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NCTE and the English Curriculum during World War II

"We need to make...changes, and individually we will perform special wartime duties; but the initial message from outstanding college teachers is that we must do the job for which we are trained: help others to realize the power that emanates from great literature to live humanely in the midst of conflict."

From College Journal, "English in Wartime" (1942)

World War II had an immediate, tangible effect on the U.S. educational system. With both teachers and students being among millions of Americans drafted, there was a diminished college population. But the war was also a driving force for many intangible changes. In particular, educators needed to change their curriculum to better reflect the needs and challenges in this new environment.

For NCTE, this meant thinking about the discipline of English and its role in supporting the war effort. According to J.N. Hook in *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's First Sixty-Seven Years*, "the Council reacted immediately to the state of war by creating a Planning Commission" (1979, p. 133). It tackled the basic, yet weighty questions posed by the war: "Can the teaching of English in American...schools remain unchanged by our entrance into World War II? And should it? If not, how should it be changed?" (p. 133).

The Planning Commission determined that while the basics of English should remain the same, certain aspects of the subject had more significance during wartime. After all, English was a valuable discipline to the war effort's communication needs. Marion Sheridan, NCTE Executive Board member, pointed out that English played a vital role in democracy:

"A democracy depends upon the use of words, upon the ability to understand and to discuss questions of freedom, liberty, labor; upon the ability to trace the course of thought and to detect specious argument.... Literature is a storehouse of the experiences of mankind.... Its peace and serenity may give balance and a sense of normalcy, and fortitude, when total war dominates the situation." (qtd. in Hook, p. 135)

To help English teachers fulfill the discipline's role during this dire time, NCTE published a series of pamphlets to guide them in thinking about how the war affected their curriculum. In addition, the journals *College English* and the *English Journal* regularly featured articles and letters about the special challenges teachers faced. To learn more about NCTE's role in World War II, take a look at the featured records below.

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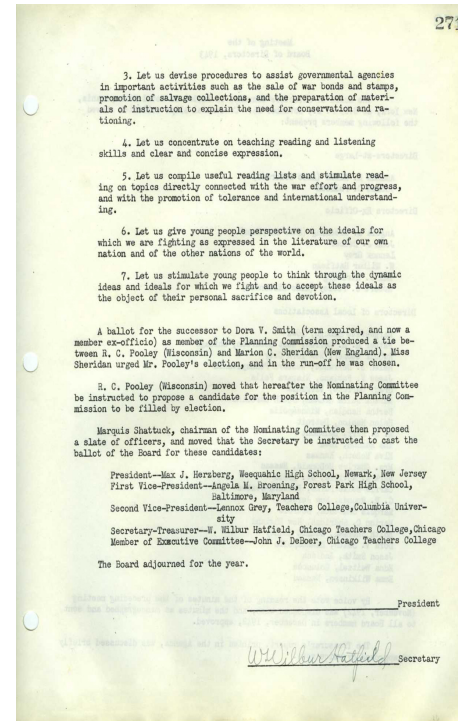
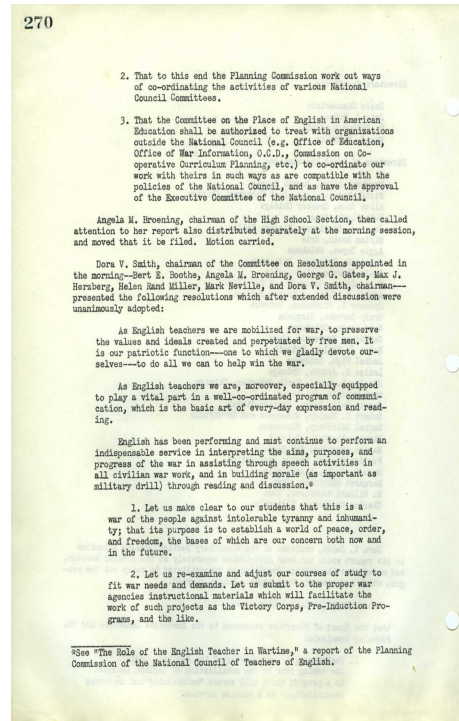
[What Communication Means Today](#)

Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, November 1942

In November 1942, NCTE held its annual board meeting, its first since the United States declared war on the Axis powers. The minutes record a series of resolutions affirming the Council's devotion to supporting the war effort. The resolutions consisted of seven main points, the first of which emphasized the grave threat the country was facing and what was at stake: "Let us make clear to our students that this is a war of the people against intolerable tyranny and inhumanity; that its purpose is to establish a world of peace, order, and freedom, the bases of which are our concern both now and in the future."

Item: Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting (1942)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/70/001](#)



Pages of the resolutions passed by NCTE during its annual board meeting in 1942.

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The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime

The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime was the result of the Planning Commission's work on determining if the English curriculum should be changed because of the war. They determined that while the basics should remain the same, "especial caution is needed to conserve those aesthetic and recreational values in English which are necessary to continuing culture, to personal growth and satisfaction, and to the maintenance of sanity and perspective during wartime." The Council also stressed the importance of maintaining all tenets of democracy, including "international good will," to avoid the danger of intolerance and hatred.

Item: Copy of *The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime*(1942)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: **15/73/803**

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER IN WARTIME

[At an emergency meeting held during the Christmas holidays the Planning Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, along with more than twenty other Council leaders, studied the role of the Council and of the teacher of English in the present war emergency. Problems of promoting Council growth and of improving the effectiveness of Council activities at this time were considered by separate committees. Of greatest immediate interest, however, is the report of the subcommittee on the role of the teacher of English in wartime, which is here presented in full. It is of interest to note that the report, which was approved by the Council's Executive Committee, was the product of genuine group thinking and was unanimously adopted by the conference.]

Whole or part of this report may be reproduced in any manner without special permission.

Although the statement of "Basic Aims of Instruction in English" recently produced by the National Council of Teachers of English is obviously as important for times of war as for times of peace, it seems wise, in view of the present emergency, to select for particular emphasis at the moment certain aspects of the program which have special significance for the current scene.

As teachers of English, we recognize that we have a specific contribution to make toward winning the war and insuring the victory of democratic ideals.

I. Through reading and discussion we can help young people to sense what it is that America is fighting for by developing an understanding of democratic ideals and by stimulating devotion to them.

a) These ideals include a respect for the dignity and worth of the individual and a broad sensitivity to human beings and to their needs and aspirations.

b) They are concerned with the basic principles of the Bill of Rights, such as freedom of person and of religion, freedom of speech and of the press, the right of assembly and of petition, equality before the law, the privilege of trial by jury, and the right to vote.

c) As teachers of literature, we are conscious of the fact that America's fight for democratic principles is but one part of mankind's long struggle for freedom. For that reason we wish to utilize materials which present that struggle as revealed at Thermopylae, in Magna Carta, in the French Revolution, in Russia, in South America, and in other lands and times, as well as in our own nation and in our own era. By such a presentation we hope to achieve that perspective without which the individual finds himself overwhelmed emotionally and intellectually in the current disaster.

d) We conceive it as part of our obligation to stress international good will as a major tenet of democracy, stimulating a knowledge of, and a respect for, the cultures of all nations that will share with America in the establishment of the peace. By so doing, we shall hope to avoid the dangers of the present crisis, such as a glorification of war per se, hatred of the common people of other nations, distrust of minority groups in the United States who are descended from peoples of enemy countries, and an attitude of blind patriotism which leads to selfishness, self-sufficiency, and separatism after the war is over. Substitution of positive attitudes of mutual understanding can be accomplished through the right choice of materials for reading and through wise guidance in topics for discussion.

e) As teachers of English, we can develop those skills essential to participation in democratic life (1) through classroom practice in group thinking and decision, (2) through teaching the techniques of public and panel discussion, and (3) through emphasis upon the need for precision and honesty in the use of language in reading and reporting and in the expression of ideas in speech and writing.

f) In this connection we recognize the unique importance of the newspaper, the magazine, the radio, and the motion picture and will assist boys and girls in the discriminating use of them.

II. In the teaching of English we are in a position to promote national unity (1) through the democratic integration of diverse cultural groups, (2) through recognition of the unique contribution of each to our national culture, and (3) through emphasis upon the contribution which America has made to each of them.

a) Since language is an important element in unifying a people, we recommend that all elementary and secondary schools use English as the language of basic instruction. At the same time, we recognize the

desirability of continuing instruction in foreign languages and retaining skill in the use of them.

b) We seek to unify the entire Western Hemisphere by promoting greater understanding and appreciation of the culture and ideals of Central and South America and closer cultural association with Canada.

c) In the development of democratic unity we aim to recognize the rights and contributions of minorities in this country as well as those of majorities, especially of the Negro, the Semitic peoples, and those loyal aliens who may be under suspicion at the moment because of descent from enemy nations.

d) At the same time, we seek to promote through the study of literature a sense of unity among the various sections of our country and among the various social and economic groups represented in our national life.

e) A considerable proportion of the literature to be taught in the schools shall be chosen with its suitability for these purposes in mind. Some of it has been taught for many years. Some of it will need reorienting in terms of the present scene. Other materials must be sought out and brought into the schools. Two types of presentation of the democratic ideal are available. One is patriotic literature as such, which *proclaims* the principles of democracy and arouses emotional response to them. The other, even more important, is illustrative of life under democratic conditions or of individuals struggling with fortitude to maintain a democratic way of life. It aims to *interpret* rather than to *proclaim*. Some materials will give positive evidence of the incorporation of such ideals into the lives of individuals and of homes and communities. Others will reveal violations of the same principles. So far as possible, the positive presentation is preferable.

f) In classes in both literature and expression it is important that we help young people to understand the function of criticism in wartime and the seeming contradiction between the necessity for taking orders in an emergency and the assumption of critical attitudes basic to training for the peace.

III. The teaching of English in wartime will concern itself also with the needs of the individual for social and personal adjustment.

a) It will develop those linguistic skills essential to the carrying-out of democratic principles in daily living. It will promote that power of language requisite to securing, weighing, and exchanging

ideas together with a clear recognition of the emotional connotation and exact denotation of words, which is powerful in establishing attitudes.

b) In the expressional phases of English, discussion of personal and social problems contingent upon the present war will be encouraged, and problems of mental hygiene kept constantly in mind. Among these is the personal adjustment of individual boys and girls to the tension in family life due to anxiety about the war. Attitudes of fortitude can be engendered through reading and discussion, and emotional preparation for the shocks of war may be promoted.

c) A major purpose of such reading and discussion will be to develop a long view of the problems confronting the present in an effort to preserve sanity and perspective and to provide the relief which comes from seeing the present conflict in relation to past events.

d) Creative expression will also be fostered as an outlet for the emotions and as a means of reflection upon and synthesis of the experiences which young people are facing.

IV. As teachers of English, we recognize that continuing emphasis upon all the aims presented in the report of the Basic Aims Committee of the National Council is important in wartime and that, so far as possible, all the normal experiences in language and in reading outlined in it should be maintained, for young people are being educated at the moment for the peace as well as for the war. Especial caution is needed to conserve those aesthetic and recreational values in English which are necessary to continuing culture, to personal growth and satisfaction, and to the maintenance of sanity and perspective during wartime.¹

¹ The report of the Basic Aims Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English may be found in the *English Journal* for January, 1942. It is also available in separate pamphlet form for ten cents from the Council Office at 21 West Sixty-eighth Street, Chicago, Illinois.

A crucial document for guiding teachers during World War II, NCTE encouraged the wide dissemination of the ideas expressed in this four-page pamphlet, *The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime*, by allowing anyone to reproduce it in its entirety.

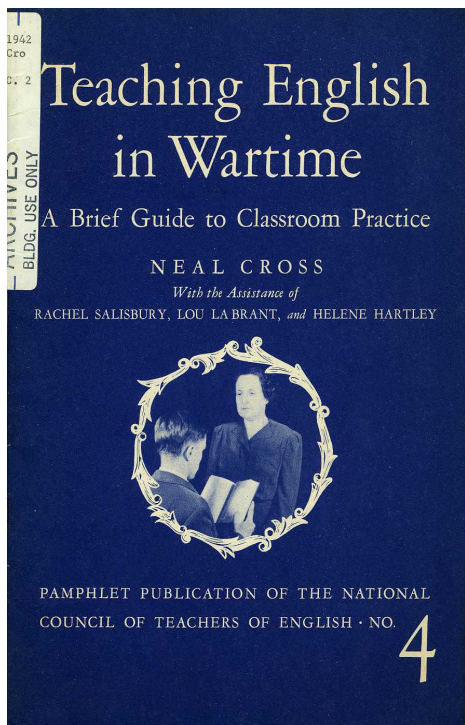
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Teaching English in Wartime: A Brief Guide to Classroom Practice

To further guide teachers, NCTE published *Teaching English in Wartime: A Brief Guide to Classroom Practice*. Authored by Neal Cross, member of the Planning Commission, this pamphlet addressed the question of how teachers can adapt their curriculum to the war. The Council again emphasized the importance of international relations and understanding foreign cultures. One of the most prominent concerns, however, was how to instill a devotion to democracy in students.

Item: Copy of *Teaching English in Wartime: A Brief Guide to Classroom Practice* (1942)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/71/809](#)



PUBLICATIONS OF
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Issued by special committees and individual members of the National Council of Teachers of English under the direction of the Publications Committee

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ENGLISH MONOGRAPH No. 13, Nellie Appy, *Committee Chairman*
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PAMPHLET PUBLICATIONS

1. PITFALLS FOR READERS OF FICTION, Hazel Sample
2. WE BUILT TOGETHER: A READER'S GUIDE TO NEGRO LIFE AND LITERATURE,
Charlene Rollins
3. BASIC AIMS FOR ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, Doris V. Smith, *Committee Chairman*
4. TEACHING ENGLISH IN WARTIME: A BRIEF GUIDE TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE, Neal
Cross, *Committee Chairman*

*Out of print.

TEACHING ENGLISH IN WARTIME*

Teachers of English in this time of war must re-examine their aims and materials in order to do better the things which they have been trying to do all the time. The skills of reading, speaking, writing, and hearing are more important now than they have ever been. The education of our children for life in a democracy and the understanding of the culture of foreign nations are important parts of our program now if we are to win the peace as well as the war. English teachers need to be keenly aware of these aims, especially in these times.

I. HOW CAN WE HELP YOUNG PEOPLE TO REALIZE WHAT
IT IS THAT AMERICA IS FIGHTING FOR?

This question must dominate the whole of English instruction. Many of the literary selections ordinarily taught can be pointed to develop an understanding of democratic ideals and to stimulate devotion to those ideals.

We need to examine our anthologies and other teaching materials for reading selections which may be applied to this purpose. For example, Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" can be used to illustrate the principles which underlie any peace program, for it stresses the necessity for human understanding. Its characters are common people. In discussing the poem, we might ask such questions as: What is it that doesn't love a wall? Why does Frost speak of gaps where "Two men can walk abreast"? Why does he use the symbol of the "old stone sarge arm'd" in describing his neighbor? What is the significance of the lines, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know What I was walling in or walling out"?

This kind of emphasis upon human relations and the principles of democracy can be emphasized in presenting many of the selections

*The reader is referred also to the Council's new publication, *Speak, Look, Listen!*, which discusses the use of visual aids in the emergency, and the new pamphlet on discussion techniques prepared by the Council's Committee on Language Communication.

[1]

14. BROWN, STERLING A. (ed.), *The Negro Caravan*.
A thousand pages of the best imaginative literature written by American Negroes reflect the pathos of an oppressed people and the courage of men who have led a slow march toward freedom.
15. LORD BYRON, *Childe Harold*, Canto III.
A recital in verse of the successive efforts of the Greeks, from ancient to modern times, to gain and guard their liberty and to build a great civilization.
16. DOS PASSOS, JOHN, the biographical sketches in *U.S.A.*
Interspersed in the narrative of Dos Passos' trilogy are vivid and thoroughly readable prose poems about such great democratic and intellectual leaders as the elder La Follette and Thorstein Veblen.
17. SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM, *Julius Caesar*.
This familiar play has been taught as the story of the assassination of the original Roman Fascist leader by an idealist and friend of the people.
18. SHOLOKHOV, MIKHAIL, *And Quiet Flows the Don*.
A great trilogy on the efforts of the Russian people to achieve freedom after World War I. The story is told with poise and vigor, giving an intimate picture of the peasants.

Further explorations should be made among the biographies of such popular heroes as Bolivar, Garibaldi, and Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the work of such poets as Whittier, Whitman, Sandburg, and Rukeyser.

d) UNDERSTANDING OF PEOPLES OF OTHER NATIONALITIES
EITHER IN THIS COUNTRY OR ABROAD

The attainment of this goal is of sufficient importance to merit an entirely new course or an exceedingly important unit in present literature courses. A world-literature course especially prepared to meet the needs of a particular community is that submitted by Miss McKibben of Amsterdam, Ohio.

Amsterdam is a coal or "feeder" town to the steel city of Steubenville, Ohio. The workers in the mine come from nine European countries. Eight of every ten pupils in the school are of foreign-born parents or of foreign birth themselves. The course is one in twelfth-

[6]

grade general reading. Its three aims are to build a real appreciation of the joy of reading, to create pride in the country from which these children or their parents come and a better understanding of the ideals and customs of the country to which they have come, and to serve as a discussion ground for the difficulties which arise from the amalgamation process.

The plan of the course is to use the first semester for an extensive study of the literature, music, and art of thirteen European countries. During the second semester the amalgamation and assimilation of immigrants in this country are studied. During the first six weeks of the first semester England, Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands are considered. The second six weeks are devoted to France, Spain, and Italy. The third cover the countries of Middle Europe, Russia, and Germany.

Monday of each week is devoted to an introduction to a country politically and historically, with reference to outstanding men in literature, music, and art. The playing of musical recordings and looking at pictures of the country under consideration occupy Tuesday and Wednesday. Miss McKibben notes that books from which the teacher reads to the class are made easily accessible to the students, and as a rule are immediately borrowed and read extensively. Friday is given over to class reports on reading and to a general summary of the week's work. While it is planned that each country will be considered for a week, it is possible to extend the time if the study proves sufficiently interesting.⁴

The second semester is concerned with the study of the amalgamation and assimilation of immigrants in this country. During the first six weeks such books as *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1912), Heyrick's *Americans All* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1920), and others are read. During the same six weeks this class will also study the influence of foreign countries upon our art, music, and literature, using such selections as Washington Irving's sketch of the Alhambra and Willa Cather's French colonial novels as reading materials.

The second six weeks are devoted to the study of sectional United

⁴ See also Harold A. Anderson et al., *Instruction in English in the University High School* ("Publications of the Laboratory School," No. 9 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1941), pp. 97-108.

[7]

The cover and pages from *The Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter*. The introduction discusses the importance of teaching democracy in the classrooms, while pages six and seven address the importance of learning about the international community.

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The Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter

To stress the importance of English during World War II, NCTE published numerous pamphlets informing teachers and students on how the war affects English education. The pamphlet, *The Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter: A Reading List for Young People*, focused on what readings would help junior high students understand the problems and issues brought up by Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech and by the Atlantic Charter. NCTE hoped that through these recommended books, students would understand the significance of the war and the challenges that await after the war.

Item: Copy of *The Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter* (1943)

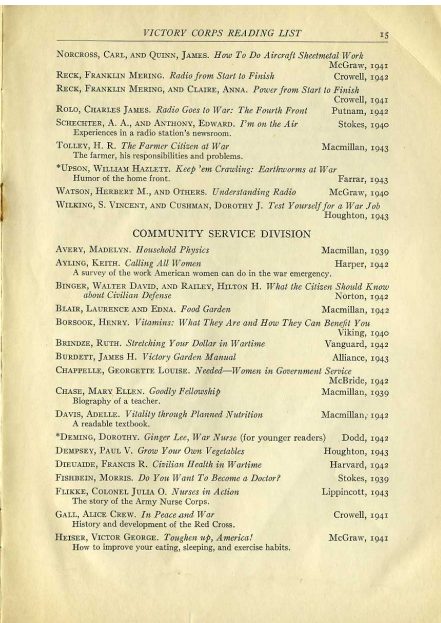
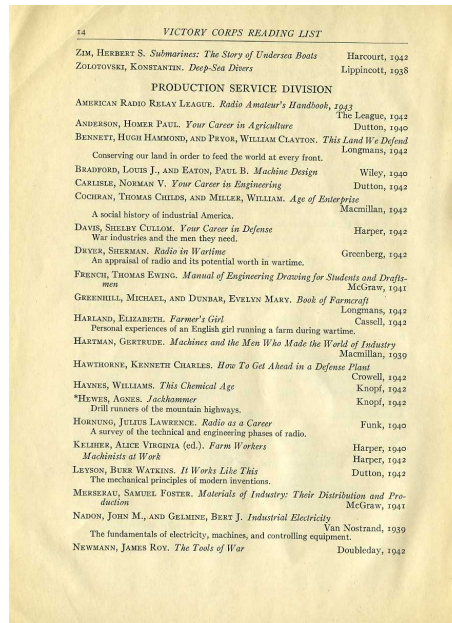
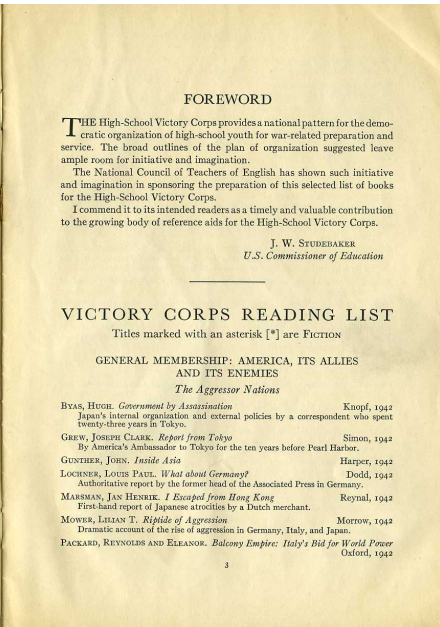
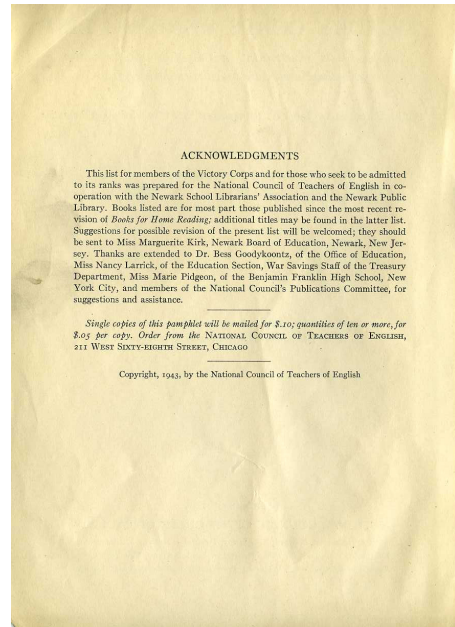
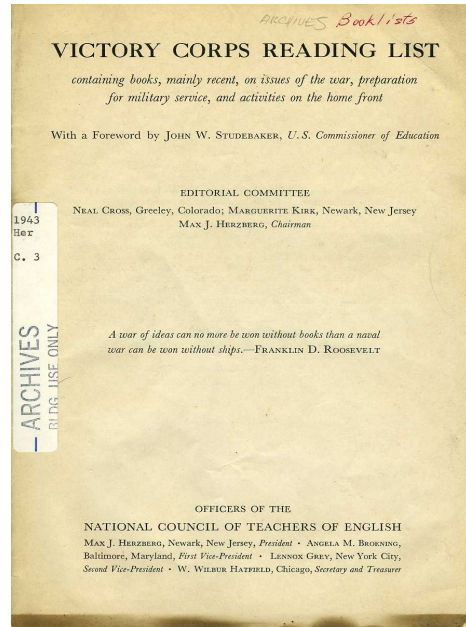
To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/71/824](#)

Victory Corps Reading List

Another pamphlet the Council published was the *Victory Corps Reading List*, which provided book recommendations for members of the High-School Victory Corps. The reading list was divided into categories related to different aspects of the war, including America's allies and enemies, food production, and community service. The U.S. Commissioner of Education, J.W. Studebaker, praised NCTE for its "initiative and imagination in sponsoring" the list.

Item: Copy of *Victory Corps Reading List* (1943)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/71/824](#)



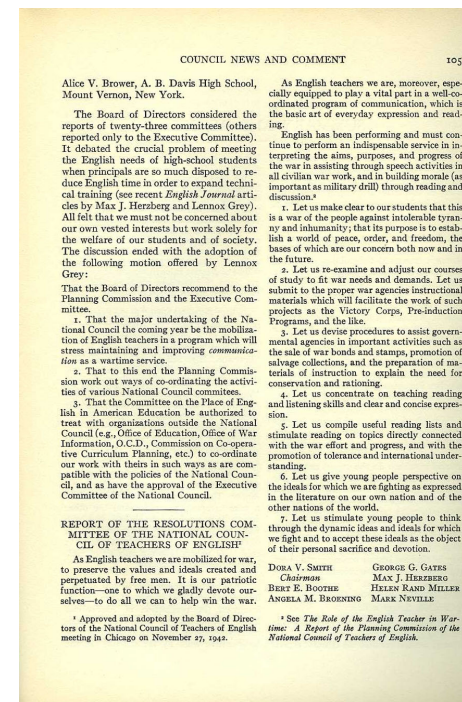
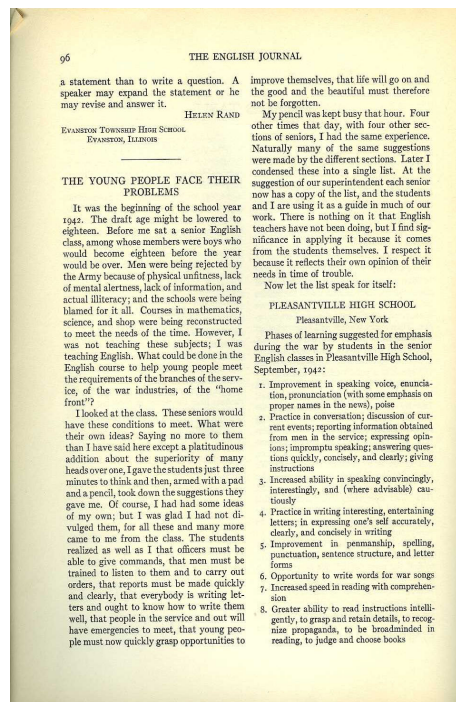
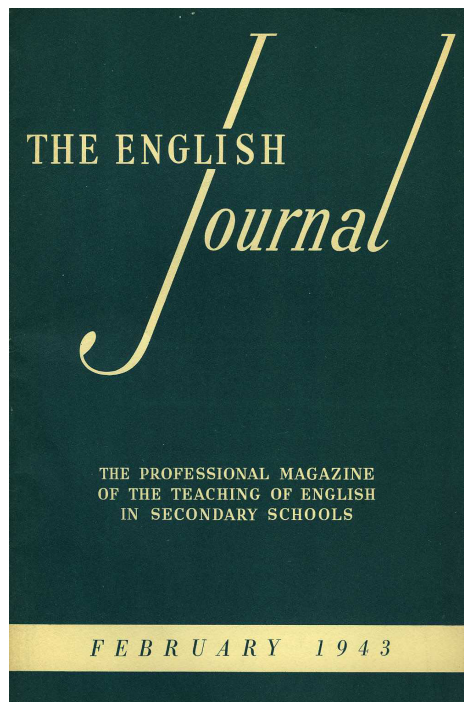
The cover and pages from *Victory Corps Reading List*. The foreword and acknowledgement explained the partnership between NCTE and the Victory Corps. Pages 14 and 15 illustrate how suggested readings were annotated and the different types of subjects.

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Throughout the war, *The English Journal* published articles on how the change from peacetime to wartime affected English education. The article entitled "The Council Meets in Wartime" in the February 1943 issue discussed the annual NCTE meeting where along with usual business, the Council also had to make critical decisions regarding English's place in the war. Not only did the Council pass measures recommended by the Resolutions Committee to help with the war effort, but the *English Journal* published letters from teachers illustrating how the war affected students and their learning needs.

Item: Copy of *English Journal*(1943)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/71/801



The cover and pages from the February 1943 edition of *English Journal*. It included the list of resolutions passed and a letter from a teacher sharing what her students wanted to learn in this new environment.

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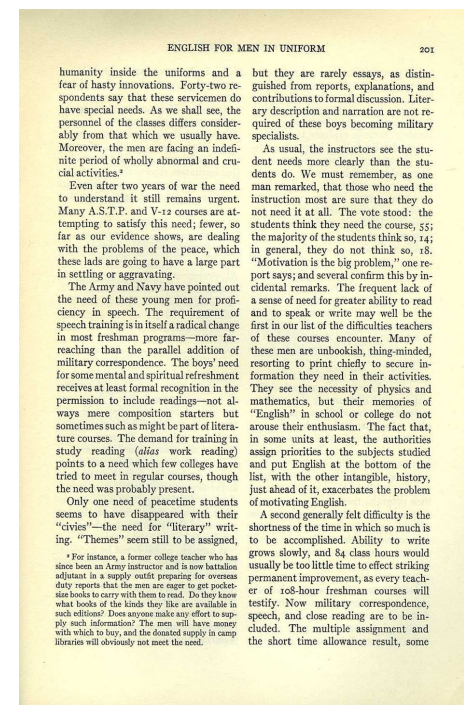
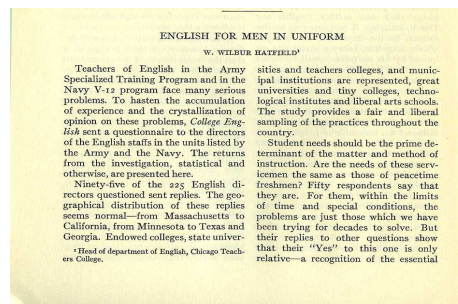
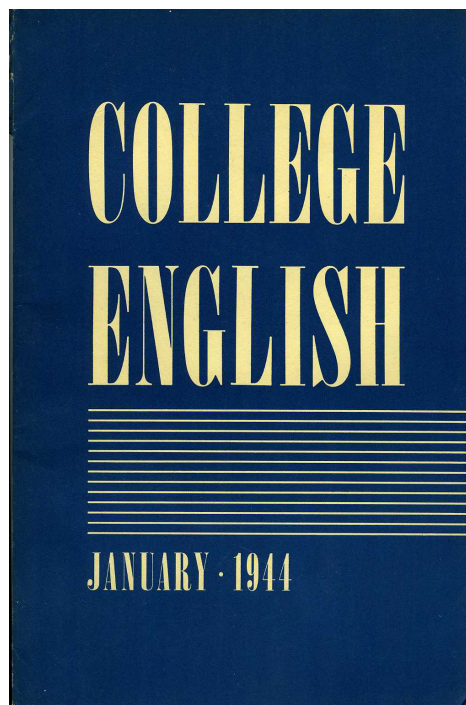
College English

College English was especially focused on the war. At the college level, students and their teachers were eligible to be drafted. In the February 1942 issue, the article "English in Wartime: A Symposium by College Teachers" discussed the specific challenges and changes the war would bring to the English curriculum and what must stay the same. In an article in the January 1944 edition, W. Wilbur Hatfield examined the learning needs

of soldiers, drawing upon the results from an NCTE survey sent to the directors of English staff in the Army and Navy.

Item: Copy of *College English* (1944)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: **15/71/802**



Two pages from W. Wilbur Hatfield's article, "English for Men in Uniform," which appeared in the January 1944 edition of *College English*. Hatfield investigated the educational needs of soldiers.

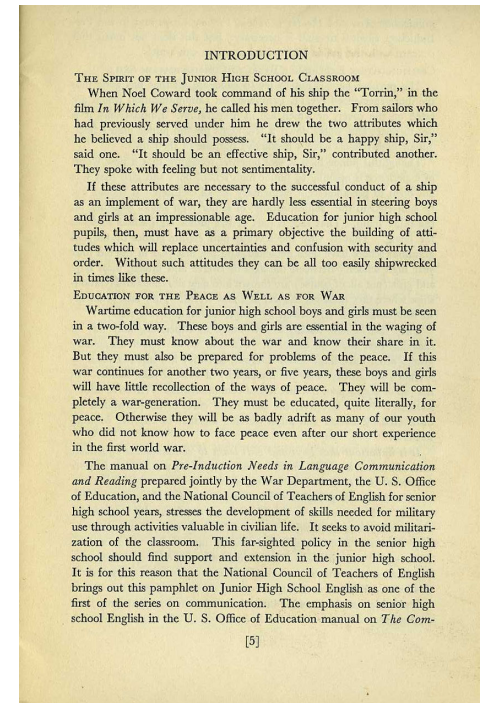
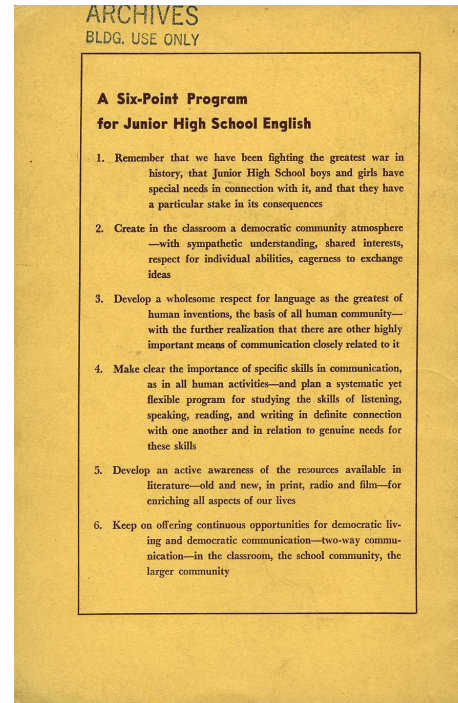
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Junior High School English

College and high school students were not the only ones whose needs the Council addressed during this time. *Junior High School English*, prepared by the Committee on Junior High English in Time of War, focused on younger students and their role in the war. They created a "six-point program" for teachers, the first point declaring "Remember we have been fighting the greatest war in history, that Junior boys and girls have special needs in connection with it, and that they have a special stake in its consequences." The Council was not solely focused on the war, however, acknowledging that educating students about life during peace was just as important for this generation so accustomed to war.

Item: Copy of *Junior High School English* (1944)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/73/803](#)



The front cover, back cover and introduction of *Junior High School English*. The book cover listed the "six-point program." The introduction emphasized the needs for instruction in both peace and war.

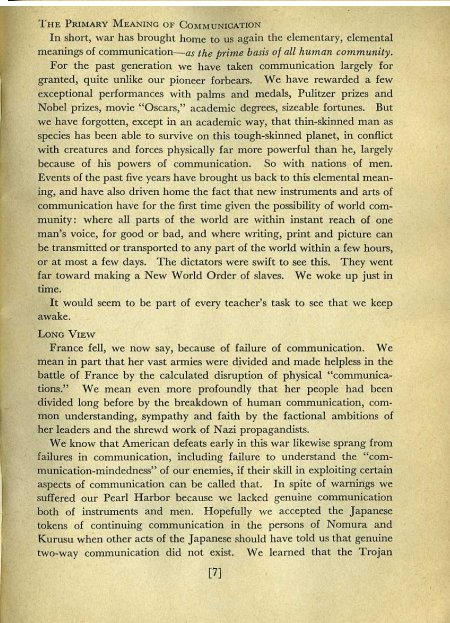
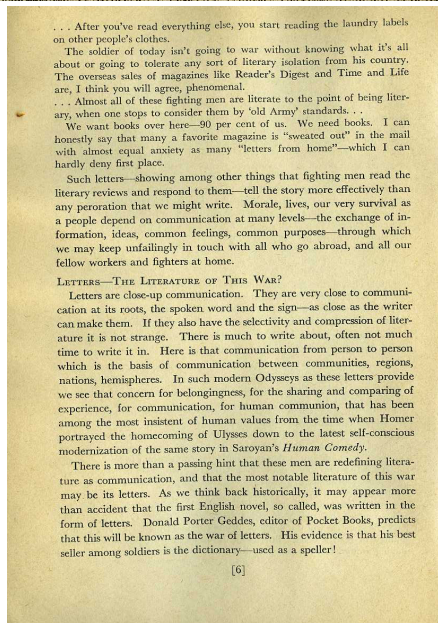
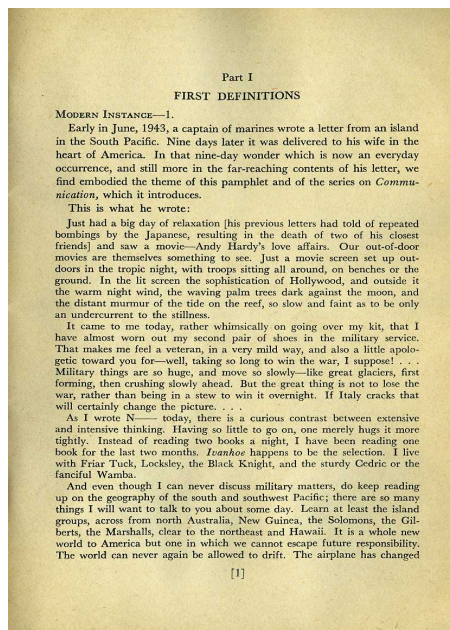
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What Communication Means Today

"This will be known as the war of letters," said Donald Porter Geddes, quoted in *What Communication Means Today* by Lennox Grey. This book served to educate readers on the importance of communication during World War II. The author shared numerous anecdotes of soldiers writing back home and of communication errors that caused defeats in the battlefield. In addition, Grey quoted a soldier, stating that "Almost all of these fighting men are literate to the point of being literary.... We want books over here – 90 percent of us. We need books." The author pointed out that communication also facilitates propaganda. As with how the Council acknowledged that the English curriculum must change to adapt to war, this book defined the changing nature of communication during World War II.

Item: Copy of *What Communication Means Today* (1944)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/71/824](#)



The cover and pages of *What Communication Means Today*. The introduction began with a letter from a soldier fighting overseas. Pages six and seven explained the many ways communication had affected the war thus far.

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