World War I: Arguments For and Against Going to War

by Steven Schwartz

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original source materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary source materials.

Over the course of two or three lessons, the students will read two primary sources, President Wilson’s war message and a US senator’s anti-war speech. Students will demonstrate their understanding of these texts through a close-reading and textual analysis of the speeches and critical-thinking questions.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, decipher, analyze, and explain the meaning of sophisticated arguments from speeches contemporary to the period
- Decipher text through context reading
- Engage in group work to reach an understanding of potentially difficult vocabulary, including, but not limited to belligerents, bereaved, temperateness, mobilization, liability, conceived, judiciously, flagrantly, munitions
- Create written arguments based upon information in primary source documents

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: Two-three 45-minute periods

GRADE LEVEL: 11–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson went before a joint session of Congress to request a declaration of war against Germany. Wilson cited Germany’s violation of its pledge to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, as well as its attempts to entice Mexico into an alliance against the United States, as his reasons for declaring war.

By 1917, the continued submarine attacks on US merchant and passenger ships, and the Zimmerman Telegram’s implied threat of a German attack on the United States through an alliance with Mexico, swayed US public opinion in support of a declaration of war. Furthermore, international law stipulated that the placing of US naval personnel on civilian ships to protect them from German submarines already constituted an act of war against Germany. Finally, the Germans, by their actions, had demonstrated that they had no interest in seeking a peaceful end to the conflict. These reasons all contributed to President Wilson’s decision to ask Congress for a declaration of war against Germany.

In rebuttal to President Wilson’s call for a declaration of war, Senator George Norris of Nebraska gave a 2,200-word speech on the floor of the Senate. Norris, a Republican progressive who often supported Wilson, had grown to be an isolationist in regard to the conflict raging on the other side of the Atlantic. He had come to believe that the push to engage in the war was an agenda of the bankers and stockbrokers and would lead to nothing but their gain and everyone else’s loss. He was one of only six senators who voted against joining the war.

On April 4, 1917, the US Senate voted in support of the measure to declare war on Germany. The House concurred two days later. The United States later declared war on German ally Austria-Hungary on December 7, 1917.

LESSON 1

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, decipher, analyze, and explain the meaning of sophisticated arguments from speeches contemporary to the period
- Decipher text through context reading and answer document-related questions
- Engage in group work to reach an understanding of potentially difficult vocabulary

MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: Woodrow Wilson, War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917 (excerpts)

- Teacher’s Resource: Senator Norris Opposes US Entry into the War, April 4, 1917 (excerpts)

- Summary Organizers #1–6
- Overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

PROCEDURE

1. Over the next two days the class will be working with three selections from Woodrow Wilson’s War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917, and three selections from Senator George Norris’s speech against declaring war. Today the focus will be on excerpts from the War Message (provided on Summary Organizers #1–3). Explain to the students that they will be analyzing selected parts of the document during this lesson and that they will be learning how to do in-depth analysis for themselves.

2. Hand out Summary Organizer #1. “Share read” the text with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to serve as the model for the class. This technique will support both struggling readers and English language learners (ELL).

3. Display Summary Organizer #1 in a format large enough for all of the class to see (an overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device). Explain that today the whole class will be going through the text-analysis process together for the first selection from the text.
4. Explain that the first objective is to select Key Words from the text and then use those words to create a summary sentence that demonstrates an understanding of what Wilson was saying in the first selection from the War Message.

5. Guidelines for Selecting the Key Words: Key Words are very important to understanding the text. Without them the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs. Tell the students not to pick “connector” words (are, is, the, and, so, etc.). The number of Key Words depends on the length of the original selection. This selection is 247 words long, so you can pick seven to ten Key Words. The other Key Words rule is that the students must know the meaning of the words they select. This will give them practice reasoning out word meanings using context clues and advanced dictionary skills.

6. Students will now select seven to ten words from the text that they believe are Key Words and write them in the Key Words section of their organizers.

7. Survey the class to find out what they selected as Key Words. You can ask for a show of hands to determine the most popular choices. Using this vote and some discussion the class should, with your guidance, decide on seven to ten Key Words. For example, let’s say that the class decides on the following words: extraordinary session (two words can be allowed when they convey a single idea; just don’t let whole phrases get by), choices, immediately, submarines, sink, due warning, new policy, ruthlessly, without warning, and neutrals. Now, no matter which words the students had previously selected, have them write in the Key Words section the words agreed upon by the class or chosen by you.

8. Explain that the class will use these Key Words to write a sentence that summarizes the meaning of the first section of the War Message. This should be a class discussion-and-negotiation process. For example, “We are meeting in an extraordinary session to discuss our immediate choices regarding a new policy to address the actions by submarines that ruthlessly and without due warning attack neutral ships.” You might find that the class decides they don’t need some of the Key Words to make the summary even more streamlined. This is part of the negotiation process. Copy the final negotiated sentence into the organizer.

9. Tell the students to restate their summary sentence in their own words, not having to use the Key Words from the text. Again, this is a class discussion-and-negotiation process. For example, “The US is going to declare war on Germany because they are attacking neutral ships without warning.”

10. Hand out Summary Organizers #2 and #3. These contain the additional selections from the War Message. Divide the class into an even number of groups, each group composed of three to five students. They will return to these groups for the next lesson.

11. Share read the texts with the whole class as described above or have each group read the selection together. As you did with the whole class, ask the individual students to select Key Words and then negotiate the final choice with their groups. For the second selection, which is almost 200 words, the students can pick seven or eight Key Words. The third selection is only 100 words, so they can select six or seven words. Review the process of negotiating a summary sentence that gets at the gist of the War Message, and then a restatement of the summary in the students’ own words. You...
can ask groups to share out their summary sentences and restatements and discuss the different interpretations with the class.

12. Wrap-up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. You could have students use the back of their organizers to make a note of these words and their meanings.

13. Assign Summary Organizers #4–6 from the George Norris document for homework. The students will select Key Words (7–8 for Organizers #4 and #6 and 6–7 for Organizer #5) and write a summary sentence and a restatement in their own words for each of the three selections from George Norris’s speech.
LESSON 2

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Work in groups, using the materials from Lesson 1 to create a newspaper story
- Individually compose an argumentative essay using information from the speeches presented in Lesson 1

MATERIALS

- Completed Summary Organizers #1–6
- Critical-Thinking Questions and Class Discussion worksheet

PROCEDURE

1. Divide the students into their groups from the previous lesson. Make sure you have an even number of groups for the next part of the lesson.

2. Have the groups discuss the summary sentences and restatements that they generated for the selections from Senator Norris’s speech.

3. After this discussion hand out the Critical-Thinking Questions and Class Discussion worksheet. The groups can discuss the questions and answers, but each student should complete their own worksheet based on group discussion. The students should be advised to base their answers solely on the information in Wilson’s War Message and Senator Norris’s speech.

4. Assign each group a role for the next part of the lesson. Half the groups (Group 1) will take the role of a reporter from a pro-Wilson, interventionist-leaning newspaper. The students are to compose the first three paragraphs of a story for their newspaper on Wilson’s message and create an appropriate headline. Half the groups (Group 2) will take the role of a reporter from a pro-Norris, isolationist-/neutrality-leaning newspaper. The students are to compose the first three paragraphs of a story for their newspaper on Norris’s message and create an appropriate headline. Remind students to cite text from the primary sources to support their arguments.

5. Upon completion of the two news articles, each group will have a volunteer read the group work aloud. To assess their work, note parts of the articles that specifically cite President Wilson’s or Senator Norris’s arguments.

6. As a culminating activity, which may be completed as a homework assignment, students will compose an argumentative essay completing the following heading:

   The arguments over whether the United States should have become involved in World War I were best expressed by . . .

*** Note: It is important that you use evidence taken directly from the two documents. Clearly cite the evidence in your essay.
Woodrow Wilson’s War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917 (excerpts)

Gentlemen of the Congress:

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making.

On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or 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 or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean . . . since April of last year the Imperial Government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in conformity with its promise then given to us that passenger boats should not be sunk and that due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy . . . The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind . . . 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.

. . . American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, 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. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.

With a profound sense . . . of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States . . .

What this will involve is clear . . . It will involve the organization and mobilization of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war . . . It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy’s submarines. It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States . . . at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service . . . It will involve also, of course, the granting of adequate credits to the Government by well conceived taxation . . .

Mr. President, while I am most emphatically and sincerely opposed to taking any step that will force our country into the useless and senseless war now being waged in Europe, yet if this resolution passes I shall not permit my feeling of opposition to its passage to interfere in any way with my duty either as a Senator or as a citizen in bringing success and victory to American arms. I am bitterly opposed to my country entering the war, but if . . . we do enter it, all of my energy and all of my power will be behind our flag in carrying it on to victory.

The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step . . . we ought 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 beginning and through the various stages of this unholy and unrighteous war.

No close student of recent history will deny that both Great Britain and Germany have, on numerous occasions since the beginning of the war, flagrantly violated in the most serious manner the rights of neutral vessels and neutral nations under existing international law as recognized up to the beginning of this war by the civilized world.

The reason given by the President in asking Congress to declare war against Germany is that the German Government has declared certain war zones, within which, by the use of submarines, she sinks, without notice, American ships and destroys American lives . . .

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 . . .

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 munitions 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 . . .

Critical-Thinking Questions and Class Discussion
Examples from the texts must be cited in the answers to these questions.

1. How did President Wilson attempt to evoke compassion from the American people?
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2. How did President Wilson indicate his caution in asking for a declaration of war with Germany?
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3. Explain how Wilson outlined the potential impact on the American people if a declaration of war was approved.
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4. How did Senator Norris indicate his patriotism while opposing President Wilson?
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5. What arguments did Norris make against US support for either Germany or Great Britain?
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6. Explain who Senator Norris claimed would benefit from US entry into the war.
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Summary Organizer #1

**Original Text:**

*Gentlemen of the Congress:* I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making.

On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or 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 or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean . . . since April of last year the Imperial Government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in conformity with its promise then given to us that passenger boats should not be sunk and that due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy . . . The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind . . . 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.

**Summary:**

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**In Your Own Words:**

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Summary Organizer #2

Original Text:

. . . American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, 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. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.

With a profound sense . . . of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States . . .

Summary:

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In Your Own Words:

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Summary Organizer #3

Original Text:
What this will involve is clear . . . It will involve the organization and mobilization of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war . . . It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy’s submarines. It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States . . . at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service . . . It will involve also, of course, the granting of adequate credits to the Government by well conceived taxation . . .

Key Words (6–7):

Summary:

In Your Own Words:
Mr. President, while I am most emphatically and sincerely opposed to taking any step that will force our country into the useless and senseless war now being waged in Europe, yet if this resolution passes I shall not permit my feeling of opposition to its passage to interfere in any way with my duty either as a Senator or as a citizen in bringing success and victory to American arms. I am bitterly opposed to my country entering the war, but if . . . we do enter it, all of my energy and all of my power will be behind our flag in carrying it on to victory.

The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step . . . we ought 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 beginning and through the various stages of this unholy and unrighteous war.
Summary Organizer #5

Original Text:

No close student of recent history will deny that both Great Britain and Germany have, on numerous occasions since the beginning of the war, flagrantly violated in the most serious manner the rights of neutral vessels and neutral nations under existing international law as recognized up to the beginning of this war by the civilized world.

The reason given by the President in asking Congress to declare war against Germany is that the German Government has declared certain war zones, within which, by the use of submarines, she sinks, without notice, American ships and destroys American lives . . .

Key Words (6–7):

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Summary:

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In Your Own Words:

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Summary Organizer #6

Original Text:
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 . . .

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 . . .

Summary:
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In Your Own Words:
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Key Words (7–8):
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