

Lesson Plan: Postal Censorship in the World War One Era

Focused Inquiry: How was the First Amendment comprised during World War One in the trenches and on the homefront? What was censored during World War One in terms of mail? How did the censorship of mail affect the letters' message? How did the censorship of mail affect the tone and emotions included in the letters? How did the censorship of letter affect the morale of soldiers? How did censorship affect what the Homefront knew and felt about World War One?

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Grade Span(s): 8th

Duration: 2-3 class periods, 50 minute periods each

Overview: Students are going to act as censors after they read letters from the World War One era. Students will have viewed World War One propaganda and learned about censorship. Now they will make an emotional connection by acting as the censor. Each student will be given a black sharpie and a photocopy of a World War One era letter.

Key First Amendment Concept(s) Explored: Free Speech and Freedom of Press through censorship

Materials: Students will need:

- Access to online World War One visuals of censored letters
- Two copies of World War One letters (found at the referenced links)
- Black Sharpies for all students
- Scissors

Learning Activity Sequence: How should the lesson progress? Provide steps for implementation of the activity, including an initial hook. This lesson can be facilitated as a part of any World War One unit.

The initial hook can be reading what is left of a censored letter and showing students a picture of a censored letter. It is also essential to make personal with the students by asking them what would happen if someone read and censored their online posts, snaps, tweets, texts, or emails. What would happen if someone was reading and censoring their communications? The importance of letters in the World War One era should be discussed.

Fear should be discussed. Students should be taught/ reminded that initially the censorship was to try to protect the troops so that military information would not be shared. Then the censorship extended into any information about the geography or weather, which was thought to be a threat that might expose troop location. Then the censorship extended

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into any information about the geography or weather, which was thought to be a threat that might expose troop location. Then the censorship extended into controlling any negative information about conditions and violence, as not to destroy the myth that joining the War effort overseas was a great adventure..

Students will then be told that they are going to be given the power to disregard the United States Constitution.

Remind students that they are receiving two copies of the letters, so that one remains in tact and readable. Provide students with copies of the photocopied letters from the War. Give them time to act as a censor blackening and cutting text from the letters.

After a few minutes, stop students and ask them what emotions they are feeling. Facilitate a discussion and again make sure that students are making connections to the First Amendment and being given the power to disregard it. Have students continue censoring.

Learning Activity Closure: After censoring, students need time to read what is left of the letters and to reread the original letters. Then students should meet in groups of three or four to discuss how they felt, how the censorship changed the letters, and how the censorship affected both the letter author and intended audience.

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Facilitate a whole class discussion based on the student group report outs. Try to help students make emotional connections to how it felt to disregard the First Amendment. Help students to discuss the impact on both the soldiers and the homefront. Ask students to make predictions as to whether this era impacted future interpretation of the First Amendment rights. I also had students go back and explore and research to learn more about the authors of the letters. At this point I used a simple graphic organizer, such as the one pictured below this template.

Reflection Prompt: How did acting as a censor affect your understanding and respect of the First Amendment?

Notes to Facilitator: This lesson can be used as a part of a World War One unit. When deeply exploring the First Amendment during the World War One era the Montana Sedition Project can be a particularly effective and engaging teaching tool.

References: "My Fellow Soldiers." Exhibit - My Fellow Soldiers, postalmuseum.si.edu/MyFellowSoldiers/exhibit.html - this site provides samples of World War One letters that can be used for this activity.

National Archives. "Letters from the First World War, 1915." The National Archives, The National Archives, 11 Sept. 2018,

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www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/letters-first-world-war-1915/ - this site provides samples of World War One letters that can be used for this activity.

“Not Even Past”, Censorship in Surprising Places: Uncovering the Letters of Wilfred Owen <https://notevenpast.org/censorship> - this site provides samples of World War One letter censorship.

“Jailed For Their Words”, The Montana Sediton Project, www.seditonproject.net/jailed.html - the Montana Sediton Project provides additional information about the loss of First Amendment rights during World War One.

The following two texts are grade appropriate novels which include World War One letters as a part of their plots:

- Larson, Kirby. *Hattie Big Sky*. Ember, 2013 - also includes censorship.

- Morpurgo, Michael. *Private Peaceful*. HarperCollins Children's Books, 2016.