The story
This true story is set in Japan in the 1700s. At that time ceremony was extremely important, and people were expected to behave in the correct manner. Lord Asano is a daimyo, which means he is a powerful man in his part of the country, known as Ako. Every year the Shogun calls two daimyo to his palace to serve him, and in 1701 Lord Asano is called to serve the Shogun. While he is at the palace, he has lessons with Lord Kira, a teacher of ceremony. Lord Kira is often rude to Lord Asano.

One day Lord Asano is so angered by Lord Kira’s comments that he attacks him in the Shogun’s palace and cuts his head. Because of this act, Lord Asano is made to commit seppuku. He takes out his long knife and cuts into his stomach from left to right.

As a daimyo, Lord Asano has nearly three hundred samurai warriors working for him in Ako. Lord Asano’s samurai are so upset and angered by what has happened to Lord Asano that a number of them swear to get their revenge. However, Oishi, the captain of Lord Asano’s samurai, decides that they should wait for some time before carrying out their revenge. He explains that Lord Kira will be expecting an immediate attack, so it is important for them to take enough time for Lord Kira to become less afraid of attack and lower his guard. Now called ronin due to having no lord to serve, Lord Asano’s samurai move to different parts of the country and live quiet lives, waiting for the day that they can get their revenge.

Oishi moves with his family and a few other ronin to live near Kyoto. There Oishi begins to spend his nights with unpleasant men so that his reputation is damaged and people think that he has no honour. One of the other ronin, Mimura, finds out that the cook in Oishi’s house is actually a spy for Lord Kira. This is a benefit to the ronin, and exactly what Oishi wants, as the cook reports to Lord Kira Oishi’s loss of honour.

Nearly two years after Lord Asano’s death, the ronin are ready. Forty-seven of them, including Oishi’s son Chikara, prepare to attack Lord Kira’s mansion. On a dark night in November 1702, the forty-seven ronin break in to Lord Kira’s mansion, killing many of his servants and not allowing anyone to leave. Initially they do not find Lord Kira, but then one ronin, Hazama, finds him hiding in a pile of wood. Oishi repeatedly asks Lord Kira to commit seppuku but he will not do it, so eventually Oishi cuts off his head. Oishi and the other ronin take Lord Kira’s head and place it on Lord Asano’s grave. After the attack on Lord Kira’s mansion, forty-six of the ronin are made to commit seppuku and their bodies are placed in graves near to Lord Asano’s grave. However, at this time, one of the ronin, Terasaka, is many miles away in Hiroshima giving word of Lord Kira’s death to Lord Asano’s brother. When he returns the Shogun feels sorry for him and does not force him to commit seppuku. He lives to the grand age of eighty-three and when he dies, he asks to be buried alongside the other ronin, making him the forty-seventh ronin.

Background to the story
This true story is still told and celebrated in Japan today. Every year on December 14, there is a festival at the Sengaku-ji temple, where Lord Asano and the forty-seven ronin are buried. Thousands of people come to this festival every year to remember Lord Asano’s death and the revenge of his brave, loyal ronin.

There is a film based on this story starring Keanu Reeves entitled 47 Ronin.
47 Ronin: A Samurai Story from Japan

Pre-reading activity

Vocabulary Match

Match the words with the definitions.

1 ___ samurai
2 ___ ronin
3 ___ Shogun
4 ___ seppuku
5 ___ ceremony
6 ___ loyal
7 ___ revenge
8 ___ honour
9 ___ punishment
10 ___ spy

a staying true and faithful to someone
b ritual suicide – killing yourself by cutting your stomach open with a knife
c something that is done to a person because they have done something wrong
d samurai without a daimyo (lord or master)
e knowing and doing what is right, which causes other people to respect you and think of you well
f a person who tries to learn secrets about an enemy
g famous fighting warriors in the old days in Japan
h a formal public event where things are always done in the same special way
i the military ruler of Japan in the old days
j something bad that you do to somebody because they have done something bad to you

To the teacher

Aim: To introduce some of the key vocabulary
Time: 10–15 minutes
Organization: Give a copy of the worksheet to each student. Ask students to match the words with the definitions. When the students have completed the task, go through the answers as a class.
Key: 1g, 2d, 3i, 4b, 5h, 6a, 7j, 8e, 9c, 10f.
Before reading chapter 4, decide what you think happens next. Do you think number 1, 2, or 3 is true, or do you have another idea?

1. Oishi gets all the ronin together in Edo and they talk about what to do next. Many of the ronin now have new lives and families that they don’t want to lose. There is a lot of arguing and many of the ronin disagree. After many days of talking the ronin decide not to attack Lord Kira and go back to their everyday lives across Japan.

2. Oishi gets all the ronin together in Edo. They plan their attack carefully and collect many weapons together. On a dark night in December 1702, the ronin attack Lord Kira’s mansion. Unfortunately, Lord Kira has many spies working for him and is expecting their attack. He has many Uesugi guards and soldiers waiting for the ronin and every one of the 47 ronin is killed that night by Lord Kira’s men.

3. Oishi gets all the ronin together in Edo. They plan their attack carefully and collect many weapons together. On a dark night in December 1702, the ronin attack Lord Kira’s mansion. The ronin charge through the mansion and gardens, killing many of Lord Kira’s servants and eventually find Lord Kira hiding in some wood. Oishi asks Lord Kira to commit seppuku but he will not, so Oishi takes out his sword and cuts off his head.

Other idea:

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To the teacher

Where: After reading chapter 3

Aim: To predict what happens next in the story

Time: 15–20 minutes

Organization: Put students in pairs and ask them to review what has happened so far in chapters 1–3. Give them a few minutes to quickly discuss what they think might happen next. Give each student a copy of the worksheet and ask them to read through it and choose their answer. When everyone has finished, go through students’ answers as a class and discuss any other ideas students may have about what happens next.

Key: Students will find out as they read more, but the correct answer is number 3.
47 Ronin: A Samurai Story from Japan

After reading activity

Roleplay

Before you begin speaking, plan what you want to say.

Oishi
You are the captain of Lord Asano’s samurai. You are also the father of Chikara, a fifteen-year-old boy. Chikara has decided that he wants to join you and the other ronin to attack Lord Kira’s mansion and get revenge for the death of Lord Asano. You believe that Chikara is ready for the life of a samurai as he is nearly sixteen and a good swordsman, but are worried because he may be killed in the attack or after the attack as a punishment. You, your wife Riku, and Chikara are coming together today to discuss what Chikara should do. Make some notes before you begin speaking.

Riku
You are the wife of Oishi, captain of Lord Asano’s samurai. You are also the mother of Chikara, a fifteen-year-old boy. Chikara has decided that he wants to join his father and the other ronin to attack Lord Kira’s mansion and get revenge for the death of Lord Asano. You believe that Chikara is too young for the life of a samurai and want him to go with you and your other children to your father’s house. Here you will all be safe. You, your husband Oishi, and Chikara are coming together today to discuss what Chikara should do. Make some notes before you begin speaking.

Chikara
You are the son of Oishi, captain of Lord Asano’s samurai, and Riku. You are a fifteen-year-old boy and have decided that you want to join your father and the other ronin to attack Lord Kira’s mansion and get revenge for the death of Lord Asano. You believe that you are ready for the life of a samurai and can help the other ronin because you are a good swordsman. You, your father Oishi, and your mother Riku are coming together today to discuss what you should do. Make some notes before you begin speaking.

To the teacher

Aim: To roleplay a conversation from the story
Time: 20–25 minutes
Organization: Put students in groups of three and tell them that they are going to do a roleplay. Give each student in the group one of the rolecards and ask them to make some notes to plan what they are going to say.

After five or ten minutes, ask the students to stop making their notes. Tell them that they are going to start speaking and must reach a decision. Ask them to begin speaking. When all groups have finished, do some class feedback to find out what decision each group has made.