The effect of the war upon the United States will depend upon what American citizens say and do. Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned. The spirit of the nation in this critical matter will be determined largely by what individuals and society and those gathered in public meetings do and say, upon what newspapers and magazines contain, upon what ministers utter in their pulpits, and men proclaim as their opinions upon the street. The people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war. It is natural and inevitable that there should be the utmost variety of sympathy and desire among them with regard to the issues and circumstances of the conflict. Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle. It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it. Those responsible for exciting it will assume a heavy responsibility, responsibility for no less a thing than that the people of the United States, whose love of their country and whose loyalty to its government should unite them as Americans all, bound in honor and affection to think first of her and her interests, may be divided in camps of hostile opinion, hot against each other, involved in the war itself in impulse and opinion if not in action.

Such divisions amongst us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the one people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial mediation and speak the counsels of peace and accommodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend.

I venture, therefore, my fellow countrymen, to speak a solemn word of warning to you against that deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality which may spring out of partisanship, out of passionately taking sides. The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men’s souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action, must put a curb upon our sentiments, as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another.

Source: President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech before Congress, August 19, 1914.
Document B: Woodrow Wilson Speech #2 (Modified)

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.

The German policy has swept every restriction aside. Ships of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom of the ocean without warning. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken.

I advise that the Congress declare the recent actions of the Imperial German Government to be, in fact, nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States.

Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved.

The world must be made safe for democracy. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek not material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.

It is a fearful, but right thing to lead this great peaceful people to war. We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of [people] to have a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations.

Vocabulary
commerce: trade
feasible: possible
dominion: control or domination
material compensation: money

Source: President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech before Congress, April 2, 1917.
Guiding Questions

President Wilson’s Speeches

1. Read the first speech. Does Wilson think the United States should enter WWI? Why or why not?

2. Read the second speech. Does Wilson think the United States should enter WWI? Why or why not?

3. **Contextualization:** Use the 1917 speech to “imagine the setting.” (a) What does Wilson accuse Germany of doing? (b) Do you think this is a good reason to go to war? (c) What additional information would you need to have before making a decision?

4. **Close reading:** Re-read the last two paragraphs of the 1917 speech. Why do you think Wilson added these paragraphs? How do you think these words made Americans feel?
Document C: Historian Howard Zinn (Excerpted)

President Woodrow Wilson had promised that the United States would stay neutral in the war… But in April of 1917, the Germans had announced they would have their submarines sink any ship bringing supplies to their enemies; and they had sunk a number of merchant vessels. Wilson now said he must stand by the right of Americans to travel on merchant ships in the war zone…

As Richard Hofstadter points out (The American Political Tradition): “This was rationalization of the flimsiest sort...The British had also been intruding on the rights of American citizens on the high seas, but Wilson was not suggesting we go to war with them…

The United States claimed the Lusitania carried an innocent cargo, and therefore the torpedoing was a monstrous German atrocity. Actually, the Lusitania was heavily armed: it carried 1,248 cases of 3-inch shells, 4,927 boxes of cartridges (1,000 rounds in each box), and 2,000 more cases of small-arms ammunition…The British and American governments lied about the cargo…

Prosperity depended much on foreign markets, it was believed by the leaders of the country. In 1897, private foreign investments of the United States amounted to $700 million dollars. By 1914, they were $3.5 billion…

With World War I, England became more and more a market for American goods and for loans at interest. J.P. Morgan and Company acted as agents for the Allies and when, in 1915, Wilson lifted the ban on private bank loans to the Allies, Morgan could now begin lending money in such great amounts as to both make great profit and tie American finance closely to the interest of a British victory in the war against Germany.

Guiding Questions for Textbook: (Digital History "Overview of WWI" article)
1. What are TWO reasons that the textbook gives for why the U.S. entered the war?

2. Based on the reasons in Wilson’s 1917 speech and in the textbook, do you think the United States had good reasons for entering WWI?

Guiding Questions for Howard Zinn:
1. Sourcing: Before reading the document, what do you predict Howard Zinn will say about the United States’ reasons for entering WWI?

2. Close reading: Why does Zinn claim that Wilson made a flimsy argument?

3. Close reading: What does Zinn suggest are the real reasons the United States entered the war?

4. Close reading: What evidence does Zinn provide to support his claims that the United States was motivated by other reasons (besides German attacks on U.S. ships)?

5. Do you find Zinn’s argument convincing? Why or why not?