Little John joins: compare two tellings

Read the two short adaptations. Look for what happens before John agrees to join the band.

These passages are short adaptations, not quotations. Both begin after Robin has lost a contest with staffs on a narrow bridge.

A · The older ballad

Robin climbed out of the brook and called his companions with his horn. When they wanted to throw the stranger into the water, Robin stopped them. He invited the stranger to join his band. The man agreed and gave his name as John Little. His new companions reversed it to Little John, joking about his great height.

B · Howard Pyle’s retelling

After Robin fell into the brook, he called his companions and invited the stranger to join. John did not agree at once. He wanted to know whether they could beat him at archery. John hit a small target. Robin’s arrow then split John’s arrow. Impressed by the shot, John accepted Robin’s offer.

1. What happens to Robin in both versions?

2. What extra test does John ask for in B?

3. What convinces John to join in B? Underline the evidence.

4. Does a later retelling prove that the extra event happened?

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1. The shared event

Robin loses the staff contest and ends up in the brook. Both versions then have him invite his opponent into the band. Accept an answer that identifies the shared event in the passages.

2. The extra test

Pyle's John wants an archery trial. The older ballad's recruitment passage has him accept the invitation without that extra test. The comparison concerns these two named texts, not every Robin Hood story.

3. What persuades John?

Robin's arrow splits John's arrow after John has hit the target. In this passage, John respects the skill he has just seen. Ask learners to underline the sentence about Robin's shot and the following acceptance.

4. A story is not proof of an event

No. A later author can develop a scene to create excitement or explore a character. The added archery test shows what happens in Pyle's story; it does not independently demonstrate that the event occurred in history.

Sources and what was shortened

A follows the main text of Child's ballad 125, taken from A Collection of Old Ballads (1723). B follows the opening chapter of Howard Pyle's The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood (1883), How Robin Hood Came to Be an Outlaw. The adaptations leave out the detailed fight, injuries, the band's handling of John and the later celebration. Pyle is a later literary retelling, not a medieval manuscript witness.

Try a different solution

Invite learners to write two lines of dialogue that would let both travellers cross peacefully. Label this as their own alternative. They can then colour the companion bridge picture and identify which details are supported by a text and which are imagined.

Read Child 125 · Read Pyle's opening chapter · Explore the versions

Suggested for ages 9+, with reading support. This is a reading and writing activity, not a suggestion to recreate the bridge fight or archery scene.