“How to Tell a True War Story”

1. What implicit problem is created about the story by its first line, “This is true”? How is the notion of “truth” problematized throughout the story and subjected to irony?
2. Why is Rat Kiley so upset over Curt Lemon’s sister not writing back?
3. How are you affected by the descriptions of Curt Lemon being blown up in paragraphs 17, 98, and 105?
4. Analyze the story told about the six-man patrol in paragraphs 19-65. How is this story relevant to the rest of the plot?
5. What emotions did you feel as you read about the shooting of the water buffalo? How does paragraph 75 achieve these effects?
6. Explain what you think O’Brien means when he writes “After a fire fight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness” (para. 93).
7. Trace the narrator’s comments about what constitutes a true war story. What do you think these competing and contradictory ideas finally add up to?
8. Characterize the narrator. Why must he repeatedly “keep on telling” his war story?
9. Consider O’Brien’s use of profanity and violence in this story. Do you think they are essential or merely sensational?
10. How does the treatment of violence in O’Brien’s story compare with that in Andre Dubus’ “Killings” (para. 110)?