

Becoming American

What does it take to become an American Citizen?

In this inquiry-based task, students will investigate the history of citizenship in the United States and how legal requirements and processes for naturalization have evolved over the years. Students will analyze the comments about citizenship made by three different Presidents, then engage with the USCIS test. Students will use their analysis of the test to develop a conclusion about what the test says is an important characteristic of American citizens. They will then communicate their conclusion through the creation of a project. The full inquiry may take two weeks to complete. For a shorter inquiry task, teachers could focus on a modified version of Task #3. This alternative is at the end of this document.

Task #1 - Examine the historical background of citizenship in the United States, with the purpose of constructing a question related to becoming an American citizen. (1 class)

C3 Framework Indicator: D1.1.6-8. Explain how a question represents key ideas in the field.

Task #2: Summarize the requirements specific immigration laws have created for naturalization. (2 class periods)

C3 Framework Indicator: D2.Civ.3.6-8. Examine the origins, purposes, and impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements.

C3 Framework Indicator: D2.Civ.12.6-8. Assess specific rules and laws (both actual and proposed) as means of addressing public problems.

Task #3: Investigate how the USCIS Citizenship test aligns with the ideas Presidents Washington, Reagan, and Obama expressed about what it means to be an American citizen. (2 class periods - one for analyzing the Presidents' quotes, the second for taking the USCIS test)

C3 Framework Indicator: D3.3.6-8. Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.

Task #4: Construct an argument for how the USCIS Naturalization Exam does or does not represent a key characteristic of American citizenship. (One full week of class)

C3 Framework Indicator: D4.3.6-8. Present adaptations of arguments and explanations on topics of interest to others to reach audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies

Notes for Teachers: (remove this page for student print-outs)

Student Objective:

By the end of this inquiry, students will be able to communicate a conclusion explaining how the USCIS exam is more than just a test of a person's understanding of facts about the United States.

Rationale behind the lesson:

This lesson engages students in a historical and civic inquiry into the evolution of U.S. citizenship laws and culminates in an evaluation of the USCIS Naturalization Exam. An analysis of how U.S. presidents have described what makes someone an “American”, paired with reflecting on the content of the Naturalization Exam, this inquiry aims to move students beyond a perception that the USCIS exam is a rote memorization task.

Project-Based Learning and Differentiation

This lesson embraces project-based & inquiry-driven learning by asking students to explore a compelling question: *Does the USCIS exam reflect what it truly means to be an American?* The four tasks combined will have students work on their document analysis skills, synthesize multiple sources, and develop a conclusion that they must communicate. By allowing student choice & voice in the final task, they are more likely to be engaged and express creativity.

Differentiation is embedded throughout the lesson. Primary sources (laws & quotes) are excerpted to increase student accessibility. Sentence starters are included in analysis sections to support learners with IEPs and ELLs. Teachers may choose to have students work individually, with partners, or in small groups to best meet their learners' needs. Teachers are encouraged to modify the length and complexity of the tasks as needed. The “one-day version” of the lesson allows students to focus only on analyzing presidential quotes and test questions. This allows teachers to have students focus on the richer components of the inquiry when facing time constraints.

Lesson plan format:

The structure of the lesson loosely follows the C3 “Inquiry Design Model” which escalates students through different Depth of Knowledge tasks that build on each other. Everything needed to complete the inquiry is embedded in the following pages, except space for students to create/submit their summative task of communicating their conclusion. The last page of the inquiry packet is a “single column” rubric that students will use to evaluate their final task. In this document, it is the page before the one-day version of the inquiry.

Becoming American

What does it take to become an American Citizen?

Task #1 - Understanding the History of Citizenship:

There are two primary ways one can become a citizen of the United States. The first is through “birthright citizenship”, and the second is through naturalization, both of which are based on British Common Law. William Blackstone describes both of these legal traditions in his “Commentaries on the Laws of England”. Birthright citizenship is based on the principle of “jus soli” (right of soil). Blackstone explained, “[n]atural allegiance is such as is due from all men born within the king's dominions immediately upon their birth.”. This principle was clarified in American law as a result of the infamous Dred Scott v. Sandford Supreme Court Case. In 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney had ruled that African Americans were not citizens. The Congress looked to right this wrong following the conclusion of the American Civil War, through the introduction of a proposed 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

The 14th Amendment states, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” The 14th Amendment’s principle of birthright citizenship would be affirmed in the 1898 Supreme Court case United States v. Wong Kim Ark. The Chinese Exclusion Act had restricted the ability of Chinese people to become American citizens. Wong Kim Ark was born in the United States to Chinese parents, but after leaving the United States to visit China, he was disallowed re-entry into the States. His case made it to the Supreme Court, where Justice Horace Gray proclaimed that, “the Fourteenth Amendment affirms the ancient and fundamental rule of citizenship by birth within the territory...”

In “Commentaries”, Blackstone noted that “[n]aturalization cannot be performed but by act of parliament: for by this an alien is put in exactly the same state as if he had been born in the king's ligeance”. Meaning, only the elected Government had the authority to create a system through which foreigners could become English citizens.

The Founders addressed naturalization through Article I, Section 8, Clause 4 of the Constitution. They gave Congress the power, “To establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization ... throughout the United States.” Less than two years after the ratification of the Constitution, the United States Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1790. Since that first piece of legislation, Congress has made many changes to the requirements and process for naturalization. (Analyzing a number of those requirements and processes is the next step of this inquiry.)

Task #1: Construct a compelling question focused on American citizenship:
(consider what the Common Law tradition implies is important about citizenship)

Task #2 - Summarizing Naturalization Laws:

“An act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization,” 1790 (excerpts)

[A]ny Alien being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof on application to any common law Court of record in any one of the States wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such Court that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath or affirmation prescribed by law to support the Constitution of the United States ... and thereupon such person shall be considered as a Citizen of the United States...

1. In 1790, some requirements of becoming an American citizen were:

An Act to establish an uniform rule of Naturalization, and to repeal the acts heretofore passed on that subject: 1802 (excerpts)

[A]ny alien, being a free white person, may be admitted to become a citizen of the United States, or any of them, on the following conditions, and not otherwise:—

First, that he shall have declared, on oath or affirmation, [to a court of law] three years at least, before his admission, that it was, bona fide, his intention to become a citizen of the United States....

Secondly, That he shall, at the time of his application to be admitted, declare on oath or affirmation, before [a court of law], that he will support the constitution of the United States, and that he doth absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty whatever....

Thirdly, That the court admitting such alien shall be satisfied that he has resided within the United States five years at least ... and it shall further appear to their satisfaction, that during that time, he has behaved as a man of a good moral character, attached to the principles of the constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same:

2. In 1802, some requirements of becoming an American citizen were:

An Act To establish a Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, and to provide for a uniform rule for the naturalization of aliens throughout the United States. 1906 (excerpts)

Sec . 4. That an alien may be admitted to become a citizen of the United States in the following manner and not otherwise:

First. He shall declare on oath before the clerk of any (Federal court, or authorized court) to naturalize aliens ... that it is bona fide his intention to become a citizen of the United States, and to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty....

Second.... he shall make and file, in duplicate, a petition in writing, signed by the applicant...

The petition shall set forth that he is not a disbeliever in or opposed to organized government, or a member of or affiliated with any organization or body of persons teaching disbelief in or opposed to organized government, a polygamist or believer in the practice of polygamy, and that it is his intention to become a citizen of the United States and to renounce absolutely and forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, ... and that it is his intention to reside permanently within the United States.... The petition shall also be verified by the affidavits of at least two credible witnesses, who are citizens of the United States, and who shall state in their affidavits that they have personally known the applicant to be a resident of the United States ... and that they each have personal knowledge that the petitioner is a person of good moral character, and that he is in every way qualified, in their opinion, to be admitted as a citizen of the United States....

Third. He shall, before he is admitted to citizenship, declare on oath in open court that he will support the Constitution of the United States, and that he absolutely and entirely renounces and abjures all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty.... that he will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and bear true faith and allegiance to the same.

Fourth. It shall be made to appear to the satisfaction of the court admitting any alien to citizenship that ... he has behaved as a man of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same....

Sec . 8. That no alien shall hereafter be naturalized or admitted as a citizen of the United States who can not speak the English language: Provided, That this requirement shall not apply to aliens who are physically unable to comply therewith, if they are otherwise qualified....

3. In 1906, some requirements of becoming an American citizen were:

§1423. Requirements as to understanding the English language, history, principles and form of government of the United States, an amendment to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 (excerpts)

(a) No person except as otherwise provided in this subchapter shall hereafter be naturalized as a citizen of the United States upon his own application who cannot demonstrate-

(1) an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language: Provided, That the requirements of this paragraph relating to ability to read and write shall be met if the applicant can read or write simple words and phrases to the end that a reasonable test of his literacy shall be made and that no extraordinary or unreasonable condition shall be imposed upon the applicant; and

(2) a knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and of the principles and form of government, of the United States.

4. In 1952, some requirements of becoming an American citizen were:

5. In summary, members of the United States Congress addressed public concerns about immigration through naturalization requirements and procedures by:

Public Concern (site year)		Naturalization requirement remedy (cite year)
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	

Task #3 Draw conclusions about the USCIS Citizenship test

Part A: Analyze the three quotes below, trying to identify what Presidents Washington, Reagan, and Obama consider characteristics that make someone ready to become an “American”.

George Washington, Farewell Address 1796, (excerpt)

“Citizens by birth or choice of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts, of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.”

Ronald Reagan, Ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom Speech, 1989 (excerpts)

“[S]ince this is the last speech that I will give as President, I think it's fitting to leave one final thought, an observation about a country which I love. It was stated best in a letter I received not long ago. A man wrote me and said: “You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey or Japan, but you cannot become a German, a Turk, or a Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the Earth, can come to live in America and become an American. ...

This, I believe, is one of the most important sources of America's greatness.... If we ever closed the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost.”

Barack Obama, Remarks on Comprehensive Immigration Reform, 2013 (excerpts)

“And when each new wave of immigrants arrived, they faced resistance from those who were already here. They faced hardship. They faced racism. They faced ridicule. But over time, as they went about their daily lives, as they earned a living, as they raised a family, as they built a community, as their kids went to school here, they did their part to build a nation.... They all came here knowing that what makes somebody an American is not just blood or birth, but allegiance to our founding principles and the faith in the idea that anyone from anywhere can write the next great chapter of our story.”

Task #3 Part A: Using evidence to formulate a definition of what makes someone an “American”.

1. According to Presidents Washington, Reagan, and Obama, what characteristic makes someone who has immigrated to the United States ready to become a citizen or the United States?

Part B: Take the USCIS Exam on Gilder Lehrman's webpage to assess how the exam measures the characteristic key to American citizenship. Gather evidence from 10 questions that demonstrate how the test measures the key characteristic of citizenship:

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/citizenship/full-exam>

- Question # _____ demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship because:

- Question # _____ demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship because:

- Question # _____ demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship because:

- Question # _____ demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship because:

- Question # _____ demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship because:

Task #4: Communicate a conclusion about how the USCIS Naturalization Exam *does or does not* represent a key characteristic of American citizenship.

You may communicate your argument in an appropriate form of media which allows you to present and defend your argument using evidence. Examples of different media include; posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, reports, as well as digital technologies (e.g., website, social media content, and digital documentary).

Inquiry Rubric

Criteria	2 Detractors	3 Proficient	4 Enhancers
Claim/ Thesis	What did I do that made my Claim/Thesis less effective? What could I have done to improve my Claim/Thesis?	My claim/thesis clearly addresses the compelling question or prompt. I used at least two relevant reasons to support my claim/thesis. I identified 2 examples to strengthen my argument.	What did I do that made my claim/thesis more effective? How was this an improvement?
Evidence	What did I do that made my use of evidence less effective? What could I have done to improve my use of evidence?	I produced relevant and accurate evidence from multiple sources. I used pieces of accurate evidence from historical sources representing multiple viewpoints. My evidence is accurate (ex: quotations, paraphrasing, and/or contextual elements) I produced accurate evidence that is appropriately cited and sourced. I used grade level appropriate communication skills.	What did I do that made my use of evidence more effective? How was this an improvement?
Reasoning	What did I do that made my use of reasoning less effective? What could I have done to improve my use of reasoning?	I produced reasoning that connects the evidence to the claim/thesis I used discipline-specific thinking skills in many ways (i.e. for history: contextualizing, comparing and contrasting, causation, or continuity and change over time.) I included a counter argument.	What did I do that made my reasoning more effective? How was this an improvement?

One day lesson:

Drawing conclusions about the USCIS Citizenship test

Part A: Analyze the three quotes below, trying to identify what Presidents Washington, Reagan, and Obama consider characteristics that make someone ready to become an “American”.

George Washington, Farewell Address 1796, (excerpt)

“Citizens by birth or choice of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts, of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.”

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Part A: Using evidence to formulate a definition of what makes someone an “American”.

2. According to Presidents Washington, Reagan, and Obama, what characteristic makes someone who has immigrated to the United States ready to become a citizen or the United States?

Part B: How do the following five questions from the USCIS Exam measure the characteristic key to American citizenship which was alluded to by the three Presidents quoted in the last task?

If time allows, take the full USCIS Exam on Gilder Lehrman's website do find out about the other 95 questions on the exam: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/citizenship/full-exam>

- Question # __2__ : “What does the Constitution do?” demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship alluded to by the three Presidents because:
- Question # __3__ : “The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?” demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship alluded to by the three Presidents because:
- Question # __12__ : “ What is the “rule of law”?” demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship alluded to by the three Presidents because:
- Question # __53__ “What is one promise you make when you become a United States citizen?” demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship alluded to by the three Presidents because:
- Question # __55__ “What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?” demonstrates the key characteristic of American citizenship alluded to by the three Presidents because: