



Graphic courtesy of DK Children from Happy Birthday America by Becky Bainnes.

Introduction

Two hundred and fifty years after delegates from all thirteen colonies signed the Declaration of Independence, America's semiquincentennial is a birthday celebration one quarter millennium in the making. According to the mission statement of the U.S. semiquincentennial, "the journey toward this historic milestone is an opportunity to pause and reflect on our nation's past, honor the contributions of all Americans, and look ahead toward the future we want to create for the next generation and beyond." Elementary students can join in the celebration by learning about foundational documents, reflecting on historic people and places, and taking positive, practical action. This guide, targeted towards K–5 students, offers opportunities to research, reflect, and respond with high-impact practices that integrate critical reading, writing, thinking, and speaking. Suggested texts are provided that correspond to the guide's essential themes and questions. Teachers can select the titles and ideas that best align with classroom goals while inspiring students to learn from history, see themselves as change agents, and take their place as advocates for a more perfect union.

About the Author of This Guide

Laura Reis Mayer is a professional learning consultant from Asheville, NC. She develops and facilitates learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), she taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than fifty teacher guides for multiple publishers.

Suggested texts to use with this guide





Big Idea #1: *Aspiration*

By examining America’s founding documents, ideas, and figures, elementary students build knowledge, celebrate heritage, and aspire for advancement.

Essential Questions:

1. What ideas and promises do we see in the Declaration of Independence?
2. What does it mean to be a patriot?
3. How do patriotic icons and symbols help us understand what America values?



Activities:

“Most American” Thing Game

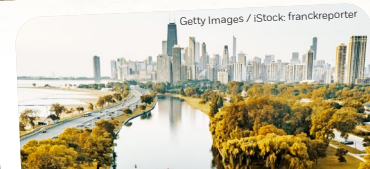
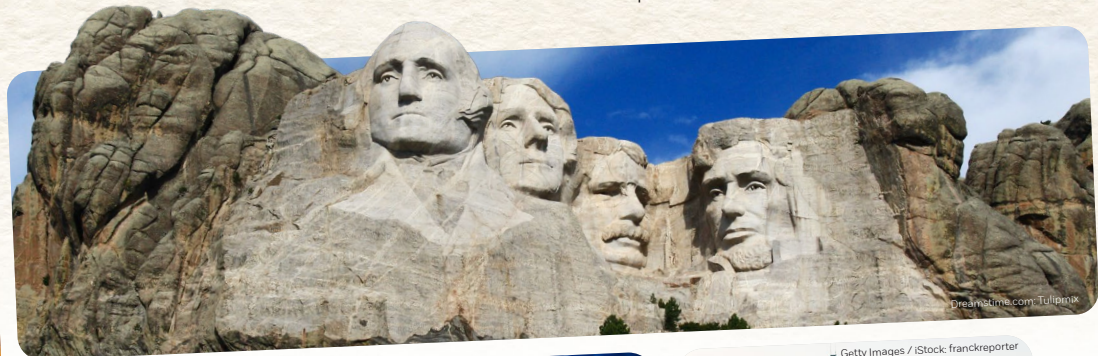
Generate interest and build knowledge around American culture, symbolism and identity with “The Most American Thing” game (stories.state.gov/most-american-thing/). In this online showdown activity, which can be projected on the whiteboard or completed individually, students view two images of Americana such as hot dogs, baseball, the Statue of Liberty, or the Constitution. Participants move quickly to determine which of the two images most represents America, and the game narrows their choices until they arrive at the “most American thing.” The game includes explanations of each icon that can be used for pre-instruction or referenced as needed while students choose. As an extension, students can justify choices or make connections to the objects and traditions they see on the screen. For younger students or those who may not be familiar with all icons, consider narrowing the list and creating modified slides or flashcards.

Visible Thinking

Display the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence on the classroom whiteboard (archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript). Using a word cloud generator such as Mentimeter or AnswerGarden, invite students to post the words and phrases in the document that convey its big ideas and promises. As students select “created equal,” “unalienable Rights,” “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” etc., the cloud alters to emphasize the most often selected choices. Ask students to think/pair/share: Why were these ideas and promises so important to Americans in 1776? How does each generation take part in defining what it means to be an American? As an extension, students can write a newspaper-style headline using their chosen diction to summarize the Declaration’s promises to Americans.

Heroes Board

Invite students to explore the heroes that helped shape America. Using a 3x3 digital explore board template, students select a tile and click links taking them to images and texts (prhlink.com/ditchtextbook). The board should include a mix of well-known and “unsung” heroes of the Revolutionary period through modern day. It should reflect the diversity of cultures that have contributed to our nation’s history. Example tiles might include Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Lee, Paul Revere, Betsy Ross, Deborah Sampson, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and George Washington. Once students have explored, they can share their learning with creative posters or a visual encyclopedia. Ask: What do these heroes have in common? What are the characteristics of a patriot? How can I show my love for our country in a way that respects all its citizens?





Big Idea #2: *Apply*

By reflecting on their own American story, as well as the part played by other American people and places, elementary students are able to realize their individual and collective identities.

Essential Questions:

1. What does America mean to me? What places bring that meaning to life?
2. What roles have other cultures played in the American story?
3. How have persistence, protest, and civil disobedience shaped America?

Activities:

Google Earth Field Trip

Take inspiration from “America’s Field Trip” (america250.org/fieldtrip), which challenges students to respond to a prompt in order to win visits to iconic American places representing the varied and unique spirit of our nation. Ask students to address the contest prompt: What does America mean to me? Students can respond in writing or with art, such as a painting, poem, song, sculpture, model, or presentation. Share responses on a class bulletin board or website.

Afterward, students can all “win” a virtual field trip. With the help of a classroom projector and Google Earth (earth.google.com/web), the class can visit national parks and historic sites with the use of maps, images, and links. Students can also work in partners or groups to design their own Google Earth field trip by selecting a location and adding images, videos, and other links. With both teacher- and student-made field trips, encourage sites that represent America’s diverse cultures and complex history. Possible sites can be found at National Park Service website (nps.gov/index.htm).

Immersive Storytelling

Invite students to step into the storytelling experience of historian Ken Burns and his film, *The American Revolution* (prhlink.com/kenburnsclassroom). Students will immerse themselves in the story of Betsy Ambler, a young girl who lived during the American Revolution. Betsy’s story is broken into small components, allowing students to experience life as a child during this period of American history, and to reflect on the sacrifices and changes they might be confronted with if they lived during such a time. As students watch and listen, they respond to prompts like “Would you be willing to abandon every comfort to have liberty?” Students can work independently through Betsy’s entire story, or they can partner up, read one or more sections, and “jigsaw” the story as a class. Afterward, discuss: What lessons about bravery, persistence, and protest can we learn from listening to others’ stories?

Book Trailer

Play for the class the video book trailer of *Born on the Water*, the acclaimed children’s book that examines the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans (prhlink.com/ytbornonthewater). (For younger elementary students, consider prefacing the trailer with a focus on vocabulary such as “freedom” and “slavery.”) While students watch the trailer, ask them to record any notices and wonders, including words, phrases, and images. Students might note “they were free,” “the people fought,” and “the people survived.” After viewing, discuss student takeaways, including how the people “born on the water” had a culture of their own, were enslaved against their will, and persevered despite the harshest of circumstances.

Next, as a class, read and annotate the poem “William Tucker,” from *Born on the Water* (prhlink.com/nprbornonthewater). Ask students to once again note standout words, phrases, and imagery. Afterward, encourage students to share their thinking, and discuss the last stanza: “The first Black child born in the land/ that would become the United States/ The first truly American child.” Ask: In what ways have Black Americans built our country and shaped the idea of equality? Why does the poet call those born on the water “the most American people of all”? Why is it important to elevate the stories of multiple cultures as we celebrate our nation’s 250th birthday?





Big Idea #3: *Act*

By embracing the role of service leaders who wish to benefit those beyond themselves, elementary students become change agents ready to define their role in advancing America.

Essential Questions:

1. What is one step I can take toward making change in my school, community, or country?
2. What makes America great? Where do we still need work?
3. What does it mean to be an American? How can we recognize, include, and celebrate all Americans while respecting and preserving individual cultures and heritages?

Activities:

Service Learning Project

Ask students to participate in the America Gives challenge (prhlink.com/americagivesorg) and volunteer to make their school or community even better. The class can identify needs, select a focus, and design a service project that benefits the school or community. Projects might include a campus or neighborhood mural, a clothing or food closet, a culture-sharing night, and more. The class can share its project with parents, school, and community members in presentations, on bulletin boards, or in digital newsletters and portfolios. For more on elementary service learning, visit Edutopia's website (prhlink.com/edutopiaconnect).

Hopes and Wishes Time Capsule

Invite students to reflect on their hopes and wishes for America's future by contributing to a time capsule. For inspiration, show the Smithsonian Institution's short video about their time capsule mural (prhlink.com/sstimecapsule). In the video, children share their dreams for

peace, inclusion, health, and more as America approaches its 250th birthday. Wishes are posted on a mural, then inserted into a time capsule to be opened in 2075. Invite students to create their own hopes and wishes mural and time capsule. Provide note cards and art supplies, and challenge students to reflect and record on a bulletin board or wall. Discuss: What items should we add to these wishes when we create our capsule? What can we include that mirrors our nation's identity and challenges, even if not always positive? Why include children in a time capsule celebrating and reflecting on all that is America?

We Are All Americans Quilting Bee

To reinforce the notion that Americans are made up of a diverse mix of cultures, races, religions, and backgrounds, and that successful and supportive communities of Americans recognize and celebrate such diversity, hold a class "quilting bee." Explain that traditional quilting bees were community-based opportunities to blend individual talents and backgrounds into one beautiful cohesive image, and that quilts were

often gifts to newcomers to make them feel a sense of belonging. Distribute squares of paper or cloth and invite students to decorate with symbols, images, and phrases from their own cultures or backgrounds. Join the squares together to form a "quilt" that can be displayed on the classroom or hallway wall. Add iconic American symbols. Title the quilt "We are all Americans." Discuss: How does this quilt represent the balance between individual cultures and a national community? How does it symbolize belonging?

Alternatively, or as an extension, create a digital class quilt using the grid layout on a free online tool such as Canva, Adobe Express, or TikTok. Record individual students finishing the following two sentence starters:

1. I am an American because _____
2. I can make my neighbors in America feel welcome by _____

Publish the video online, or play it at an assembly for families and community. Discuss: What lessons can we apply as we envision an America that welcomes and celebrates diversity?

Visit our website, PenguinRandomHouseEducation.com, to browse more titles for the K-12 classroom.



Penguin
Random House
EDUCATION

Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
Queries:
k12education@penguinrandomhouse.com



Browse our
**America's 250th
Anniversary collection**