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## **Why did the United States Enter World War I in 1917?**

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**Grade Level:**

9 – 12

**Objectives:**

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Explain why the United States hesitated to get involved in World War I at its onset
- Explain the series of events that eventually drew the United States into World War

**Guiding Question:**

Why did the United States enter World War I in 1917?

**Connections to Common Core:**

**CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.6–8.1** – Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

**CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.6–8.2** – Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

**CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.6–8.6** – Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

**Connections to C3 Framework:**

**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.5.9–12** – Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.

**D2.His.11.9–12** – Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

**D2.His.14.9–12** – Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

**D2.His.16.9–12** – Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

**D4.2.9–12** – Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose

**Documents Used:****Primary Sources:**

Notice in the *New York Times*, May 1, 1915

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70915F8395B17738DDDA80894DD405B858DF1D3>

Editorial in the *New York Times*, May 8, 1915

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30E17FD385C13738DDDA10894DD405B858DF1D3>

Zimmermann Telegram, 1917

Decoded Zimmermann Telegram, 1917

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60>

President Wilson's Declaration of War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=61>

Dr. William A. Quayle, *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, page 28

<https://archive.org/details/literarydigest59newy>

### **Secondary Source:**

Video clip - "WWI Firsts"

<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/videos#wwi-firsts>

### **Lesson Description:**

**Overview:** This lesson is intended to help students understand the factors that pulled the United States into World War I. The lesson is modeled after the "Reading Like a Historian" curriculum developed by Sam Wineburg and the Stanford History Education Group. The lesson begins with a central investigative question that allows for multiple interpretations. Students must sort through a series of primary sources to discover evidence and determine the main factors that brought the United States into World War I. Once students have developed an interpretation that answers the investigative question, they must use primary source evidence to support their answer.

**Time:** 1 to 2 class periods

### **Materials**

- World War I timeline
- Primary Source Documents Packet
- Fact Pyramid Graphic Organizer

### **Lesson Preparation:**

- Project one copy of the World War I timeline in front of the class
- Make one classroom set of primary source documents
- Make one Fact Pyramid copy per student
- Make one Guiding Question copy per student

## Procedure:

- **Attention Grabber:** Play the video clip, “WWI Firsts” to provide a proper context for the lesson plan.
- **Anticipatory Set:** Ask students to do a think–pair–share and respond to the following two questions:
  - What are some reasons why a country might go to war?
  - What are some reasons why a country might want to stay out of a war?
- Students should brainstorm a list of ideas on their own first and then share their list with a partner. While each group shares their ideas with the larger group, the instructor should develop a master list for the whole class to see. Wrap up the discussion by emphasizing the need for countries to protect themselves and maintain sovereignty over their own affairs. Inform the students that they will be investigating the causes for American involvement in World War I.
- **Introduction:** Display the World War I Timeline and briefly review the major events listed on the timeline. Remind the class that the United States did not get involved in the war for three years. The investigation will focus on the factors that finally pulled the country into the war.
- Instruct students that they will become historical detectives today. Their job is to investigate why the United States remained neutral in the war for three years, then finally got involved in 1917. Introduce the central investigation question for the lesson: *Why did the United States enter World War I in 1917?*
- Inform the students that they will investigate four “clues,” or sources, and at the conclusion of the activity, report their findings in the form of a “fact pyramid.”
- Distribute the documents and guiding questions.
- Begin the investigation by going over Document A together and answering the guiding questions as a large group.
- Divide students into groups of 2–4. Have students complete the guiding questions for Document B in small groups. After five minutes, review the answers as a class.
- Have students complete the rest of the guiding questions for Documents C–D. Review student answers for guiding questions in a large group.
- Ask students to turn to the fact pyramid and re–introduce the central question with the students: *Why did the United States enter World War I in 1917?* Ask students to share some of the facts they might include in the fact pyramid. Be sure to have students reference the evidence from the sources that supports their answers. Complete one portion of the fact pyramid in front of the students. Demonstrate that each fact in the fact pyramid should include a citation. This

shows that the fact is based on evidence. Remind the students that there is no correct or incorrect order for the fact pyramid. Students get to determine their own ranking, but they have to justify their decisions and use evidence from the documents in the “because” boxes.

- Allow students to complete their fact pyramids. When complete, have students present them to the large group or display them around the room for a gallery walk. There is a good opportunity for discussion by having the students defend their ranking of facts/causes.

### **Assessment Materials:**

- Guiding questions for primary source documents
- Fact Pyramid with assessment rubric

### **Methods for Extension:**

- Students could use the Chronicling America website (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) to search for local newspaper accounts of the events investigated in the lesson plan. Students could pay particular attention to how local communities reacted to these events. Students could compare these reactions to the national government’s reaction.

### **Adaptations:**

- Challenging vocabulary should be pre-taught prior to the lesson for English Language Learners and students with special needs. Sources can also be read aloud for these students. The instructor should model how to look for evidence within a primary source and use that evidence to answer the central investigative question.

## Bibliography:

### Primary Sources

*New York Times*. "German Embassy Issues Warning," May 1, 1915.

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70915F8395B17738DDDA80894DD405B858DF1D3>.

*New York Times* "War By Assassination," May 8, 1915.

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30E17FD385C13738DDDA10894DD405B858DF1D3>.

Quayle, Dr. William A. "Northwestern Christian Advocate." *Literary Digest* 59, October 19, 1918. <https://archive.org/details/literarydigest59newy>.

Wilson, Woodrow. "Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany, April 2, 1917." Our Documents. Accessed February 1, 2014.

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=61>.

"Zimmerman Telegram (1917)." Our Documents.

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60>.

### Secondary Sources

"World War I Firsts." HISTORY. 0:00–1:19. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt\\_a#t=0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt_a#t=0)

# World War I Timeline

**June 8, 1914** – Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria assassinated

**August 1914** – With World War I underway in Europe, President Wilson proclaims neutrality and offers to mediate the conflict

**May 7, 1915** – German U-Boats sink the *Lusitania*, killing 1,198 people, including 128 Americans.

**March 1916** – After the Germans sink a French ferry, the *Sussex*, the United States threatens to break diplomatic relations with the Germans if they ever attacked a civilian ship again

**May 4, 1916** – Sussex Pledge – Germany pledges to restrict its submarine warfare and not to attack merchant ships without warning

**November 7, 1916** – Woodrow Wilson elected to a second term as president on the campaign pledge, “He Kept Us Out of War”

**January 31, 1917** – Germany announces its intention to resume unrestricted use of submarine warfare

**February 3, 1917** – United States breaks diplomatic relations with Germany in response to January 31<sup>st</sup> announcement

**April 2, 1917** – Woodrow Wilson delivers message to Congress asking for Declaration of War against Germany

**April 6, 1917** – Congress declares war on Germany

**November 11, 1918** – An armistice ends the fighting in World War I

**December 13, 1918** – President Wilson arrives in France to help negotiate a treaty

**June 28, 1919** – The Treaty of Versailles is signed, formally ending World War I

Document A: *New York Times* articles related to the sinking of the *Lusitania*; May 1915

Note to students: These articles appeared in the *New York Times* in early May of 1915. The first source is a notice published by the German government shortly before the *Lusitania* embarked on her voyage. The second is an editorial, which appeared after the sinking of the ship

*German Warning: May 1, 1915*

*Editorial: May 8, 1915*

## GERMAN EMBASSY ISSUES WARNING

Advertises Notice of Danger  
to Travelers in the  
War Zone.

### BUILDING UP A DEFENSE?

Suggestion That Notice May Be  
Cited Against Possible Claims  
for Damages—Cunard Agent  
Says Travel Is Safe.

The following advertisement was received last night by THE TIMES and other newspapers throughout the country. It came from an advertising agent in Washington, who said it had been brought to him by the Counselor of the German Embassy:

**NOTICE!**  
Travelers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travelers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.  
IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY,  
Washington, D. C., April 22, 1915.

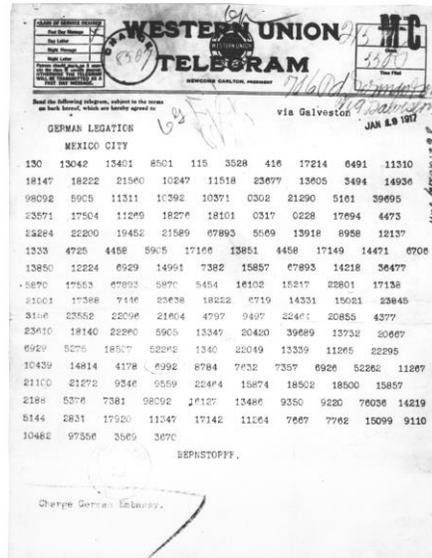
### WAR BY ASSASSINATION.

From our Department of State there must go to the Imperial Government at Berlin a demand that the Germans shall no longer make war like savages drunk with blood, that they shall cease to seek the attainment of their ends by the assassination of non-combatants and neutrals. In the history of wars there is no single deed comparable in its inhumanity and its horror to the destruction, without warning, by German torpedoes of the great steamship *Lusitania*, with more than 1,800 souls on board, and among them more than 100 Americans. Our demand must be made, and it will be heeded, unless Germany in her madness would have it understood that she is at war with the whole civilized world. For many hours yesterday the hope was cherished that the passengers and crew of the ship had been saved, but later it was made certain that there had been an appalling loss of life, and then there was here full realization of the extreme seriousness of this latest act of barbarity and of its effect upon our relations to the war. It will stir the American people as they have not been stirred since the destruction of the *Maine* in the harbor of Havana, and Government and people will be united in the resolve that Germany must be called upon to bring her practices into conformity with the usages of civilized warfare.

Source: *New York Times*

**Document B: Zimmermann Telegram; January 16, 1917**

*Note to students: This telegram was sent by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the President of Mexico. Once the message was decoded by the United States, it was learned that the Germans proposed a military alliance with Mexico against the United States. In return for their support, the Germans would help the Mexicans reclaim New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona from the United States (land which they had lost during the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848).*



**Translation:**

“We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President’s attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace.”  
Signed, ZIMMERMANN.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration

## Document C: President Woodrow Wilson Asks Congress to Declare War; April 2, 1917 (excerpts)

On the third of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the first day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe...

The new policy 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. Even hospital ships and ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium...have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion or of principle....

I am now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the wanton and wholesale destruction of the lives of noncombatants, men, women, and children, engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. 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...The ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way.

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. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances...

The world must be made safe for democracy. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We are but one 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.

It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration

**Document D: Bishop William A. Quayle Magazine Article; October 19, 1918 (excerpts)**

*Note to students: This article was written by a prominent Methodist bishop and published in the Northwestern Christian Advocate in 1918. Consider the source and his biases as you read this account. Not all of the information presented by Bishop Quayle is factually accurate (i.e. – the Lusitania medal was struck after the sinking of the ship). Also keep in mind, that after the Germans invaded France through the neutral country of Belgium in 1915, a large number of sensational news stories flooded the United States, describing German atrocities of arson, rape, mayhem and murder perpetrated on the innocent Belgian people.*

Let us set down sternly that we are at war with the Germans. The German people is committing the unspeakable horrors which set the whole world aghast. The German people is not and has not been conducting war. It is and has been conducting murder. Hold fast to that...

All decencies, honors, humanities, international agreement, and laws have been smashed by them day and night from the first rape of Belgium to now. The new atrocity which appeared this week was spraying prisoners with burning oil.

Germany has ravished the women of Belgium, Servia, Romania, Poland and Armenia. Germany murdered the passengers of the *Lusitania* and struck a medal to celebrate that German triumph, dating it two days before the horrible occurrence. Germany has poisoned wells, crucified inhabitants and soldiers, burned people in their houses, and this by system. Germany has wantonly defaced the living and the dying and the dead.

Germany has stolen things little and big: playthings from children, finery from women, pictures of incalculable worth, bank-deposits, railroads, and factories. Germany has sunk hospital-ships, has bombed hospitals and Red Cross camps.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration

# Guiding Questions

## Document A – *New York Times* Articles

1. According to the German warning on May 1, why should American passengers be cautious about riding on the *Lusitania*?
2. How did the *New York Times* editorial writer react to the *Lusitania* sinking?
3. Although the *Lusitania* was sunk in 1915, and it angered many Americans, the government refused to go to war. Why do you think the country remained out of the war for two more years?

## Document B – Zimmermann Telegram

1. What were the Germans proposing to the Mexicans in this telegram?
2. Why do you think the Germans resorted to sending this message? What can it tell us about their situation in 1917?
3. How might this telegram anger the American government?

**Document C – Woodrow Wilson Speech**

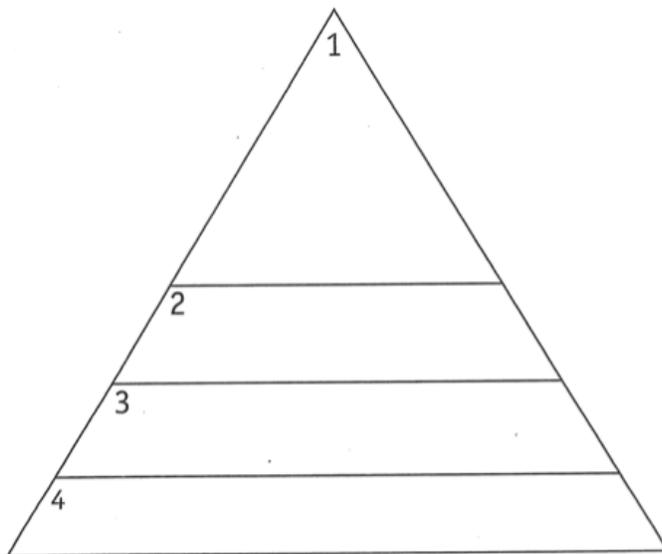
1. What was the main purpose of this speech?
2. What reasons does Woodrow Wilson give for going to war?
3. Does it seem like the United States is entering the war for political or economic reasons? Explain.

**Document D – Bishop Quayle Article**

1. How does Bishop Quayle feel about the Germans?
2. What can this letter tell us about the feelings of average Americans in 1918?
3. How trustworthy do you think Bishop Quayle is? What could you do to verify any of this information?

# Fact Pyramid

Fill in the Fact Pyramid with four important pieces of information that answer the question: *Why did the United States enter World War I in 1917?* The facts should come directly from the Documents. Please write down the document you obtained each fact from. Rank the facts from 1 (the largest and most important cause) to 4 (the smallest cause). Next to each section, in the "Because Box," write a sentence defending the ranking of that specific fact. *Use evidence from the documents to support your rankings.*



Fact Pyramid

1
2
3
4

Because Box

# Fact Pyramid Rubric

- A
  - Student has clearly explained the facts mentioned in the fact boxes and connected them to information in the documents
  - The “Because Box” contains thorough explanations of the ranking
  - Well written with few or no errors in sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization
- B
  - Student has vaguely explained the facts mentioned in the fact boxes and connected them to information in the documents
  - The “Because Box” contains vague explanations of the ranking
  - Well written but includes some errors in grammar and spelling
- C
  - Student has facts listed in the fact boxes, but has failed to connect them to information from the documents
  - The student is unable to clearly explain their ranking system in the “Because Box”
  - Written with complete sentences, but contains too many errors in verb tense, agreement, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization
- D
  - The student is unable to explain facts in the pyramid
  - The student has no explanations for their ranking in the “Because Box”
  - Contains serious errors in sentences structure and mechanics