



America's Field Trip Master Class: Valencia Abbott

Overview

The America's Field Trip Master Class features Valencia Abbott, a social studies teacher, sharing her insights on creating meaningful and engaging activities that help students connect their personal stories with the historical events and themes they are studying. Through these activities, students can explore the meaning of America's birth as a nation through personal and historical examples, analyze the historical significance of personal stories in relation to American ideals and events, and create an entry for submission to the America's Field Trip contest sponsored by America250, expressing what America means to them.

How To Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help educators implement the key themes present in Valencia Abbott's instructional strategies into their own teaching and ultimately, support students in answering the question, "What does America mean to me?" as part of the America's Field Trip contest. To support students in exploring this question, this guide contains resources and strategies educators can use to create engaging activities that enable students to understand the significance of local histories, oral traditions, and personal stories in shaping and preserving American history and identity. Educators may use all the content presented in this guide or pick and choose from the activities and resources that best meet the needs of their students.

While this educator guide is designed to help teachers unpack key themes from the America's Field Trip Master Class video to use in their planning and instruction, a teacher-led activity designed to build on the themes present in Valencia's instructional strategies has been included to accompany this guide.

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>.

Featured Educator

Valencia Abbott

Valencia Abbott is a social studies teacher at an early college high school in Wentworth, North Carolina. She teaches American History, Economics, and Civics. After school, she spends time facilitating a student-led history club and serves on the program committee of the Museum and Archives of Rockingham County. Valencia holds a bachelor's degree in political science, as well as a master's degree in history and a master's degree in K-12 literacy. She is a 2024 America250 NC Freedom Fellow and served on the educator advisory panel for America250's inaugural America's Field Trip contest.

Theme 1

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR ALL GRADE BANDS

A key theme from Valencia's Master Class is the importance of sharing your story with others, and how sharing diverse stories from America's past can be a powerful engagement strategy for students. Using conversation starter strategies can help teachers facilitate meaningful classroom discourse that engages students in the exploration of complex topics. This helps students connect personal experience, prior knowledge, and other personal assets with new concepts, creating a deeper understanding of the complex topics at hand. By encouraging and creating space for students to share their stories and listen to the stories of others, teachers create an engaging, inclusive classroom environment where different perspectives are valued.

The intentional use of conversation starter strategies can enhance critical thinking while also developing students' communication skills, promoting a stronger sense of community within the classroom. Teachers can utilize these conversation-starter strategies to kickstart student discourse and encourage students to share their personal experiences and consider the personal experiences of their peers. As students build confidence sharing and listening to the stories of others, teachers can encourage students to consider how these stories and perspectives shape what America means to them as individuals, enabling students to better understand and answer, "What does America mean to me?"

"It is important for students to know the story of us, to know the stories that made them who they are, and for students to know the construct of what this country came to be. Because, unless they know those past things, they're never going to understand what the present and future can be for them."

—Valencia Abbott

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Think-Pair-Share: Ask straightforward questions like, “What’s a fun story someone in your family has told you?”, “What is a tradition in your family?”, or “What is your favorite memory about your friends or family?” Students first think quietly, then share their story with one partner, and finally share their story with the class.

Story Circles: Create small circles of 3 to 5 students and use a “talking stick” or other symbol to encourage each student to share a short story from their family.

Guided Imagery: Use prompts like, “Imagine you are listening to a story from an older friend or family member. What do you see and hear as they speak?” Then, have students draw what they imagined and share it with the class.

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

Think-Pair-Share: Pose questions such as, “What family stories have been passed down to you?” First, students think quietly, and then share their story with at least one partner, and finally share their story with the whole class.

Story Circles: Form small groups where students share longer family stories. Encourage students to share and listen for details and personal reflections within their stories.

Guided Imagery: Provide prompts like, “Visualize a historical event your family talks about. What do you see, hear, and feel?” Students can then write a paragraph describing their visualization.

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

Think-Pair-Share: Engage students with complex questions like, “How do your family’s stories shape your understanding of your identity?” Students then share their responses with a partner, and then with the whole class.

Story Circles: In groups, students share and discuss family stories, focusing on important themes like resilience, identity, or cultural traditions.

Guided Imagery: Use prompts like, “Picture a pivotal moment in American history your family experienced. What is happening around you?” Students can create detailed written or artistic representations.

Additional Conversation Starter strategies may include:

<p>Silent Discussions</p>	<p>Using large sheets of paper, post questions or prompts around the room. Students circulate and write their responses, reading others' contributions as they work through the prompts. This method encourages thoughtful reflection and participation from all students, even those less comfortable speaking out loud, and can create a springboard to whole-class discussion afterward.</p>
<p>Think-Write-Share</p>	<p>A modified version of Think-Pair-Share, Think-Write-Share provides students with structured time to prepare a written response to the question before sharing it with the group.</p>
<p>Personal Artifacts</p>	<p>Ask students to bring in an object, photo, or piece of memorabilia that connects to the topic. Students share their artifacts and their significance, fostering personal connections and enriching the discussion.</p>
<p>Snowball Discussions</p>	<p>Pose a question to the class and encourage students to write their response on a piece of paper. Students then crumple their responses into "snowballs" and toss them into a central area of the class. Each student picks up a different snowball, reads the response, and shares it with the class.</p>

Theme 2

A FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A second key theme in Valencia's Master Class is the importance of engaging students by connecting the history learned in the classroom to the lives of students. One way to create powerful connections between classroom topics and real-world experiences is through civic engagement. Student civic engagement can create a sense of responsibility and reveal opportunities for active participation in their communities.

Civic skills refer to the behaviors that strengthen a person and their community. By encouraging students to explore their local histories, engage with community members, and contribute to civic projects, this framework for civic engagement could enhance student development of civic skills.

Through the integration of civic engagement, teachers will support development of students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills, all while helping them explore the question, "What does America mean to me?"

Teacher Note:

Some students may find it difficult or traumatic to explore and share stories about their family and/or other personal experiences. In these cases, consider diverse ways to present these questions to students. For example, instead of asking students to share a *family story*, ask students to share a *community story* or *personal experience*.

	Community Interviews	Local History Projects	Service Learning
Elementary School	Provide a simple template with basic questions like, “What is your family story about America?” Encourage students to interview close friends or family members.	Partner with local libraries for story sessions where librarians share local histories. Students can sketch pictures of what they learned.	Organize a visit to a local historical site or historical marker where students can learn about local history and engage in a related activity like a cleanup or planting project.
Middle School	Students develop a questionnaire focused on experiences and personal views of America. Guide students on how to conduct and record interviews.	Collaborate with local historical societies to gather oral histories. Students create presentations or reports on their findings.	Facilitate projects like helping digitize local historical documents or creating a community mural that represents local history.
High School	Students create in-depth interview guides, focusing on complex topics like economic challenges, personal identity, or the importance of traditions. Teach students interview techniques and ethical considerations.	Students work on research projects involving local archives and oral histories culminating in a comprehensive product presented in a community forum.	Engage students in projects like organizing a local history fair, creating a digital archive of oral histories, or leading educational workshops for younger students.

Additional opportunities for all grade bands to foster civic engagement might include:

Classroom Debate or Mock Trials: Organize debates or mock trials on relevant civic issues or historical events, encouraging students to research, articulate arguments, and understand multiple perspectives on those topics.

Service-Learning Projects: Integrate service-learning projects into course curriculum, encouraging students to participate in community service projects related to in-class topics. Common service-learning project examples include conducting environmental cleanups, volunteering at local shelters, or assisting in community parks or gardens.

Community Partnerships: Establish partnerships with local civic organizations like Rotary Clubs, historical societies, or community centers, to create opportunities for students to engage in service projects or volunteer opportunities while gaining real-world experience.

Theme 3

CONNECTING LOCAL HISTORY TO AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Another key theme from Valencia's Master Class is the importance of connecting personal, individual stories to American history more broadly. Connecting local histories to American identity helps students understand the interwoven personal and community narratives that collectively shape America's story. Through the intentional connection of local histories to American identities, teachers will encourage students to dive deeper into their community's past and present, recognizing the significant contributions and experiences of diverse groups and individuals that shape what America means to so many individuals and groups today.

Through this investigation, students gain a deeper appreciation for the unique experiences and histories that shape American identity and enable students to see the relevance of history in their own lives and communities. In Valencia's own words, "It brings them a connection that you can't get from the internet; you can't get from a picture, or from somebody telling you."

Example ideas to connect local history to American identities might include:

Have students develop timelines that place personal or family stories alongside major local, state, or national events, enabling students to visualize the connection between how local narratives fit into the larger national history.

Assign students to compare their personal or family stories with historical accounts from different periods (e.g., the Great Depression, Civil Rights Era). Students then prepare to discuss how these stories and the similarities and differences between them reflect American values and experiences.

Encourage students to use various media tools (artwork, videos, podcasts, etc.) to prepare and present their personal reflections on what America means to them.

Activity Summary

Overview

The teacher-led activity aims to help students explore what America means to them through the lens of personal and historical oral histories. It emphasizes the importance of oral traditions and stories in preserving and understanding local and national histories and encourages students to develop a deeper connection to the concept of America and what it means to individuals nationwide. By connecting personal, local stories with national history, this activity is designed to demonstrate how individual narratives contribute to the collective understanding of America, highlight the diverse experiences that shape what America means to many individuals, and help students prepare their submissions for the America's Field Trip contest.

Activity Learning Targets

Students will identify the significance of oral history in preserving personal and collective history and recognize how stories contribute to the broader American story.

Students will explore the connection between personal and family stories, reflecting on how individual experiences contribute to national identity.

Students will analyze the historical significance of oral histories, connecting these stories to American ideals and historical events.

Students will create a product to share what America means to them through various formats, such as artwork, poems, essays, and more.

[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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