

# TEACHING WITH FILM: 1917

**Recommended Grade Level: 9-12, Adult Learners**

**Format: Article, Video, Primary Source**

The Academy Award-nominated *1917* is loosely built on the family stories of director Sam Mendes. While incorporating extensive research to stunningly portray fighting and living conditions in the trenches and on the battlefield, the film follows a fictitious narrative of two British soldiers racing through the horrors of No Man's Land to warn their comrades of an enemy ambush.

## Assignment: Real vs. Reel

At the [National WWI Museum and Memorial](#), we regularly receive inquiries on a film's historical accuracy. Have your students do the real-life history work of a museum educator to specifically look at the depictions of trenches within the film and compare/contrast with primary source photos, oral history and gallery information from the Museum and Memorial's collection. The following is just a portion of the resources a museum educator might use to provide historical analysis on the film. Students can find more on the online collections database.

Have students, in either a written paragraph or in an audio recording, provide analysis of the similarities and differences (or the historic accuracies and inaccuracies) of the film's depiction of trenches in World War I.

Film clips: <a href="#">Official Trailer</a> <a href="#">Mission</a> <a href="#">Wilco's Ear</a> <a href="#">Dogfight</a>	<i>1917</i>   360 Trench Experience (VR) best experienced on a mobile device <a href="https://intothetrenches.1917.movie/">https://intothetrenches.1917.movie/</a>  Full Film, to be released
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## National WWI Museum and Memorial Sources

### Source 1: Trench Map, Primary Source

German map in Beaumont Nord area: [2008.117.4](#)

Cantigny, France trench map: [1992.76.16](#)

Meuse-Argonne Offensive trench map: [2018.79.10](#)

### Source 2:

[Google Arts and Culture, Trenches of World War I: An Immersive Tour](#)

### Source 3: Oral History, Primary Source

[Robert Sweeney, 317th Sanitary Train, 92nd Division, AEF](#) (catalog and transcript [here](#))

[William Knox, 366th Ambulance Company, 92nd Division, AEF](#) (catalog and transcript [here](#))

### Source 4: Photographs, Primary Source

Soldier in Trench Writing Home, Raemaekers: [1983.120.41](#)

Trenches. Malbrooch Hill: [2005.121.24](#)

Trenches: [1985.210.48](#)



Dawn in the Trenches near Berry au Bac: [1977.20.28n](#)  
Trenches near Chateau-Thierry and shell holes: [1983.122.32](#)  
Stereoscope card of troops digging trenches: [2009.105.30](#)  
Soldiers digging trenches: [1982.254.1](#)  
Aerial photograph of trenches Vinaigrier, France: [1976.227.236](#)  
Aerial photograph: [2005.74.37.96](#)  
Trenches near Luippes (Marne): [1990.53.56](#)  
Enemy Wire Entanglement Attacked From German Trenches: [1999.20.276](#)  
French soliders in a covered trench: [2016.56.11](#)  
French Front Line Trenches: [1987.129.62](#)  
German soldiers posing in the trenches: [1940.1.13](#)

#### Source 5: Letter about the Trenches, Primary Source

Elisabeth and Hans Culemeyer of Peine, Germany, Nov. 1914-June 1915: [2014.27.66](#)  
Ned Henschel, July 19, 1917: [1996.51.136AU](#) & [Oct 9, 1918: 1996.51.136DN](#)  
Walter Shaw to his mother, February 12, 1918: [1982.83.57a](#)

#### Teacher Resources, Interviews with the Senior Curator of the National WWI Museum and Memorial:

Articles:

- [Smithsonian Magazine, The True History Behind the '1917' Movie](#)
- [TIME Magazine, The Real World War I History Behind the Movie 1917](#)
- [Esquire Magazine, 1917 Is Based on a Harrowing True WWI Story From Director Sam Mendes's Grandfather](#)
- [The Kansas City Star, '1917' racks up film awards, but what do experts at Kansas City's WWI Museum think?](#)

Podcast:

- [Based on a True Story, 1917 with Doran Cart \(57:07\)](#)

#### Additional Questions on Primary Sources

1. Compare the experiences of trench warfare on the Western Front. Which army (or armies) had the “best” trenches? Which army (or armies) had the “worst” trenches? Justify your answer.
2. In the trailer, Colonel MacKenzie (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) says “there is only one way this ends—last man standing.”
  - Think of how this quote illustrates the battlefield and soldiers. How is this perception of battle similar (or different) from those heard in the Museum and Memorial’s oral histories?
  - Do you think fighting until “the last man standing” was necessary for soldiers to win battles? Why or why not?
3. Compare the description of trench life in [Wilco's Ear](#) to [William Knox's](#) account. Do you find Wilco’s story to be feasible?
4. When reading the Culmeyer letters and looking at the photographs and maps of trenches, how realistic do you find the film’s depiction of trenches? List three examples from the primary sources that you see in the film.

## Additional ELA Questions

1. In the trailer, Colonel MacKenzie (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) also says “I had hoped today would be a good day. Hope is a dangerous thing.”
  - View the three film clips—create a list of 2-3 hopes you see portrayed in each scene. What different hopes did you find? Is there anything that is hoped for in every clip? How could these hopes be “dangerous”?
  - Do you agree with MacKenzie’s quote?
2. Consider all that happens in the [Dogfight](#) clip. Which of MacKenzie’s two quotes rings most true for this scene and why?