



**OwlTeacher**  
**Teaching with Movies & Literature**

**LAWRENCE OF ARABIA**

**Good for the following school subjects:**

- ✓ World History
- ✓ Great Britain/English History
- ✓ Middle East Studies
- ✓ World War 1

Directed by David Lean  
1962; Rated PG (some graphic war violence); Drama; 221 minutes; Color;  
Available from [www.OwlTeacher.com](http://www.OwlTeacher.com) bookstore

**Synopsis:** This is a fictional account of the legendary British Intelligence officer, T. E. Lawrence (1888 – 1935). During the First World War, Lawrence operated behind enemy lines and prompted an Arab uprising against the Turks. This movie is only useful so long as you focus your students on the wider themes, such as the Arabs in the context of World War One. Make sure students understand that while T.E. Lawrence did exist and was a British Intelligence Officer in the Middle East, he was not actually present at the Arab attack on the Turks. The film itself does not claim to be completely historically accurate. At the very end of the film, there is this disclaimer which many people don't even read:

*"This story is based upon actual events, however, some of the characters and incidents portrayed and the names herein are fictitious, and any similarity to the name, character, or history of any person, living or dead, or any actual event is entirely coincidental and unintentional"*

**Educational Benefits of this movie:** This film offers good historical background on international relations during World War One, specifically the Middle East, Great Britain, and France. Many scenes in the movie are taken from actual historical events that did occur. The film can serve as a springboard for discussion about T.E. Lawrence himself and further study on the man. It is also very beneficial as a supplement to a unit on the Middle East and its struggles with colonizers like Great Britain and France. Finally, history on the oppression that the Turks placed on many ethnic groups throughout the Middle East would also benefit from viewing this film.

**Historical Background:** The film is loosely based on T.E. Lawrence's book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) in which he writes about his experiences during the war and his beliefs about the entire situation he was involved in.

The Turks of the Ottoman Empire controlled most of Arabia prior to 1914. When World War One erupted in Europe, Turkey allied itself with Germany. Because Great Britain and France promised independence to all Arab nations after the war if they



allied with them, these Arab nations were encouraged to hold uprisings against the Turks. T.E. Lawrence, a British Intelligence Officer, was put in charge of this campaign and the Arabs conquered the city of Damascus in 1918 with the help of Lawrence.

Unfortunately and despicably, Great Britain and France never planned to give the Arabs their independence at all. Completely unaware of this, T.E. Lawrence kept reassuring the Arabs that independence was imminent. When World War 1 was over, Lawrence relentlessly worked to grant independence to the Arabs. He worked tirelessly to make sure the British and French kept their promises to the Arabs. He lobbied British and French governments and even attended the Versailles peace conference to petition for Arab independence, but to no avail. Most of the Middle East was carved up between British and French occupation after World War One.

### Activity:

1. On a [blank map of the Middle East](#), neatly label the following:

- ✓ Cairo
- ✓ the Suez Canal
- ✓ Mecca
- ✓ Medina
- ✓ Aqaba
- ✓ the Arabian Peninsula
- ✓ the Sinai Peninsula

### Study Questions:

2. When Lawrence reaches Suez someone asks "Who are you?" But Lawrence cannot answer. Was he an English Officer or an Arab nationalist? The movie raises the question. What do you think?
3. When the Turks capture and torture Lawrence, life changes dramatically for him. He begins to lose hope and focus on his mission and becomes consumed with revenge for the Turks. Describe the different ways that Lawrence's feelings have changed towards the end of the movie:
4. When Lawrence is asked whether he is happy about returning to Great Britain, why doesn't he answer this question?
5. Do you think his beliefs about the Arabs and their values stays the same during the film, or do you think it changes at all? Cite scenes from the movie to support your answer.
6. Do you agree with this sentence: "Lawrence of Arabia" is a tale about war with the usual good guys and bad guys." Why or why not?
7. When Lawrence discovered that Great Britain and France had no intention of honoring their promise to the Arabs, what should he have done?

### Project:

Research the life of T.E. Lawrence, paying particular attention to his experience during World War 1 with the Arabs. Construct a neat and creative horizontal time line beginning in 1914 through Lawrence's death in 1935. On the top, chronicle events as depicted in the movie. On the bottom, chronicle events from your research. When you have finished, write a 250 word essay explaining the differences between the two and your personal feelings regarding these differences.