

## Veterans Legacy Program Curricular Materials

### Letters Home: American Soldiers on the European Front

**Grade(s):** 11th Grade

**Time (minutes):** About ten 50 minute class periods

**Lesson Overview:** The First World War was one of the most destructive conflicts in human history, and it was the world's first truly global war. In this lesson, students learn about the outbreak of the First World War and the transition of American foreign policy from one of non-interventionism to total war. Along the way, students analyze primary and secondary sources, and put themselves into the shoes of American soldiers writing letters home on their behalf to loved ones.

**Essential Question**

Why did the U.S. get involved in the First World War, and in what ways did the First World War impact the lives of Americans?

**Florida State Standards:**

SS.912.A.1.2 Utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources to identify author, historical significance, audience, and authenticity to understand a historical period.

SS.912.A.1.5 Evaluate the validity, reliability, bias, and authenticity of current events and Internet resources.

SS.912.A.1.7 Describe various socio-cultural aspects of American life including arts, artifacts, literature, education, and publications.

SS.912.A.3.13 Examine key events and peoples in Florida history as they relate to United States history.

SS.912.A.4.5 Examine causes, course, and consequences of United States involvement in World War I.

SS.912.A.4.6 Examine how the United States government prepared the nation for war with war measures (Selective Service Act, War Industries Board, war bonds, Espionage Act, Sedition Act, Committee of Public Information).

SS.912.A.4.7 Examine the impact of airplanes, battleships, new weaponry and chemical warfare in creating new war strategies (trench warfare, convoys).

SS.912.A.4.8 Compare the experiences Americans (African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, women, conscientious objectors) had while serving in Europe.

LAFS.910.RH.1.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

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### **Historical Context:**

In 1914, continental Europe descended into war when the Archduke Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was assassinated by a Serbian national longing for the independence of Austrian territory he believed ought rightfully belong to his homeland. Within weeks, the Austro-Hungarian Empire retaliated by declaring war on Serbia with the backing of its ally, Germany. In short order, Russia came to Serbia's defense, followed by France and the United Kingdom. By relying on support and resources from territories that they controlled around the world, Europe's conflicted states soon brought the war to the shores of nearly every continent.

Although officially neutral, the United States provided assistance to the United Kingdom and the entente powers. As a country of immigrants largely from Europe, it would have been politically difficult for the United States to drum up support for the war. President Woodrow Wilson had only narrowly won reelection in 1916 under the slogan "he kept us out of the war," after all. Even the sinking of the Lusitania — a British passenger ship carrying Americans — could not bring the United States around to take up arms. It was not until German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann sent a secret telegram to Mexico's capital seeking an alliance and promising that Mexico could reconquer Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas that circumstances changed. Less than one month later, Woodrow Wilson gave a speech to Congress calling for war against the Imperial German government in order to "vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power..."

Rapid global industrialization in the previous century made the First World War one of the most ruthlessly and fatally efficient wars in human history. The deployment of the first tanks, machine guns, airplanes, field guns, and other artillery transformed battlefields into slaughters. For American soldiers, fighting in Europe was thus often made a horrible, terrifying experience. The United States spared no expense in the fight, mobilizing millions, rationing food, and garnering public support by disseminating propaganda. In May 1917, Congress even authorized the federal government to expand the military through conscription. Among the many who served were around 400,000 African Americans. Shamefully, these brave Americans did not receive a hero's welcome upon their return, but came home instead to a country that W. E. B. Du Bois characterized as representing "lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult." This, too, is an important theme of the history of the Great War and its impact on the U.S. and its people.

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### **Required Materials:**

- President Woodrow Wilson's Statement of American Neutrality to Congress: [Woodrow Wilson, Message to Congress, 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Doc. No. 566 \(Washington, 1914\)](#).
- Encyclopedia Britannica Article on the sinking of a British passenger ship: "[Lusitania.](#)" [Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica, 22 May. 2018](#).
- [Telegram with a Translation of the Zimmerman Telegram](#)
- Telegram from Acting Secretary of State Frank L. Polk to the American Embassy in Mexico City <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/telegram-american-embassy>
- [An Excerpt from Woodrow Wilson's Declaration of War](#)
- Selective Service Act 1917: [Babe Ruth Draft Card and Explanation of Selective Service Act](#)

### *Documents from the Veterans Legacy Program*

- [Will Todd Biography](#)
- [Willoughby Marks Biography](#)
- [Fred White Biography](#)
- [Paul Hon Biography](#)
- [Eduard Desaussure Biography](#)

### *Accounts of War Document Subset*

- [A letter from First Lieutenant James W. Alston to H. H. Brimley on November 1, 1918 about being only black officer in a hotel in France](#) and Du Bois, "[Returning Soldiers](#)"
- [Empey, Arthur Guy, Over The Top \(1917\) Gas Attack 1916](#)
- [Bert Chaney's account appears in Moynihan, Michael \(ed.\) People at War 1914-1918 \(1973\); Liddell Hart, Basil, The Tanks vol. 1 \(1959\)](#).
- Christmas in the Trenches Account: This eyewitness account appears in Richards, Frank, Old Soldiers Never Die (1933); Keegan, John, The First World War (1999); Simkins, Peter, World War I, the Western Front (1991).
- [Keegan, John, The Face of War \(2001\); Seeger, Alan, Letters and Diary \(posthumously published 1917\)](#).

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### **Procedures:**

#### **Activity 1: American Foreign Policy of Non-Interventionism**

In the first activity of the unit, students are introduced to the United State's policy of non-interventionism upon the outbreak of the First World War in Europe.

##### *Lesson Procedures*

1. Students are provided with a copy of an excerpt from Woodrow Wilson's statement of neutrality to congress in August, 1914, as well as a copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica article on the R.M.S. Lusitania. These documents may be provided students digitally or physically.
2. With the guidance of the teacher, students may analyze and discuss the sources through any of various previously taught document analysis strategies.
3. The teacher should lead a discussion of the documents. Students ought to be asked to justify responses to questions from the teacher or classmates with evidence from the text. The following questions may serve as a starting point for discussion:
  - Who is Woodrow Wilson addressing in his Statement of Neutrality?
  - What does Woodrow Wilson hope to achieve with his Statement of Neutrality?
  - Why do you think that Woodrow Wilson believes the U.S. ought to remain neutral?
  - Why was the sinking of the R.M.S. Lusitania particularly important to the U.S.?
  - Were the Germans in any way perhaps justified in sinking the R.M.S. Lusitania? Why or why not?
4. As a closing to the lesson, the teacher should summarize together with students what was learned in that class period. This can be done with a 3-2-1 activity. The teacher might ask the class for three new things that they learned in that class period, two questions that they still have, and one guess as to what they will be learning the following class period. The teacher might record these on the classroom whiteboard or elsewhere, and refer to them at the beginning of the next day's lesson. That is a good time to answer student questions, and see if their class' predictions came through.

#### **Activity 2: The Zimmerman Telegram brings the U.S. into World War One**

In the second activity of the unit, students are introduced to the Zimmerman Telegram and how it moved U.S. leaders to change their policy position from one of non-interventionism to one of war.

##### *Lesson Procedures*

1. Students are provided with a copy of the Zimmerman Telegram as well as the acting Secretary of State William F. Polk's ensuing telegram to the American embassy in Mexico City.
2. Working in groups of four, students are assigned either a position for or against the resolution that the teacher writes on the board: "The U.S. was right to enter the First World War after the Zimmerman Telegram." In groups, students write their responses by stating that either "we affirm the resolution resolved ..." or "we negate the resolution resolved..." with supporting arguments.
3. Students should designate a group member as speaker. Other group members might be allowed to help their group's speaker by passing notes or whispering in their ear.

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4. Each group is given an opportunity to present their arguments, alternation pro and con positions. The teacher should manage discussion by giving each group a limited time frame to read their argument (perhaps 1-2 minutes), and ask opposing groups to question or cross examine the other groups only by raising their hand after they have been given the opportunity to speak.
5. As a closing to the lesson, the teacher and students together should reflect on what was learned in that class period. Students may be asked to participate in a blind vote to see how many students agree with the United States' decision to enter the war, and whether or not they changed their opinions through the debate. The teacher might choose to record the votes cast on the classroom whiteboard as a reference point for the following day.

**Activity 3: Declaration of War** – In the third activity of the unit, students learn about how and why the United States declared war on Germany.

### *Lesson Procedures*

1. The students are provided with an excerpt from Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war selected by the teacher. Individually, students conduct a so-called "SOAPS" analysis, reading the excerpt they are provided carefully and evaluating the:
  - Speaker: in whose voice is the document written?
  - Occasion: what is the historical context for the document? What was going on?
  - Audience: to whom is the document addressed, and how does this affect what the speaker says?
  - Purpose: what is the speaker trying to accomplish with this document?
  - Subject: what is the main idea of the document summarized in a few words?
2. The teacher leads a discussion on the source that the students analyzed. Students should be asked to share their findings for each component of the analysis verbally. The teacher may probe the class to build on student contributions with prompts such as "does anyone else have something to add?"
3. Throughout the discussion, the teacher should debrief the class by sharing insights into what a thorough analysis of the source might reflect on. A few essential observations from the source include:
  - Speaker: President Woodrow Wilson had won his second presidential campaign on a platform of keeping the U.S. out of war. When prompted, students will often name the speaker, but few identify major beliefs of that individual. This is a good opportunity for the teacher to probe students about Wilson's views, and to explain why it is relevant information that ought to be considered in document analysis.
  - Occasion: The historical context for the source is not only during the First World War, but mere weeks following the decoding of the Zimmerman Telegram. Students ought to be probed for more detailed information about the course of the war at the time the document is dated than just a vague statement.
  - Audience: In his address, Woodrow Wilson speaks not only to the U.S. Congress but also to the American public. It is important to recognize that Wilson would have been keenly aware of the huge reach and potential impact of his words, and that this attention would have shaped what he said.

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- Purpose: As the head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces, it is the role of the president to mobilize the country for war and to articulate the position of the U.S. in relation to other countries. Wilson's address called the U.S. to war, and sought to convince the public and lawmakers alike of the necessity of the U.S. entering the war.
- Subject: Wilson's speech to Congress seeks to persuade lawmakers and the American public of the necessity of the U.S. fight in World War One. To do so, the address states the selfless and noble aims of the U.S. in defending liberty and democracy.

### Activity 4: Accounts of War from Soldier's Perspective

In the fourth activity of the unit, students will be learning about the experiences of soldiers fighting on the front in Europe, as well as the terrifying impact of industrialized warfare fought with modern machines with the capacity for ruthless slaughter.

#### *Lesson Procedures*

1. Students are divided into five groups composed ideally of four students.
2. Each group is provided with one of the "Accounts of War Document Subsets" in the form of a digital or physical copy. The teacher ought to provide 5-10 minutes for students to read their assigned document individually. Students may decide how to best interact with the document, and may use any close-reading or annotation strategies pretaught by the teacher.
3. Students are prompted to discuss their document in groups using the guiding questions below posted either on the classroom whiteboard or in physical copies distributed to the students. The teacher may have the students submit written responses to these guiding questions to check for understanding.
  - Who is the author of the source you are analyzing, and what is their background? You may use any digital resources available for further research.
  - What is the author's opinion of war based on the source? (Is he in favor of the war, or against it?)
  - What stands out (to you and your group) in the document you are studying and why?
  - What can you and your group gather about life during World War One based on the document you are analyzing?

### \* Optional Extension Activity: The Soldier's Perspective Jigsaw

As an extension to Activity 4, teachers may choose to conduct a "Jigsaw" activity where students share with one another what they learned about soldiers' experiences in World War One.

#### *Lesson Procedures*

4. Students rejoin their groups from the lesson activity prior. Students are numbered off according to the number of students and groups in the class. Once students have their number, groups are then reformed according to students' new numbers (ones meet together, twos meet together, etc.) Ideally, there should be a speaker from each of the class groups in these new groups,

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5. Students share what they learned about the unique experiences of the soldiers or individuals that they learned about in their original groups. Students are prompted to share those individuals' attitudes toward the war, weaponry, psychological impact, and issues of racial tension in particular.
6. Students are prompted to return to a whole-group class setting. As a closing to the lesson, the teacher and students together should reflect on what was learned in that class period. The teacher leads a discussion on how the experience of war affected the individual soldiers that the students had studied. This activity is a building block for the summative assignment at the end of the unit, where students have to draw on their understanding of the experiences of soldiers in the war to create letters home.

### Activity 5: Introduction to Soldier Journal Project

In the fifth activity of the unit, students will be introduced to a summative project where they reflect on the experiences of American soldiers and use these experiences to formulate and create "Letters Home."

#### *Lesson Procedures*

1. Students rejoin their groups from activity four and are assigned one of the five Florida Veterans who served in World War One. Each of these soldiers is accompanied by a detailed biography produced by graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Central Florida working with the Veterans Legacy Program.
  - Group 1: Will Todd
  - Group 2: Willoughby Marks
  - Group 3: Fred White
  - Group 4: Paul Hon
  - Group 5: Eduard Desaussure
2. Using the attached graphic organizer, students gather key information about each of the soldiers. This data will eventually be incorporated into letters home to loved ones from the perspectives of these soldiers. Students work together in groups to complete the data sheet. Teachers may choose to collect this data sheet for a grade or to check for student understanding.

### Activity 6: World War One Letters Home

As a summative activity for the unit, the teacher explains how students will create "letters home" on behalf of the soldiers that they learned about in activity five.

#### *Lesson Procedures*

1. The teacher introduces the desired outcome of the summative unit project that the students will be creating: 1) students consider the point of view of their assigned soldier closely, and 2) are able to adequately describe that soldier in the broader historical context, understanding the relationship between the two.
2. The teacher distributes the attached instructions, requirements, and rubric for the upcoming project to students in physical or digital format.
3. Students will be required to write three letters. Each will have to take carefully into consideration the data collected about the students' assigned soldier in activity six.

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1. Entering the War (letter could focus on basic training, after getting drafted, or enlisting)
2. Arriving in Europe
3. Battlefield Experience
4. The teacher should explain the expectations for work and submission. It may be advantageous to refer students back to letters that they analyzed in activity three for examples of what their letters might look like. Student letters should seek to incorporate as much relevant personal information about the soldiers studied as possible, and further research may be necessary for timelines and basic facts about the course and major events of the First World War. Interactive timelines such as the one provided by the [World War One Museum in Kansas City](#) may be recommended as useful aids.

### Activity 7: Writing Letters Home

In this final activity for the unit, the teacher provides students with time in class to write their “letters home” from the perspective of World War One.

#### *Lesson Procedures*

1. At this point, students are working independently. The teacher should establish classroom procedures for writing, asking questions, and seeking help from the teacher, while providing an adequate climate for writing.
2. How much time is allotted for writing depends on the teacher and students, but an average writing session will take 2-3 class periods.
3. Before students submit their letters, the teacher can provide students with the option of sharing a letter that they wrote by reading it to the class. The class may be asked to provide the student with positive feedback or to ask questions about the letter, the historical context addressed in the letter, and in general discuss the soldier’s life.
4. At the end of this sharing activity, the teacher collects and grades the student letters with the attached rubric.





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### Floridian Soldiers in World War One: Data Sheet Handout

Name:	Date of Birth:
Parents, Relatives, and Loved Ones:	
Details from life before the war (education, occupation, marriage, etc.)	
Were they drafted, or did they enlist?	Division or branch of the military (Navy, Army, etc.)
Arrival date in Europe:	Return date or deceased:
Details from field experiences:	
Details from life after war (if survived):	

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### Letters Home from World War One: Student Handout

#### Directions:

Review the personal information of the American soldier that you studied in class. Then, write letters from the point of view of that soldier home to his family. You should write three letters: one from the beginning of the war, another upon that soldier's arrival in Europe, and one that addresses battlefield experience. While you have a good deal of facts about this person's life at your disposal, you will have to fill in the gaps, so be creative! The challenge is to situate the narrative that you create as accurately as possible into the broader historical context of World War One. To do so, you may need to conduct further research about major events and turning points in the war. You may use any credible sources available to you to do so.

#### Requirements:

- Each letter should be 1.5-2 pages in length
- Each letter should be addressed to an actual family member from the soldier's biography
- Each letter should end with a closing with signature (sincerely, love, yours truly, etc.)
- Each letter should reflect, at least partially, the historical context learned in class
  - Information could include weaponry, experience as a minority, attitude towards war, loss of friends or fellow soldiers, interactions with locals, contact with officers or subordinates, weather, food, or injuries sustained

#### Rubric for Grading

	Letter One	Letter Two	Letter Three
Submission	/5 points	/5 points	/5 points
Length Requirement	/10 points	/10 points	/10 points
Historical Context Used	/15 points	/15 points	/15 points
Personal Life Details Used	/15 points	/15 points	/15 points
Closing Present	/5 points	/5 points	/5 points
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>/50 points</b>	<b>/50 points</b>	<b>/50 points</b>

Final Grade: \_\_\_\_\_/150 Points