Yes Virginia There is a Santa Claus

A reading lesson plan on the famous editorial from *The Sun* Newspaper, “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus”. Students discuss whether they believe in Santa Claus and what Santa Claus symbolizes. It’s great for introducing Santa and the spirit of Christmas and it definitely crosses cultural boundaries as every culture has imaginary characters.

Materials

- The original text
- Simplified text for beginners or lower level learners.

Warm Up

Ask students if they believe in Santa Claus. Chances are, they will say no.
Ask they why not and if they ever believed in Santa Claus. See if you can elicit any good stories about how they came to not believe. Did they see their parents putting the presents out? Did their friends tell them? Or an older brother?

Now ask why little children believe? Follow up by asking if it is important for children to believe in Santa Claus or is it better to tell them the truth, that Santa Claus is not real?

Now, ask about the symbol of Santa Claus and the Christmas/holiday spirit. What does Santa Claus stand for? Try to elicit the spirit of giving, kindness to others, happiness, childlike qualities, magic. Ask if they believe in those qualities?
In 1897, Dr. Philip O’Hanlon, a coroner’s assistant on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, was asked by his then eight-year-old daughter, Virginia (1889–1971), whether Santa Claus really existed. Virginia O’Hanlon had begun to doubt there was a Santa Claus, because her friends had told her that he did not exist. Dr. O’Hanlon suggested she write to The Sun, a prominent New York City newspaper at the time, assuring her that “If you see it in The Sun, it’s so.” While he may have been buck passing, he unwittingly gave one of the paper’s editors, Francis Pharcellus Church, an opportunity to rise above the simple question, and address the philosophical issues behind it.

Church was a war correspondent during the American Civil War, a time which saw great suffering and a corresponding lack of hope and faith in much of society. Although the paper ran the editorial in the seventh place on the editorial page, below even an editorial on the newly invented “chainless bicycle”, its message was very moving to many people who read it. More than a century later it remains the most reprinted editorial ever to run in any newspaper in the English language.

You might tell them the first part, that this little girl wrote to a famous newspaper to ask if Santa Claus was real or not. Ask what they think the newspaper did with the letter. Then tell them that the editor decided to answer the letter. Ask what they think he said.
The Text

Give them the text (either [The original text](#) or [my simplified version](#) for lower level students).

Have the students read it over. Check comprehension by asking if the editor believes in the person of Santa Claus? What exactly does he mean by saying that Santa Claus is real? Why does he talk about hiring men to watch chimneys? What does he say about a baby rattle (or in the simplified version, a car)?

You might at this point mention the fact that Church had been a war correspondent and that he felt the country had become very depressed and cynical. Discuss what the students think about this article. Do they agree with it? Was it a good answer? Would it have been better to tell Virginia the truth?

Follow-Up

Now ask if they have changed their minds about any of the questions you discussed in the warm up. Have some of your students become less cynical?