

Activity from [Contemporary History](#) and [Foreign Policy](#)  
Activity

## Discussion Activity: Interwar Neutrality

### Learning Objectives

Students will synthesize primary source documents from the neutrality debates in the 1920s and 1930s in order to construct and defend historical arguments regarding American neutrality and the country's role in the world leading up to World War II. Use the [Primary Sources from the Interwar Neutrality Debate](#) Learning Journey to facilitate the discussion activity below.

### Length

1-2 class periods

### Instructional Plan

U.S. foreign policy in the lead-up to World War II was not only shaped by politicians and world leaders—public opinion played a key role as well. As news from around the world reached Americans, discussions were had in private and public places. These included lunch counters, where affordable meals brought together individuals from different walks of life. In that spirit, set up a lunch counter in class to discuss the Neutrality debates. Students will be assigned a role. Then, they will learn about the moment by exploring a collection of readings. Finally, they will have a discussion about an issue in character.

## Part 1: Overview and Assign Roles

### Guiding Questions:

- Is the United States better served by pursuing neutrality in world affairs or actively engaging with them
- How do vocal commitments to neutrality withstand the pressures and realities of escalating global conflict?

Have students read the overview, which will outline the historical context and forces shaping views of neutrality at the time.

Assign students their roles. In the event there are more students than roles, more than one student can play the same role. They should still participate individually, they'll just share the same assigned perspective (e.g., there could be two veterans or three farmers at the lunch counter).

### Roles:

Wealthy banker/arms manufacturer

Executive at an international shipping company

Tailor who lost most of his savings in the 1929 stock market crash

World War I Veteran  
Polish immigrant  
Spanish Civil War veteran  
Midwestern farmer  
Female writer with a university degree

Consider adding unique details to each role, or ask your students to write a short profile to give their role additional background. For example:

***Frank Wilson** is a tailor living in Chicago with his wife and three young children. The Wilsons were financially stable before Frank lost most of his savings in the 1929 stock market crash. In addition, he has lost many clients since the start of the Great Depression. Struggling economically, the Wilsons have had to reduce spending and move into a much smaller apartment. Jack has a middle school education and reads the newspaper regularly.*

## Part 2: Primary Source Gallery Walk

Put students into groups. Spread the documents around the room and assign each group to one or more documents. Students should read the document together and answer the following questions:

- Who is the author of the document? What do we know about them?
- When and where was the document produced?
- What insight does this document give about the lunch counter discussion question?
- What insight does this document give about my assigned role?
- What questions does this document raise that you'd like answered?

Once students have examined their primary sources, have groups briefly share out one or two key insights from their documents. This ensures all students have exposure to all sources, not just the ones their group analyzed.

## Part 3: The Lunch Counter Discussion

For homework, have students write a short position paper in the voice of their assigned role, reflecting their character's perspective. They should write persuasively, using evidence and reasoning, as if writing an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Have students make placards that indicate their role. At the start of the discussion, ask them to briefly introduce themselves in their role to set the scene. (Optionally, students could bring props or even arrive in costume.)

Conduct the lunch counter discussion in class. Introduce the exercise with a brief scene-setter:

*It is September 4th, 1939. During your midday lunch break, you have gathered at the neighborhood lunch counter for a simple, inexpensive meal. Today, the conversation is heated and centers on the outbreak of war in Western Europe. Under Adolf Hitler's leadership, Germany invaded Poland three days ago. In response, Britain and France declared war on Germany yesterday. Since 1935, the United States has adopted a policy of strict neutrality toward the situation in Europe. Now, the discussion focuses on what the right path forward is for the United States. Each of you has your own opinions, shaped by your own experiences and circumstances. Join the discussion and share what you make of the neutrality debates in the outbreak of World War II.*

Once students are ready to begin discussion, consider the following questions:

- What are the pros and cons of rigid neutrality laws versus a more flexible policy?
- Are U.S. interests best promoted abroad by working alone or collaborating with other countries?
- Is remaining truly neutral possible in this context?

Whenever necessary, push students to provide evidence and reasoning for their comments.

*Consider recording the class or using a transcription app to help with giving feedback and assessment.*

Leave time at the end of the discussion for a debrief in which students can step outside their roles and reflect on what they learned. Optionally, consider also assigning students a short reflection paper in their own voice.

Consider the following questions:

- In the discussion, what seemed to be the most important points of agreement and disagreement?
- What made this a controversial issue? In other words, why did people disagree about it?
- How do you think the United States should have acted in the leadup to World War II?