

Should the United States Have Entered World War I?

Historical Thinking Skills Assessed: Critical Reading, Claim, Evidence

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Course: United States History from 1877 to Present

Level: High

Task Question: Should the United States have entered World War I?

Learning Outcome:

Students will be able to develop an evidence-based argument about U.S. entry into the First World War through the close reading and corroboration of two sources with conflicting perspectives.

Standards Alignment:

[Common Core Standards for Literacy for History/Social Studies](#)

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|-------------|--|
| RH.9-10.1 | Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information. |
| RH.9-10.2 | Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text. |
| RH.9-10.6 | Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts. |
| WHST.9-10.1 | Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content. |

[National History Standards](#)

Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)

Standard 2: The changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I

[College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#)

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|---------------|--|
| D2.His.1.9-12 | Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts. |
| D2.His.4.9-12 | Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras. |
| D4.1.9-12 | Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses. |

Materials:

- RS #01: Why Do Countries Go to War?
- RS #02: Student Worksheet – Guiding Questions
- RS #03: Document A – Woodrow Wilson’s Speech Before Congress, April 2, 1917
- RS #04: Document B – Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the Senate, April 4, 1917
- RS #05: Graphic Organizer – Should the United States have entered World War I?

- RS #06: Letter to the Editor – Should the United States enter World War I?
- RS #07: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric

Background for the Teacher:

In April 1917, the United States faced a difficult decision: remain neutral in the Great War or join the Allies in their fight against the Central Powers. To this point, the United States had managed to maintain its official neutrality during the nearly three years of bloody conflict; however, this neutral status had not been easily maintained, and actions on both sides of the Atlantic had been edging the country closer to the brink of war.

The United States had nearly been pulled into the conflict on several earlier occasions. Despite their acceptance of a British mine blockade of the North Sea, many Americans were outraged when the German government announced a submarine blockade of Great Britain in February 1915. What many Americans failed to understand was that the Germans had stopped viewing the United States as neutral. Germany believed that the sale of munitions by the United States to the Allied powers was a clear indication of America's partiality.¹ Stopping U.S. shipments of supplies to the Allies was therefore a major goal of Germany and its allies.

Just a few months later, another challenge led many Americans to demand action against Germany. On May 7, 1915, the British passenger liner *Lusitania* was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine, killing nearly 1,200 people, 128 of whom were Americans. Again President Wilson navigated the country away from war, asserting that maintaining neutrality was the best possible course of action.² For the next two years, the Germans backed away from unrestricted submarine warfare, allowing the Americans to remain at peace.

On February 25, 1917, the situation for the United States changed drastically with the discovery and release of the Zimmermann telegram. The note, from a high official in the German government to the German ambassador to Mexico, revealed that Germany intended to resume unrestricted submarine warfare and proposed an alliance with Mexico should the United States enter the war. At this point, after years of debating continued neutrality in the face of devastating human loss, Wilson was convinced that war was inevitable.³

When Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917, the applause was deafening; however, not everyl in the room supported U.S. entry into the war. Senator George Norris of Nebraska spoke before the Senate just two days later in strong opposition to joining the war. In Senator Norris' view, the United States had not been totally innocent in the escalation of hostilities with Germany. He asserted that the true motivating factors for U.S. entry into the war were financial in nature: the guarantee of repayment of loans to the Allies and the proceeds from continued munitions sales.

In this activity, students will analyze excerpts from both speeches in order to understand and evaluate the reasons why the United States joined the war. They will write a letter in which they argue for or against U.S. entry into the war, demonstrating their understanding of the documents by incorporating specific evidence. Students should have a prior understanding of the factors leading to the outbreak of war in Europe, the extent of U.S. involvement in the conflict to 1917, arguments for U.S. neutrality, and incidents that might have provoked the United States to enter the war.

¹ Steve Jantzen, *Hooray for Peace, Hurrah for War: The United States During World War I* (New Jersey: First Replica Books, 1999), 35.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 75.

Sources:

Jantzen, Steve. *Hooray for Peace, Hurrah for War: The United States During World War I*. New Jersey: First Replica Books, 1999.

Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. "American Entry into World War I, 1917." *MilestIs: 1914-1920*. Accessed 6/19/14. <https://history.state.gov/milestIs/1914-1920/wwi>

United States Senate. "Summary of George Norris (Chapter VIII) from *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy." Accessed 6/19/14. http://www.senate.gov/reference/common/generic/Profiles_GN.htm

Procedures

Context Setting:

- Have students complete RS#01: Why Do Countries Go to War? to evaluate the validity of various reasons why countries have gone to war in the past.
- Designate 1 side of the room "agree" and the other side "disagree." Ask students to move to opposite sides of the room based on whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement in RS#01. Lead a discussion in which students share their reasoning, focusing on what constitutes "good" reasons to go to war.

Document Analysis:

- Explain to students that they will be examining two primary source documents to help them understand some of the reasons why the United States entered World War I after three years of official neutrality.
- Distribute RS#02: Student Worksheet – Guiding Questions; RS#03: Document A – Woodrow Wilson’s Speech Before Congress, April 2, 1917; and RS#04: Document B – Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the Senate, April 4, 1917.
- Read RS#03 Document A together as a class. Model for students how to analyze the source information before reading the document.
- As a class, answer the questions for Document A on RS#02: Student Worksheet – Guiding Questions, allowing time for students to record their answers. Students may need help in identifying Wilson’s arguments for a U.S. declaration of war.
- Have students work in pairs to read RS #04: Document B – Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the Senate, April 4, 1917 and answer the guiding questions.
- Lead a class discussion of RS #04 Document B and their responses to the questions on RS#02, providing clarification as needed.

Corroborating Evidence and Constructing Interpretations – Close Analysis:

- Have the students complete RS #05: Graphic Organizer – Should the United States have entered WWI? This may be done individually or in pairs depending on the class and available time.
- As a class students will discuss their answers and reasoning before moving on to the application activity.
- Evaluate student responses to the graphic organizer using the Close Reading portion of RS #07: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric.

Thoughtful Application:

- Distribute RS #06: Letter to the Editor – Should the United States enter WWI?
- Students will write a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* in which they either support or oppose U.S. entry into World War I based on the evidence provided in the two documents and prior knowledge about reasons for U.S. neutrality and German provocations until 1917. In this brief argument-writing activity, students will demonstrate their understanding of the documents, focusing specifically on evaluating the claims made by each source.
- Letters should be evaluated using the Claim and Evidence sections of RS #07: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric.

Resource Sheet #01

Why Do Countries Go to War?

Name: _____

Date: _____

Directions: For each of the following situations, consider whether you agree or disagree that it is a valid reason to go to war. Be prepared to defend your answer to the class.

1. Our country is attacked by another country's army.

Agree

Disagree

2. I of our allies is attacked by another country.

Agree

Disagree

3. A terrorist from another country assassinates our President.

Agree

Disagree

4. I of our Navy's ships is intentionally sunk while in a foreign country's harbor.

Agree

Disagree

5. Our President reports that an unfriendly country possesses weapons that could cause mass destruction and death.

Agree

Disagree

6. A territory under our control rebels against our rule.

Agree

Disagree

Resource Sheet #02

Student Worksheet: Guiding Questions

Document A: Woodrow Wilson

1. **Sourcing** - What is the purpose of Wilson's speech?
2. **Critical Reading** - What reasons does Wilson give for why the U.S. should declare war against Germany?
3. **Critical Reading** - What words or phrases does Wilson use to persuade his listeners?

Document B: George Norris

1. **Sourcing** - What is the purpose of Norris' speech?
2. **Critical Reading** - Why does Senator Norris believe that the United States has been brought to the "verge of war?"
3. **Critical Reading** -According to Senator Norris, what reasons does the U.S. have for entering WWI?

Corroboration

How do the reasons for U.S. entry into the war given by President Wilson differ from those given by Senator Norris? Whose perspective do you find most convincing? Why?

Resource Sheet #03

Document A – Woodrow Wilson’s Speech Before Congress, April 2, 1917

On February 3, 1917, the Imperial German Government announced that German submarines would attack all ships approaching Great Britain, Ireland, and other ports controlled by enemies of Germany. Below are excerpts of President Wilson’s speech before Congress on April 2, 1917.

. . . The new policy [of the Imperial German Government] has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board, the vessels of friendly neutrals along with those of belligerents. . .

. . . The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken . . . but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. . .

. . . Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. . .

. . . The world must be made safe for democracy . . . We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but I of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

Resource Sheet #04

Document B: Senator George W. Norris' Speech Before the Senate, April 4, 1917

Following President Wilson's speech before Congress requesting a declaration of War against Germany, Senator George W. Norris gave the following response on April 4, 1917.

. . . The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step, and while standing on the brink of this terrible vortex, we out to pause and calmly and judiciously consider the terrible consequences of the step we are about to take. We ought to consider likewise the route we have recently traveled and ascertain whether we have reached our present position in a way that is compatible with the neutral position which we claimed to occupy at the beginning and through the various stages of this unholy and unrighteous war. . .

. . . There are a great many American citizens who feel that we owe it as a duty to humanity to take part in the war. Many instances of cruelty and inhumanity can be found on both sides. Men are often biased in their judgment on account of their sympathy and their interests. To my mind, what we ought to have maintained from the beginning was the strictest neutrality. If we had done this, I do not believe we would have been on the verge of war at the present time . . .

. . . We have loaned many hundreds of millions of dollars to the Allies in this controversy. While such action was legal and countenanced by international law, there is no doubt in my mind but the enormous amount of mly loaned to the Allies in this country has been instrumental in bringing about a public sentiment in favor of our country taking a course that would make every bond worth a hundred cents on the dollar and making the payment of every debt certain and sure. Through this instrumentality and also through the instrumentality of others who have not only made millions out of the war in the manufacture of munitions, etc., and who would expect to make millions more if our country can be drawn into the catastrophe, a large number of the great newspapers and news agencies of the country have been controlled and enlisted in the greatest propaganda that the world has ever known, to manufacture sentiment in favor of war.

It is now demanded that the American citizens shall be used as insurance policies to guarantee the safe delivery of munitions of war to belligerent nations. The enormous profits of munition manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must be still further increased by our entrance into the war. This has brought us to the present moment, when Congress, urged by the President and backed by the artificial sentiment, is about to declare war and engulf our country in the greatest holocaust that the world has ever known. . .

Source: Norris, George. "Against Entry Into War." *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. LV, pt. I, pp. 212-13. Accessed 6/20/14.

<http://stuff.mit.edu/afs/athena/course/21/21h.102/www/Norris,%20Against%20Entry%20Into%20the%20War.html>

Resource Sheet #05

Graphic Organizer: Should the United States have entered World War I?

Name _____

Date _____

Provide 3 reasons why the U.S. entered WWI based on Sources A&B.	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3
In which document(s) is this reason given?	A / B	A / B	A / B
Do you think this reason truly motivated U.S. leaders to go to war?	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Explain your reasoning.			
Was this a valid reason to go to war?	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Explain your reasoning.			

Resource Sheet #07

ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric

	Close Reading Strategies	Procedural Concepts	
Criteria	Critical Reading	Claim	Evidence
4	<p>Questions the author's thesis and determines viewpoint and evidence to evaluate claims, highlighting what the author leaves out.</p> <p>Cites accurate examples of how the author uses persuasive language and specific words and phrases to influence the reader.</p> <p>Seeks answers to questions left unanswered in the source to formulate an interpretation.</p>	<p>Formulates a plausible interpretation, argument, or claim based on the evaluation of evidence found in a variety of primary and secondary sources.</p>	<p>Justifies claims using appropriate direct evidence from a variety of reliable sources.</p>
3	<p>Analyzes the author's thesis, determines the viewpoint and evidence to evaluate the claims; may highlight what the author leaves out.</p> <p>Cites examples of how the author uses persuasive language and specific words and phrases to influence the reader.</p> <p>Notes that the author has left some questions unanswered.</p>	<p>Generates a reasonable interpretation, argument, or claim based on an evaluation of the evidence found in selected primary and secondary sources.</p>	<p>Justifies claims using some appropriate direct evidence from a variety of reliable sources.</p>
2	<p>States the author's claims and evidence presented to prove those claims.</p> <p>Determines the author's viewpoint.</p> <p>Notes how language is used to persuade.</p>	<p>States an interpretation, argument, or claim that may or may not be based on evidence found in selected primary and secondary sources.</p>	<p>Justifies claims using generalizations or limited appropriate direct evidence.</p>
1	<p>Attempts to identify the author's claims, viewpoint, or evidence.</p>	<p>Does not state an original claim, argument, or interpretation.</p>	<p>Does not justify or support claims using appropriate direct evidence.</p>