

Deciphering the Past

The following passage is an excerpt from the epic poem *Beowulf* in which Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon. Many versions of *Beowulf* exist, but this one reads differently from the others currently known. You have been hired by university officials to study this passage. In particular, they want to know how many authors may have contributed to this text and who contributed relative to one another. Examine the passage to see what you can discover.

Scarce had he spoken when the worm came on against his foes a second time in his wrath and wreathed with flame, and Wiglaf's shield caught fire and burned to the rim and his byrnie was of no help at all, wherefor the young warrior got him behind the iron shield of Beowulf when his own was consumed. Again Beowulf remembered his deeds of glory and with a mighty blow drove his sword into the dragon's head, a blow made strong with hate. But the sword broke. The sword of Beowulf failed him in the strife; it was not given to him that the edge of steel might help him much in battle. The hand was too strong, which every falchion, as I have heard, by its stroke overpower'd, although he to the contest bore a weapon wondrously hard, yet 'twas naught for him the better. *Wæs sío hond tó strong sé ðe méca gehwane míne gefraége swenge ofersóhte þonne hé tó sæcce bær waépen wundum heard næs him wihte ðé sél.*

Procedure

- 1 With your highlighters or pencils, use different colors to indicate the different sources represented in the passage.
- 2 Assign each source a letter "name" (i.e., A, B...). Then, using your knowledge of the English language and your best interpretation of how the English language may have evolved, try to list the sources in order from oldest to newest.

Then for the third time the fiery dragon rushed on the hero. Its bitter fangs sank in his neck, and the waves of blood gushed over Beowulf's breast. *Ðá ic æt þearfe gefrægn þéodcyniges andlongne eorl ellen cýðan cræft ond cénðu swá him gecynde wæs he heeded not the head, but the hand burn'd of the bold man, that he might his kinsman help; then he the hostile guest somewhat lower struck, the warrior in arms, so that the sword div'd blood-stain'd and ornate, so that the fire began afterwards to abate; And the king himself then, who was still in his senses, drew the knife, battle-sharp, he wore at his byrnie and hacked the worm a-two at his middle. Thus they killed the dragon, the two kinsmen together.*

