

HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS

In the Collectively American program, students practice historical thinking skills by considering the theme of American identity on a large and small scale. In the historic house, they look for objects that serve as evidence about different perspectives on American identity at different periods in the nation’s history. In the classroom, students examine specific biographies of accomplished Americans to look for evidence, answering the questions, “Does a collective ‘American character’ exist? What might it consist of?”



PART I *Historic House*

Students participate in a thought experiment, selecting objects for an imagined exhibition on the overarching question, “What does it mean to be an American?” Students divide into small groups to visit three rooms representing the early colonial period (1620–1750), the Revolutionary/New Nation period (1750–1815), and the 1800s (1815–1876). In each room they participate in an exercise with the following steps:

1. Locate the room on a timeline and identify key events and significant Americans from the same era.
2. Review the mission statement for each room, which connects the overarching question to a specific historical period.
3. Learn about a selection of objects from the tour leader and the given materials, then work with a partner to identify the object that best supports the mission statement.
4. Share the selected object with other pairs of students and explain why it was chosen.
5. “Research” the finalist objects by interviewing the tour leader about them.
6. Discuss the final object to be chosen by the group, drawing on the information learned during the research stage. Students may advocate for their own object, or support an object in the group that they feel better supports the mission statement.
7. Vote for the finalist object.

At the end of the tour, students review the three objects they chose, and the different ways the overarching question (What does it mean to call yourself an American?) may be considered in three different periods of American history.

Historical Thinking / Social Studies Skills

Chronological Reasoning

- Continuity and Change over Time
 - Demonstrated by activity mission statements
- Periodization
 - Student activity: timeline

Comparison and Contextualization

- Comparison
 - Student activity: selection of finalist objects by small groups; final choice of exhibition object by group
- Contextualization
 - Demonstrated by information provided with objects

Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

- Interpretation
 - Demonstrated by information provided by tour leader during “research” phase
 - Student activity: presentation of finalist object to group

Crafting Historical Arguments

- Historical Argumentation
 - Demonstrated by activity mission statements
- Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence
 - Student activity: selection of object as evidence to support mission statement

PART II *Classroom*

Students divide into three groups to consider the biographies of inventor John Deere, women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Groups look at primary-source evidence for their assigned person’s accomplishments and attempt to infer conclusions about that person’s character traits, ending the session by comparing notes to see if there are commonalities that might lead to conclusions about a collective “American character.”

Historical Thinking/ Social Studies Skills

Comparison and Contextualization

- Comparison
 - Student activity: comparison of biographies of three Americans
- Contextualization
 - Demonstrated by biography provided to students

Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

- Interpretation
 - Student activity: matching primary source evidence with conclusions; drawing inferences about character based on actions
- Synthesis
 - Student activity: drawing conclusions about the idea of “American character”

Crafting Historical Arguments

- Historical Argumentation
 - Student activity: taking a position on character traits of historic Americans based on evidence of their actions
- Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence
 - Student activity: reference to historical actions to support arguments about character traits

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