

Early American History: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

We tend to idolize our history and leaders, especially individuals who lived in earlier centuries. But like all heroes, these individuals are flawed people—just like the rest of us. They have their self-serving moments in addition to their iconic moments of insight, courage, and leadership.

Help your students better understand the real people they learn about in early American history with this discussion guide and its related videos and activities. They will begin by exploring the problematic first decade of the American government and the struggles faced by framers of the U.S. Constitution. Then they will meet the imperfect personalities that embodied three of our country’s most famous founders—George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the “Composing the Constitution” segment from the *American History: Foundations of American Government* program.
 - **Discussion:** Ask students: What is a system of “checks and balances”? (*It’s a power sharing system designed to insure that no branch of government has too much power.*) Then ask them to describe James Madison’s plan for a central government. (*Madison called for a government with three separate branches. An executive branch, headed by the President, would carry out the laws. A judiciary would settle disputes. And a newly formed Congress made of two houses would make the laws.*)
 - **History Investigation:** In the video clip, students learn that Shay’s Rebellion in 1786 scared many Americans and led to the writing of the Constitution. It was part of the growing unrest in the states and weakening of the central government. Working in small groups, have students use the Internet, history textbooks, and library reference materials to research Shay’s Rebellion and other significant events. Then, have the groups create a timeline that starts with the 1777 signing of the Articles of Confederation and ends with the 1787 signing of the U.S. Constitution.
 - **Writing Activity:** To help persuade New Yorker’s to sign the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton and others published newspaper articles explaining why the country needed to replace the Articles of

Confederation. Have students write their own *Federalist Papers*, using what they learned about Shay's Rebellion, unrest in the states, and the ever-weakening federal government to make their arguments for the new form of government outlined in the Constitution.

2. Show the "George Washington and the Continental Army" segment from the *Heroes of American History* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Discussion:** In the video clip, students learn that George Washington promoted himself for the job of leading the Continental Army and he worked throughout his life at enhancing his image. Were students surprised to learn these details about Washington? Does the information change their opinion of him? Why or why not?
 - **Writing Activity:** What role does image play in the success of today's political leaders? Have students write essays in which they compare Washington's "campaigning" before the Continental Congress with today's presidential political campaigns. They should focus their essays on the importance of creating and sustaining a strong image.
 - **Graphic Organizer:** Delegate John Adams was the first to recommend George Washington to command the Continental Army. Who was this man? Did he have any other reasons for wanting the job to go to George Washington? (*Yes, Adams wanted a man from the South—someone who could bring the other colonies into New England's war.*) Working in small groups, have students research John Adams's life and create a chart that lists the strengths and weaknesses of the man who went on to become the second president of the United States.

3. Show the "Franklin Alienates the British" and "Franklin and the Struggle for Independence from Britain" segments from *The Real Ben Franklin* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Pre-Viewing Discussion:** Review what students know about Franklin, noting their responses on the chalkboard or a sheet of flipchart paper. Ask: Who was Ben Franklin? What were his biggest accomplishments? What, if anything, do you know about him as a person?
 - **Post-Viewing Discussion:** Were students surprised to hear Franklin described as "the evil genius of the revolution" by King George III? Do they think the title was deserved or that it was "sour grapes" on the king's part? Were students aware of the dispute between Ben Franklin and his son? What do they think of Franklin's actions toward William? What would they have done if they were in his place? In William's?
 - **History Investigation:** In the program, students hear that Ben Franklin wrote the first draft of the Articles of Confederation. Have students compare Franklin's draft to the final articles to see what changes were made. The easiest way to do this is to visit The Avalon Project at the Yale

Law School Web site, where you can view the two side by side in a split screen: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/compare/artfr.htm>.

4. Show the “Program Introduction” and “Jefferson, the Native Americans, and American Expansionism” segments from *The Real Thomas Jefferson* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Cultural Exploration:** In the video, students learn that Jefferson was fascinated by the architecture of Native Americans and that he incorporated it into the design of his Poplar Forest Estate. Have them learn more about ancient geometric mounds of Ohio by visiting the Ohio Historical Society’s Newark Earthworks Web site at <http://www.ohiohistory.org/places/newarkearthworks/index.cfm>.
 - **Classroom Debate:** One of the paradoxes of Thomas Jefferson the man can be found in his relationship with Native Americans. While he admired, and even idealized, much of their culture, his imperialistic actions toward them included invading Native American lands and having them forcibly deported. Divide the class into two groups—one pro-Jefferson and one anti-Jefferson. After giving the groups time to research Jefferson’s life and actions, stage a classroom debate that asks the question, *Is the historical honor given to Thomas Jefferson deserved?*
 - **Writing Activity:** Roger Kennedy asks, “Who was Thomas Jefferson? Why do we find him so confusing? Perhaps because he’s so American. He didn’t become so with a stroke of the pen and the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. He spent 50 years thereafter aspiring to define what an ideal American might be, what a real Americanness was. He didn’t wholly succeed. Neither have we.” Challenge students to write essays in which they describe and define what an ideal American might be.

Academic Standards

National Council for the Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Civic Ideals and Practices
- Power, Governance, and Authority
- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- History
 - Grades K–4 History: Understands how democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols
 - United States History: Understands the institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how these elements were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights
 - Historical Understanding: Understands the historical perspective
- Language Arts
 - Writing: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
 - Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

