



Objectives

- Students will identify the significance of storytelling in preserving personal and collective history and recognize how stories contribute to the broader narrative of American history.
- Students will explore the connection between personal/family stories, reflecting on how individual experiences contribute to national identity.
- Students will analyze the historical significance of personal histories, connecting these stories to American ideals and historical events.
- Students will conclude the activity by submitting entries to the America's Field Trip contest which may include writing and artwork.

Our Voices, Our History: What America Means to Me

Overview

This activity is connected to the Master Class video featuring Valencia Abbott, and the America's Field Trip contest sponsored by America250, which invites students to explore the question "what does America mean to me?" through the lens of historical storytelling. It emphasizes the importance of storytelling and oral traditions in preserving and understanding local and national histories while encouraging students to develop a deeper connection to what America means to individuals across the country. This activity highlights how individual narratives contribute to the collective American story, highlighting the diverse experiences and perspectives that shape what America means to different people and communities across the country.

America's Field Trip Contest Overview

America250 is inviting elementary, middle, and high school students to share their perspectives on America 250 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Students can submit artwork, poems, essays, and more articulating what America means to them. First-place award recipients will be able to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime "field trip" experience at one of the nation's most iconic cultural landmarks and institutions, and second-place awardees will receive a cash award. First-place awardees and their designated chaperone will receive travel and lodging accommodations for their selected trip. For more information about America's Field Trip, contest rules, and field trip experiences for awardees, please visit <https://america250.org/fieldtrip/>.

Time

Two 45–60 Minute Class Periods

- Timing of the activities may vary by classroom, with most classes opting to complete the Ask, Analyze, and Apply sections on Day 1, then concluding the Apply section and beginning the Act and Submit sections on Day 2 (after student interviews with a friend or family member are complete). Teachers are also encouraged to consider how these activities may be used in collaboration with other educators across your school.

Materials

- Paper/Pencil
- Handout: **Personal History Analysis Handout**—*Print as many as needed*
- Handout: **Oral History Interview Plan and Reflection**
- Handout: **What America Means to Us Organizer**

Teacher Preparation

- To prepare for this activity, teachers should watch the [America's Field Trip Master Class video](#) featuring social studies educator Valencia Abbott, which sets the stage by introducing important themes students will explore in this activity.

Procedure

ASK

- Begin the activity by asking students to explore the importance of storytelling through a reflection and whole-class discussion activity that frames the connection between the importance of personal stories in developing an answer to the question “What does America mean to me?”
- Ask students to reflect independently by writing a brief response to the prompt “What is a story or tradition that has been passed down through generations in your family, community, or region?”
- Next, host a whole-class discussion, encouraging students to share the stories or traditions they identified, prompting the class to deepen their understanding of the relationship between stories, history, and what America means to them. Potential questions that teachers may use to deepen understanding might include*:
 - How do you think these stories have been remembered and shared over time?
 - Why do you think it is important to share these stories with others?

*For more conversation starter ideas aligned to specific grade bands, reference the paired [Educator Guide](#).

- What are some benefits and challenges of preserving history through stories, like oral histories?
 - How are personal stories important to understanding our local and community histories?
 - How might local histories influence and relate to national history? Can you think of examples of local events that have resonated on a national level?
 - Why do you think storytelling is an important part of understanding our local and national histories?
- Conclude the discussion by explaining to students that, in this activity, they will identify and share their own story to answer the essential question, “What does America mean to me?”

Teacher Note: If needed, define oral history as “the collection and study of historical information using sound recordings of interviews with people having personal knowledge of past events.” This is also a valuable opportunity to share with students that many cultures, including Native American, Native Hawaiian, West African, and other groups, have a rich history of using storytelling to pass down cultural traditions.

ANALYZE

- Next, explain that students will examine the importance of storytelling more deeply by analyzing examples of personal histories that have been collected to document experiences throughout American history.
- Teachers have the option of whole-class or small-group personal history analysis. With both options, take a few minutes to review the **Personal History Analysis Handouts** with students after they have been distributed. Review the directions provided at the top of the handout, and encourage students to listen carefully, recording notes as needed while they analyze the personal history examples.
 - If selecting whole-class, the teacher can choose which specific personal histories to show, using any combination of the five below. Ensure each student has enough copies of the **Personal History Analysis Handout** to match the number of personal histories shown. For example, if selecting two of the examples below, ensure each student has two **Personal History Analysis Handouts**.
 - If selecting small-group analysis, each group can be assigned one personal history to investigate together, or a small JIGSAW activity within each group can be created where each group member analyzes one personal history, then the group compares and shares findings.

- Personal Histories for Analysis—*The **Personal History Analysis Handout** provided at the bottom of this activity can be printed and distributed to students. Students can use these handouts to structure their analysis.*
 - **Evelyn Fields**—00:47 to 3:12—sharing her story about her experience during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl.
 - **Jennifer Lawson**—Beginning to 3:24—sharing her father’s story and how his story impacted their family life.
 - **Esther Hautzig**—2:29 clip from USC Shoah Foundation iWitness—sharing her story about immigrating to the United States after surviving the Holocaust.
 - **Keith Little**—46:07 to 48:42—a member of the Navajo Nation, describing what he is most proud of as a member of the Navajo Code Talkers during WWII.
 - **Bill Anders**—2:00 to 4:12—the Apollo 8 astronaut shares the story behind his famous “Earthrise” photograph, taken in 1968 while Anders and his crew orbited the moon.
- Students will conclude personal history analysis by reflecting on the connections between these personal histories and their connection to the essential question, “What does America mean to Evelyn Fields, Jennifer Lawson, Esther Hautzig, or others in their story?” using the **Personal History Analysis Handout** as a guide.

APPLY

- Transition by sharing with students that storytelling is a powerful way to gather historical evidence about individuals and groups, and that students will explore the power of storytelling by conducting an oral history interview of a friend or family member about what America means to them by creating an interview plan.
 - This document includes handouts to support the creation of these interview plans, with a handout available for Elementary, Middle, and High School students.
- To set up this activity, the teacher will:
 - Provide students with time to prepare to conduct an oral history interview with a friend or family member using the **Oral History Interview Plan and Reflection Handouts** as a guide to support student planning.
 - As students plan, rotate around the classroom supporting students in developing their interview guide as needed.
- To participate in this activity, students will:
 - Conduct an interview of a friend or family member using their created interview guides and ask what America means to them, gathering recordings or transcripts of the responses to their interview questions.

- After conducting interviews, students will unpack the key themes in interviews using the **Oral History Interview Plan and Reflection Handouts** by developmental level.
 - **Elementary (Grades 3–5)**—These handouts feature a more content-based analysis, focusing on what was said by the interviewee.
 - **Middle (Grades 6–8)**—These handouts feature a more thematic-based analysis, unpacking how the interviewee's comments might relate to the importance of preserving oral history and connecting to themes identified in the ASK section above.
 - **High (Grades 9–12)**—These handouts encourage an in-depth analysis, analyzing how interviewee comments might reflect and/or relate to ideals in the founding documents, such as life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, freedom, equality, etc.

ACT

- Next, ask students to independently reflect on and develop their own answers to the essential question, “What does America mean to me?” using the **What America Means to Us Reflection Organizer**.
- Encourage students to record their answers to the question “What does America mean to me?” on the **What America Means to Us Reflection Organizer**, preparing to share their answers to the question as a story with other students in the class.
- Using the **What America Means to Us Reflection Organizer** as a guide, ask students to share their oral histories with classmates through a small group activity, taking notes and reflecting on how their peers' stories and responses to the essential question may be similar to and different from their own.

SUBMIT

As a final step, encourage students to use what they have learned to prepare an entry for the America's Field Trip contest by creating artwork or writing that answers the question, “What does America mean to me?”

Teacher Note: Students must develop submissions individually and have a teacher, parent, or legal guardian submit their entry through the application portal. Please see the **Contest Submission Information Handout** for submission instructions.

Frameworks & Standards

Educating for American Democracy

- Our Changing Landscapes 3–5: Examine personal, familial, and societal connections between people, place, and history.
- Our Changing Landscapes 3–5: Understand personal connections to the values and norms that define various political communities.
- We the People 3–5: Explore the diversity that makes up the American community.
- Civic Participation 6–8: Analyze leadership through past and present examples of change-makers.
- Civic Participation 6–8: Analyze strategies and examples of civic participation, including instances of participation by those without full political rights.
- We the People 6–8: Cultivate understanding of personal values, principles, commitments, and community responsibilities.
- Civic Participation 9–12: Analyze leadership through past and present examples of change-makers.
- Institutional and Social Transformation 9–12: Evaluate specific moments of change as examples of refounding the United States.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- D2.Civ.2.3–5: Explain how a democracy relies on people's responsible participation, and draw implications for how individuals should participate.
- D2.Civ.7.3–5: Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school settings.
- D2.Civ.10.3–5: Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own and others' points of view about civic issues.
- D2.Civ.10.6–8: Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D2.Civ.7.6–8: Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school and community settings.
- D2.Civ.14.6–8: Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.
- D2.Civ.10.6–8: Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D2.Civ.10.9–12: Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interest and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

Common Core ELA Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6–8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6–8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6–8.1.E: Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.5: Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11–12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11–12.2.E: Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation provided (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

[America's Field Trip](#) is a nationwide student contest sponsored by **America250**, the official nonpartisan entity charged by Congress with planning the nation's Semiquincentennial in 2026, also known as the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. America's Field Trip invites students in grades 3–12 to be part of this historic milestone by sharing their perspectives on what America means to them—with the chance to earn a once-in-a-lifetime field trip experience at an iconic American landmark or cultural site, including the Smithsonian's National Zoo, National Archives Museum, Kennedy Space Center, and Yellowstone National Park—just to name a few.

Official Rules can be found at america250.org/FieldTrip/Rules.

- **Submission Deadline:** April 16, 2025 at 5:00 p.m. ET
- **Eligibility:** Any student in grades 3–12 who is a legal resident of any of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, or the U.S. territories is eligible to enter. First- and second-prize awardees from the 2024 America250 America's Field Trip contest, which ended on May 17, 2024 are not eligible to enter or win.
- **Requirements:** Students at each grade level may create artwork, including physical artwork, that is submitted through a high-res photo, digital drawing, or an essay.
 - Students in grades 3–5 may submit writing up to 100 words
 - Students in grades 6–8 may submit writing up to 250 words
 - Students in grades 9–12 may submit writing up to 500 words
- **Judging Criteria:** A panel of current and former educators will evaluate submissions based on **Clarity of Idea** (25%), **Student Voice** (50%), and **Presentation** (25%).
- **Prizes:** 25 first-place awardees from each grade level category and their designated chaperone will receive travel and lodging accommodations for a three-day, two-night trip to a select historical or cultural site. 25 second-place awardees from each grade level category will each receive a \$500 cash award. Award recipients will be announced in May 2025, and field trips will take place in July and August 2025.

How to Enter the America's Field Trip Contest

Students at each grade level will respond to the prompt, "What does America mean to you?" with artwork or an essay. Students must develop submissions individually.

Students must have a teacher, parent, or legal guardian submit their entry through the application portal at america250.org/FieldTrip/Application. A teacher may only submit an entry on behalf of a student with written permission from that student's parent or legal guardian.

For more information about America's Field Trip, including official contest rules, 2025 field trip locations, judging criteria, submission thought starters, classroom activities, and Spanish-language resources, please visit america250.org/FieldTrip or scan the QR code.

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Personal History Analysis

Directions: Use the handout provided to analyze the personal history example provided. By analyzing personal history, you will gain a deeper understanding of how personal experiences and historical events intertwine to shape individual perspectives of American identity. As you listen to the speaker, consider the importance of preserving and sharing these voices for future generations.

Who is the speaker, and what is the main topic of their story?	
What historical experiences do they discuss?	
Personal Reflections: What emotions did the speaker convey?	Connections to Identity: What impact did these experiences have on their life and identity?
Reflection Questions: 1) How did their experiences shape their understanding of America? 2) What do you think America means to them?	

Step 1: Preparing for Your Interview

1. **Choose Your Interviewee:** Think about a friend or family member you can talk to about what America means to them.
2. **Plan Your Questions:** These example questions might help you get started:
 - a. Can you tell me about a time you felt proud to be an American?
 - b. What do you like most about living in America?
 - c. What does the word "freedom" mean to you?
 - d. My Question: _____
 - e. My Question: _____
 - f. My Question: _____

Step 2: Conducting the Interview

1. **Introduce Your Project:** Start by saying: "I am working on a school project about what America means to different people. Can I ask you some questions?"
2. **Ask Your Questions:**
 - a. When asking questions, speak slowly and clearly. Be sure to carefully listen to their answers.
 - b. Write down what they say (you may use the space on the back of this handout) or record the interview if you can. You will need a summary of their responses to complete the next section.

Step 3: Reflect

Directions: Complete this section after you have completed your interview.

1. Look at What Was Said

What stories or examples did your person share?	
How do they describe America?	

2. Reflect on Their Words

What new things did you learn about your friend or family member?	
How do their experiences and feelings about America compare to yours?	

Step 1: Preparing for Your Interview

- 1. Choose Your Interviewee:** Think about a friend or family member who has interesting stories or thoughts about America.
- 2. Plan Your Questions:** These example questions might help you get started:
 - a.** Can you describe a significant experience that shaped your view of America?
 - b.** How do you think America's history has impacted your life?
 - c.** What values or principles of America do you find most important?
 - d.** My Question: _____
 - e.** My Question: _____
 - f.** My Question: _____

Step 2: Conducting the Interview

- 1. Introduce Your Project:** Start by saying: "I am working on a school project about what America means to different people. Can I ask you some questions?"
- 2. Ask Your Questions:**
 - a.** Be polite and listen carefully to their answers.
 - b.** Be sure to ask open-ended questions and encourage detailed answers. Ask follow-up questions to gather additional information if needed.
 - c.** Write down what they say (you may use the space on the back of this handout) or record the interview if you can. You will need a summary of their responses to complete the next section.

Step 3: Reflect

Directions: Complete this section after you have completed your interview.

1. Identify Key Themes

What main ideas or themes came up during the interview?	
How does the interviewee's story relate to the importance of preserving oral history?	

2. Connect to Broader Themes

How do the interviewee's experiences and viewpoints connect to the themes of freedom, opportunity, and community?	
Reflect on why it is important to both keep and share these stories.	

Step 1: Preparing for Your Interview

1. **Choose Your Interviewee:** Think about a friend or family member whose perspective on America you find intriguing or insightful.
2. **Plan Your Questions:** These example questions might help you get started:
 - a. Can you share an experience that exemplifies what America means to you?
 - b. In what ways do you think America lives up to its founding ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
 - c. How do concepts like freedom and equality influence your daily life?
 - d. My Question: _____
 - e. My Question: _____
 - f. My Question: _____

Step 2: Conducting the Interview

1. **Introduce Your Project:** Start by saying: "I am working on a school project about what America means to different people. Can I ask you some questions?"
2. **Ask Your Questions:**
 - a. Be polite and listen carefully to their answers.
 - b. Focus on open-ended, but deep, reflective questions that encourage the interviewee to think critically about their responses. Ask follow-up questions as needed to encourage the interviewee to share more about their experience and perspective.
 - c. Write down what they say (you may use the space on the back of this handout) or record the interview if you can. You will need a summary of their responses to complete the next section.

See page 2 for Step 3.

Step 3: Reflect

Directions: Complete this section after you have completed your interview.

1. In-Depth Analysis

How do the interviewee's comments reflect ideals found in America's founding documents like freedom, equality, and justice?	
What historical or personal events do they relate to these ideals?	
How do these historical or personal events shape their perception of America and what America means to them?	

2. Reflect on Broader Implications

How do the experiences and perspectives shared by the interviewee contribute to your understanding of American values?	
Why might it be important to preserve oral histories like these for future generations?	

Directions: First, draft an answer to the driving question below, considering the personal experiences and stories that shape what America means to you. Then, connect with at least one peer and reflect on the similarities and differences in your responses using the Venn Diagram below.

Driving Question: What does America mean to me?

Part 2: Venn Diagram

Working with a partner, use the Venn Diagram below to reflect on the similarities and differences in your responses to the driving question above.

