

# Memorial Inquiry

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## **Purpose:**

Because memorials often serve as either official or vernacular representation of war and military veterans, we will begin exploring the question of veteran identity by inquiring into why some memorials are designated “veteran” memorials and others are “war” memorials. To do this, students will visit a local veteran’s memorial or a war memorial and consider why the memorial is dedicated to the war or to veterans or if it commemorates something else, such as a specific battle or “soldiers” instead of veterans. They will consider how the memorial represents and remembers veterans and/or the war. Students will describe and analyze both the memorial itself and the space in which the memorial exists and share this with the class.

## **Learning Objectives:**

After completing the readings and participating in the activities, students will be able to

- Follow a process of inquiry
- Conduct and reflect on site studies
- Analyze a memorial
- Identify key memorial elements that distinguish, or attempt to differentiate, a war memorial from a veteran memorial

## **Exploratory Questions:**

What happens when we dedicate a memorial to veterans, to a war, to the dead? Are these oppositional? Cooperative? Are their intentions and reception the same, no matter what their name? What do you expect from a veterans memorial? From a war memorial? What might be some distinctions between the two?

**Readings:** Professors will want to consider whether or not to assign readings before or after students visit memorial sites. I recommend assigning readings from Piehler *after* the site studies to truly promote inquiry and to avoid student proclivity toward finding “correct” answers or analyses.

1. Piehler, Kurt G. *Remembering War the American Way*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1995.
2. Watch the video “Introduction to The Vietnam Veterans Memorial” from the National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/vive/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>
3. Read about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial controversy here: <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/r5/>
4. Explore photographs of National World War II Memorial website: <https://www.nps.gov/wwii/learn/index.htm>  
<https://www.nps.gov/wwii/learn/historyculture/index.htm>
5. And read about the inscription controversy here: <https://www.nps.gov/wwii/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>

### **Questions to consider when visiting memorials:**

Note, professors and students should expand and adapt the following questions. The following questions are intentionally *not* comprehensive in order to encourage localized classroom/community development.

- Consider why this is a “veteran’s” memorial or a “war” memorial.
- Take historical and cultural contexts into consideration. When was the memorial dedicated? When was the war or conflict? What group(s) or individual does the memorial commemorate?
- Does the memorial meet your expectations of a veteran’s memorial or a war memorial?
- How does it memorialize its particular war or group?
- What does the memorial space look like?
  - How do you define that space? What are the boundaries?
  - What kind of space is it? A park? Roadside?
  - Where is the memorial located? What part of town?
  - Is the memorial prominent? Easy to locate and see?
- What does the memorial look like?
  - Materials? Color? Dimensions?
  - Is the memorial abstract, sculptural, a list of names, etc.?
  - Does it seem to contain symbolism or distinct cultural values?
  - Are there any elements of the memorial that some visitors might find controversial?
  - How does the memorial represent the war or the veterans?
  - Does it focus on the living or the dead? Both? An individual?

### **Sharing:**

Means of sharing will vary by professor—these may be reflective papers, formal essays, multimodal presentations, class discussion, etc.

- Students will describe the memorial’s form and content in addition sharing their overall impression of the memorial. They will analyze which elements of the memorial make it, as designated, either a veteran’s memorial or a war memorial and explain why it is one or the other. Finally, students should reflect on the historical and cultural contexts of the memorial in addition to memory (at least as covered by Piehler).