

# FREE CLASSROOM ACTIVITY



# BEING AN AMERICAN

*Essay Contest*

## CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTION

What civic value do you believe is most essential to being an American?

*Ours is the only country deliberately founded on a good idea.*

–JOHN GUNTHER

*It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor.*

–THOMAS JEFFERSON

*The true meaning of America, you ask? It's in a Texas rodeo, in a policeman's badge, in the sound of laughing children, in a political rally, in a newspaper... In all these things, and many more, you'll find America. In all these things, you'll find freedom. And freedom is what America means to the world. And to me.*

–AUDIE MURPHY

## OVERVIEW

The United States is said to be the only nation founded not on the ethnicity of its citizens, but on their shared commitment to certain ideas and values. Recent immigrants who share these ideals are as fully American as those who can trace their ancestry to the men who signed the Constitution. But what are these ideals that make us Americans? In this lesson, students will explore the ideas and values that unite us.

## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify values that unite us as Americans
- Understand how various Americans in history have exemplified those values
- Analyze how those values are embedded in the Founding documents
- Reflect on the ways they can exercise those values in their every day lives
- Appreciate the United States as a nation based on the shared commitment to these values

## STANDARDS

Participation in the *Being an American* Essay Contest meets the following National Standards:

NCHS: Era 3, Standard 3

CCE: IID3, VD1, VD2, and VD4

NCTE: Standards 3, 7, and 12

## BACKGROUND/HOMEWORK

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- A. Write the overview quotations (on the front page of this activity) on the board. Have students read them all and then focus on the Gunther quotation. What "idea" is he referring to? Discuss this question as a large group, emphasizing that there will be a number of correct responses. You may also use the "Being an American Quote Bank" for more quotations.
- B. Tell students that to prepare for tomorrow's discussion, they will hunt through American history from the Founding Era to the present day to find examples of that "idea." (*They can skim their textbooks or do Internet research; encourage students to go beyond individuals they know personally.*) Divide the class into group A and group B. Group A should select and investigate a Founding document (from the years 1760-1800) to identify an "idea" of America. Group B will select an individual from American history who has personified the "idea" of America in their view. They should come to class next time prepared to share and discuss what they discovered.

## ANTICIPATORY ACTIVITY

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[10 minutes]

- A. Divide students into pairs made up of one student from Group A and one from Group B.
- B. Have students discuss the Founding documents and individuals they learned about for homework.
- C. Reconvene the class and share responses as a large group. What kinds of ideas and values were mentioned most frequently: How did the individuals from American history exemplify them? How have these ideals and values shaped the American story?

## ACTIVITY

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[20-30 minutes]

- A. Ask students to brainstorm and discuss a list of values embodied in the Founding documents.
- B. Make a list on the board as students volunteer their thoughts. The list would be extensive, but examples might include: *compassion, consideration, courage, diligence, entrepreneurship, federalism, future-mindedness, honesty, humility, justice, industry, initiative, integrity, liberty, limited government, majority rule vs. minority rights, moderation, natural or inalienable rights, reliability, popular sovereignty, presumption of innocence in trials, public service, religious freedom, representative government, respect for others, respect for private property, respect for the rule of law, responsibility, separation of powers, thrift, volunteering, and other ideas.*
- C. Encourage students to think critically to conclude which values and ideas are most essential to the idea of being an American.

- D. After students have made their determinations, have them write their idea(s)/value(s) at the top of a piece of paper.
- E. Have them then make a T-chart on their papers, labeling one side "Ways I Have Exercised or Supported This Value" and the other "Ways I Can Exercise or Support This Value in the Future."
- F. While students are working, write the following quotation on the board:
 

*"The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government, are justly considered deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."*

—George Washington
- G. Have students share their responses and discuss them as a large group. Discuss responses in terms of the Washington quotation. How can students live up to his challenge in their daily lives?

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY/HOMEWORK

Have students answer the following question in an essay of no more than 750 words:

What civic value do you believe is most essential to being an American? Trace the enduring importance of this value throughout the American story by discussing: a Founding document that reflects this value; a figure from American history who embodies this value; and ways you can personally put this value into practice.

Winning essays will completely adhere to the topic and fully answer the question. These essays approach the topic with original and lively prose and trace the enduring importance of the value throughout the American story. They include a detailed discussion of a civic value, a thoughtful personal response to the value; an outstanding critique of the value as it appears in at least one Founding document (1760-1800); and a concise analysis of an historical American figure who exemplifies that value. These essays contain a well-developed thesis, outstanding analysis, original ideas, and are very clearly organized and well-written.

For new ideas and strategies for teaching writing, please visit the "For Teachers" page at [www.BeinganAmerican.org](http://www.BeinganAmerican.org).

## Winning Teaching Strategy: In-Class Writing Workshop

*Developed by previous Being an American Essay Contest winners Erica Jacobs and Eliot Waxman at Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia.*

1. In a short paragraph, define "civic value."
2. List three civic values essential to being an American.
3. Meet in groups of three or four and share definitions and your list of values.
4. As a group, choose two quotations that apply to each of your values. Don't list more than 6 values—choose the ones that appear most frequently on your lists.
5. As a group, list two historical figures that exemplify each of the civic values.
6. Choose one value, one quotation, and one historical figure and write 200-250 words in which you link them, and illustrate your value with something personal (in your past, present, or future plans.)
7. Share your writings in your same groups, and choose one or two to read aloud.
8. At home: complete the essay.

*—Erica Jacobs and Eliot Waxman, First place (South Atlantic Region 2008) and Honorable Mention (Virginia 2007).*

### Suggested Peer-Review Checklist

- understandable thesis statement
- clearly defined civic value
- smooth transitions
- thoughtful analysis
- strong personal response

Does this essay answer the question? YES / NO

# BEING AN AMERICAN QUOTE BANK

Use these statements to jumpstart your thinking about American civic values. Which values are referred to in each of the quotes? How are these values reflected in American history or American life today?

1. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.  
–*Declaration of Independence*
2. . . . that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.  
–*Declaration of Independence*
3. We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity do hereby ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.  
–*The Preamble to the Constitution*
4. The House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several states. . .  
–*Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution*
5. He [the President] shall have power, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties . . . –*Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution*
6. The Constitution. . . shall be the supreme law of the land. –*Article VI, Section 1 of the Constitution*
7. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.  
–*First Amendment*
8. The rights of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause. –*Fourth Amendment*
9. The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people. –*Tenth Amendment*
10. The consciousness of having discharged that duty which we owe to our country is superior to all other considerations. –George Washington
11. Government should be formed to secure and to enlarge the exercise of the natural rights of its members; and every government, which has not this in view, as its principle object, is not a government of a legitimate kind. –James Wilson
12. Liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker. But if we had not, our fathers have earned and bought it for us, at the expense of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood.  
–John Adams
13. Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom; and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech.  
–Benjamin Franklin
14. In republics, the great danger is that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority. –James Madison
15. The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps as deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people. –George Washington
16. If men were angels, no government would be necessary. –James Madison
17. Every member of society is in duty bound to contribute to the safety and good of the whole.  
–George Mason
18. No free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people, but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles. –George Mason