

# Citizen Builders: Laying the Foundations for a More Perfect Union

By Megan Berry

## Overview:

Soon, our country will celebrate a remarkable historical milestone of 250 years since its founding. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution, have provided a vision that, while blurry at times, has guided our government and more importantly our citizens through times of triumph and turmoil. The Founding Fathers intended that the country's citizens, or "we the people", be the driving force behind their constructed ideals of liberty, justice, and equality. They accurately foresaw that **building** a more perfect union would be an ongoing effort, and would rely on citizens at every turn to uphold such ideals.



In addition to those citizens born here, the United States has had historic waves of immigration, and provided opportunity for those of many different backgrounds to become part of its representative democracy. While the naturalization process has evolved greatly over the years, today the most recognized piece of that process is the civics test. This test covers understanding of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, civics, American history, and general geography. The current test format provides applicants 100 questions, of which they are asked up to 10 questions.

Through times of unity, and even more so in times of division, our nation has depended on shared concepts of the common good, many of which are affirmed in the the citizenship test. In celebration of the bisesquicentennial, students will examine the US Citizenship test as a reflection of the past 250 years and explore the **foundational** concepts that **built** our past, and will continue to construct our future.



## Essential Question:

In what ways do the questions of the US Citizenship test tell the story of **building** “a more perfect union” over the last 250 years?

**Number of Class Periods:** 1 (with extension activities available)

**Grade Levels:** 9-12

## **Objectives:**

Students will be able to

- exhibit understanding of direct content as well as underlying implications of text
- demonstrate understanding of visual images
- analyze the historical connections within the questions of the U.S. Citizenship test
- synthesize these connections and construct a response to a final question

## **Standards:**

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7**

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9**

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

### **C3 Framework D2.Civ.2.9-12**

Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system, with attention to the definition of citizenship, the rights, responsibilities, and duties of citizens, and how they can influence government.

### **C3 Framework D2.Civ.14.9-12**

Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

### **C3 Framework D2.His.5.9-12**

Analyze how historical contexts influence perspectives and civic ideals.

## **Materials:**

- US Citizenship Test: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/citizenship>
  - Printed questions in addition to online access
- Photo Archive: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection-search>
- Photo Archive: <https://www.archives.gov/research/still-pictures>
- Building blocks - these could be actual blocks, duplos, or even construction paper depending on availability and any cost limitations
- Assortment of printed images from the last 250 years. See examples
- Optional: mini flags, signs, or figures to decorate builds
- Graphic Organizer for completing reflection
- Rubric

## **Key Concepts and Background Knowledge:**

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/The%20Preamble%20to%20the%20Constitution.pdf>

“A More Perfect Union” - this often referenced phrase from the preamble of the United States Constitution shows the desire of the Founding Fathers to be diligent about creating a stronger union, in their time, and for evermore. Spoken by the likes of Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, this phrase acknowledges a lack of perfection, yet opportunity to improve.

## **Procedure:**

*Roadmap - students will have 15 building blocks. They will place 10 citizenship questions and 5 images on those blocks. They will **build** both literally and conceptually.*

*Note - 10 questions is by design to replicate the citizenship test. All other numeric choices are adaptable for time, age level, or other circumstances.*

1. Students will individually read through the U.S. Citizenship test, making notes of questions that interest them or that might prompt further inquiry. Taking a pretest prior to this lesson is a recommendation.
2. Students will work in pairs the rest of the lesson. Students will select **10** questions they think are most significant to **building** a nation, or that make up the **foundations** of our citizenry. While students can choose from any of the 100 questions, the teacher may suggest to pick a variety of content areas. Teachers may choose to have more control over this and could narrow or differentiate the choices for students, even requiring a certain number of questions from each category, etc. (Principles of American Democracy, System of Government, Rights and Responsibilities, Colonial Period and Independence, 1800s, Recent American History, Geography, Symbols, and Holidays).
3. For each question selected, students should record the question and answer on their graphic organizer provided by the teacher. They will then explain in 1–2 sentences *why* it's a critical piece of our **foundations**. Sentence starters and/or pre-selected questions could be included for students with IEP's.
4. Students will attach these 10 questions on 10 building blocks using tape, sticky tack, or glue.
5. Students will next pick **5** images to go on their remaining 5 building blocks. Attach to blocks as in step 4. Students will be selecting from images of famous historic events or people from the last 250 years of American History. Students should consider how these events have contributed to “building a more perfect union”. **Images may, but do not have to, match up to their citizenship questions.** Depending on time and other constraints, the teacher should plan to have a wide variety of images printed out and ready to go ahead of

time. The Teacher might also consider having brief descriptors with each image. Image selection and rationale for each may be incorporated or adapted for time on the graphic organizer.

6. Once all 15 blocks are assembled, student pairs are to **build** a structure or symbol of their own design. If they wish to use up to 15 additional blank blocks for a total of 30, they may do so. Design guidelines on this structure are intentionally left wide open. The teacher might consider having constructed an example to have on display. *Teacher Note: The hope is that this is powerful because every student's **foundation** will be uniquely their own. Each block reflects the values, events, and civic knowledge that they believe are most essential to **building** our nation.*
7. In their same pairs, students should write a response to the final question on their graphic organizer: "In what ways do your chosen blocks—questions and images—tell the story of our nation's attempt to **build** a more perfect union?"
8. Students should perform a gallery walk and observe structures the other students built. Consider the following prompts for class discussion:
  1. Which foundational questions are most common and why do you think that is?
  2. What would happen if someone's foundational question, (e.g. freedoms of the First Amendment) were removed?
  3. Can you make a connection between a question and an image in someone else's structure? What do they say together?
  4. What do the differences between your foundation and others' say about how we all see citizenship and history uniquely?
  5. If someone from another country saw your structure, what would it teach them about American citizenship and history?

**Assessment:** Teacher will develop a rubric to score student engagement and participation. See example below.

### **Extension Activities:**

- Students search for and select the historic images from the last 250 years themselves using Gilder Lehrman and National Archives databases.
- Students can take each others self-selected citizenship tests of 10 questions.
- Students could take a photo of their work. These could be turned into a digital book or posters. The teacher would then have student work representing the 250th to display.
- Students could present Procedure Step #7 to the class.
- Students could review by playing a game with the images.
- Students could take a complete post test of the US Citizenship test.

Citizen Builders  
GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

| Block # | Citizenship Test Question | Official Answer | Why This Matters (1–2 Sentences) |
|---------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| 1       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 2       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 3       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 4       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 5       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 6       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 7       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 8       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 9       |                           |                 |                                  |
| 10      |                           |                 |                                  |

| Image | Brief Description |
|-------|-------------------|
| 1     |                   |
| 2     |                   |
| 3     |                   |
| 4     |                   |
| 5     |                   |

Final Question: In what ways do your chosen blocks—citizenship questions and images—tell the story of our nation’s attempt to build a more perfect union?

## Rubric: Citizen Builders

Total Points: \_\_\_\_\_ / 40

Student(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Block : \_\_\_\_\_

|                                            | 0-9                                                                                                                            | 10-17                                                                                                                    | 18-20                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>Civic Understanding</i></b>          | Questions selected show weak understanding of civic content in US Citizenship Test and little to no concept of our foundations | Most questions selected are appropriate with some rationale provided relating to building foundations throughout history | Selected 10 thoughtful questions with strong rationale that shows clear understanding of Citizenship Test content and building foundations |
|                                            | 0-5                                                                                                                            | 6-8                                                                                                                      | 9-10                                                                                                                                       |
| <b><i>Final Reflection</i></b>             | Limited or general response, lacks connection to the themes of citizenship and a “more perfect union”                          | Adequate explanation, shows some thought, attempts to connect to themes                                                  | Clear, insightful answer to the final question, ties back to the themes of citizenship and a “more perfect union”                          |
|                                            | 0-3                                                                                                                            | 4                                                                                                                        | 5                                                                                                                                          |
| <b><i>Image Connection</i></b>             | Weak connections or limited explanations                                                                                       | Most images are appropriate, some links could be stronger                                                                | All images are meaningful and clearly tied to citizenship questions                                                                        |
|                                            | 0-3                                                                                                                            | 4                                                                                                                        | 5                                                                                                                                          |
| <b><i>Collaboration and Creativity</i></b> | Uneven or poor contribution, low effort                                                                                        | Mostly collaborative, structure shows effort                                                                             | Partnered well and created a thoughtful, creative structure                                                                                |



