order. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your reasoning to each other.
- 2 Imagine you've been asked to write a short article for a new website on the Hundred Years War. The paragraph is entitled, 'What caused the Hundred Years War and your editor has allowed you 150 words for your paragraph. Hand write or type up your article.

4B Why do we give the 'V sign' as an insult?

Roller coaster ride

Like most wars, the Hundred Years War was a bit of a roller coaster with its ups and downs. First one side did well and was on the up, and then the other side did well, and so on. Read the roller coaster story of the war carefully.

1346 Edward enjoys another clear victory on land. At the Battle of Crécy, his 12,000 archers and 2400 knights smash 12,000 French knights, 6000 crossbowmen and 20,000 militiamen. The English archers prove that they are far superior to the crossbowmen.

and wins the Battle of Sluys. The English seize the French ships as they are anchored. Though the battle takes place at sea, it is fought by archers jumping from ship to ship fighting as if they were on land. The French navy means England controls the Channel and can invade France whenever it feels like it.

1347 Edward makes it a hat-trick of victories by capturing the French port of Calais. This is the closest port to England and was to remain in English hands for over 200 years.

1356 English victories continue at the Battle of Poitiers, led by Edward's son, the Black Prince. Philip VI was captured and held to ransom for £500,000. That's five times more than Edward normally earned in a year!

The 'V sign'

Now back to the question of why the V sign is used as an insult. The answer lies in the fact that the English archers, who shot their arrows so brilliantly, were greatly feared by the French. A good English archer could fire ten arrows a minute and kill a man up to 200 metres away. At the Battle of Crécy, King Edward's archers shot 72,000 arrows in 90 seconds, killing thousands.

So, if an English archer was captured, the French would cut off the first two fingers of his hand. Can you think why? And in response to this, some English archers, when they saw a captured Frenchman, would run up to him and stick up their two fingers to show that they were still a threat! Over time this gesture became known as an insult.

Be a Top Historian

Top historians can spot what are known as 'turning points' in history. These are key events that **changed** things completely. Can you spot any key turning points in the Hundred Years War?

1422 Disaster! Henry V dies before becoming king of both England and France! His son is only nine months old and the French strike back under the leadership of a 17-year-old peasant girl called Joan of Arc. (Find out more about her on pages 152 and 153.)

1453 The French regain all their land except for the tiny area around Calais.

1370 The French start to fight back and, when the Black Prince falls ill, they win back some of their land.


1377 The Black Prince dies in 1376 and his father dies the following year. The French take advantage of the lack of English leaders and use cannons to recapture English castles in France.

1415 The new English king, Henry V, decides to renew the English claim to the French throne. He invades France and wins a famous victory at Agincourt. The French king lets Henry marry his daughter, and agrees that Henry should be the next King of France when he dies.

Winning battles... but losing the war

In spite of famous victories at Sluys, Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, the English armies were never strong enough to defeat the French once and for all. By 1453, the French had pushed the English out of France almost completely. The only part of England that had left was the port of Calais.

Work

- How many years did the Hundred Years War last?
 - Why do you think it got its nickname?
- What are the origins of the 'V sign' insult? Explain your answer.
-  **The Big Write!**
You are part of a group that is going to make the story of the Hundred Years War into a film. You must 'pitch' the

idea to a Hollywood film studio to get the money you need to make the film. You will have a short amount of time (one to two minutes) to explain to a group of Hollywood businesspeople why the Hundred Years War would be a good subject for a film and why people should be told about it. Plan and write your pitch. You might want to storyboard the film too... and decide who plays who!

