



## What Does It Mean to Be an American?

Uses Any of the Vote Worthy Segments

### Background Reading

Vote Worthy, a series of podcasts relating to elections and voting, includes a musical interlude featuring an excerpt from Madeleine Peyroux's original song, "What Does It Mean to Be American?" Podcasts often include music to enhance the listening experience. Tom Martin, producer and host of the Vote Worthy podcasts, says that many of his productions tend to be 'talk heavy' and that "contextual music can serve to hold the listener's attention while also advancing the story."

Martin first heard Peyroux's song on one of his Spotify playlists, and it immediately struck him as a perfect fit for the Vote Worthy series. As he explains, "We were producing Vote Worthy at a moment when the question she raises with the song could not have been more timely. I did a search, found her manager, got in touch and requested permission to use the song for our production, explaining our non-profit status and the context. Their response was an immediate thumbs up — that they were pleased that the song would be used in such a way."

Madeleine Peyroux has a unique perspective on what it means to be American. A native of Athens, Georgia, she spent her childhood in New York and California, often listening to the music of her parents, especially jazz and blues. When she was 13, her parents divorced and Madeline moved with her mother to Paris. She began performing with street musicians in Paris when she was 15 and later toured Europe with a vintage jazz group. Her mainstream success began in 1996 with the release of her debut album, *Dreamland*. In 2004 her album *Careless Love* sold half a million copies.

"What Does It Mean to Be American?" is one of her many original songs. After its release Peyroux began creating what she calls "monthly birthday card" videos featuring montages of Americans that she considers to be her personal heroes. As she explained with the release of the first one in January 2021: "I have been trying to create a list of my personal heroes for many years. To celebrate the spirit of 2021 and my recent single release, I thought I might share by posting a monthly birthday card based on that list. So, Happy January Birthday to some of my American Heroes! Love, Madeleine"

The videos are posted on her Facebook page and on YouTube. Here are YouTube links to the January-March 2021 heroes videos:

[January](#)      [February](#)      [March](#)

Peyroux's [LinkTree page](#) includes links to more information about her and a full video of the song "What Does It Mean to Be American?" The [full song](#) is also available on YouTube.

### Discussion Questions

1. After students listen to the podcast (play enough for students to understand its intent and to hear the use of the song — at least one segment), and the song and watch one or more of the "birthday card" montages, ask students if they think this song was a good choice for the series. Why or why not? What did the song add to the podcast?
2. Ask students what stood out to them about the lyrics? (If you want show the lyrics or have students read them, they are available [online](#) at [azlyrics.com](#).)
3. Which of the "heroes" that Peyroux honored did they recognize? What do they know about these people? How could they find out more? Why might these people be considered American heroes? Are there connections between the people in the montage and the lyrics of the song?
4. Ask if someone has to be famous to be considered a hero. What are the qualities or accomplishments that define a hero? What qualities or accomplishments would define an American hero?
5. Ask students whom they would honor as American heroes if they made a similar montage. Why would these choose these individuals? Ask them to record their choices and a few notes for a later activity.

### Teaching Tips

These activities could be used in a social studies, civics, media, music, language arts, or communications class. Just as the song "What Does It Mean to Be American?" interjects creative expression into the analytical discussion of voting rights, processes, challenges, and reform movements, these activities allow you to interject creativity into the consideration of two essential topics in high school civics:

- HS.C.CV.3 Analyze impact of the efforts of individuals and reform movements on the expansion of civil rights and liberties locally, nationally and internationally.
- HS.C.KGO.3 Describe how active citizens can affect change in their communities and Kentucky.

The activities provide opportunities for students to think about what makes someone an American hero from their personal perspective. Students can consider famous people or ordinary people in their community or family.

These activities also provide an opportunity to explicitly integrate social/emotional learning into your curriculum, specifically social awareness and relationship skills. Encourage students to celebrate the diversity within your classroom as one aspect of what it means to be American and to take the opportunity to learn about the perspectives of their classmates.

It is critical that all suggestions and viewpoints be treated respectfully. If you have not yet established guidelines for civil discourse in your classroom – or if students need a refresher – you could use these resources provided by the website of the United States Courts:

- [Civility Self-Reflection Exercise - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions](#) | United States Courts ([uscourts.gov](https://uscourts.gov))
- [Setting Ground Rules - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions](#) | United States Courts ([uscourts.gov](https://uscourts.gov))

Each of the following activities could be done as standalone activities or they could be combined in a variety of ways depending on your time frame and the needs of your class.

- Activity One invites students to research the people that Peyroux honored as American heroes and share their discoveries.
- Activity Two asks students to identify their own American heroes and share their rationale for the tribute.
- Activity Three is a group activity (small group or whole class) to create a visual representation of the heroes they identified in Activity Two. This could be a bulletin board with photos and/or original artwork; a composite slide show; a video montage; a mural, etc.
- Activity Four focuses on music, inviting students to add their own lyrics to Peyroux’s song or another suitable melody or original musical composition.
- Activity Five is a media project that builds on one or more of the preceding activities.

## Suggested Activities

### Activity One: Responding to Music/Video and Going Deeper

Choose and show one of Peyroux’s “birthday card” videos and ask students: In addition to being heroes in her eyes and having January birthdays, what do the Americans in the video have in common?

Assign students to research the people included and make a presentation to the class about the person’s life and accomplishments. Ask students to go beyond a superficial recounting of the

professional life of the person they research and consider their struggles, the causes they espoused, their values, and their legacy. In what way does each person represent something heroic about America? Finally, ask students if they can see a connection between the person they have researched and the lyrics in the song. Work with students to develop criteria for the presentations.

After the presentations are completed, revisit the discussion questions.

### Activity Two: Individual Expressive Text: Who Are Your America Heroes?

Discuss the qualities that make someone a hero. Who were the everyday heroes during the COVID19 pandemic? How did the actions of these everyday heroes impact others? Who are some of the people that they consider to be heroes in their community or family? What makes them heroic?

Divide students into small groups and have them take turns sharing ideas about people that they consider to be heroes. Remind students to be respectful and focus their attention on the person who is sharing. Encourage them to ask questions and give positive feedback.

Ask each student to create a text (remembering that a text is anything that communicates a message) that honors one of their personal American heroes. You can assign a specific format (essay, bio-sketch, poetry, visual, media or performing art, etc.) or allow free choice. Work with students to develop criteria for the texts and create a time frame that allows a mid-point check-in with their small group, a draft sharing for feedback from the small group, and a classroom presentation.

### Activity Three: Visual Arts: Convey Meaning through Collaborative Visual Arts

Before you begin, consider the intent of the work and the end product you have in mind. Will this be an in-class project or will you share it with a wider audience? This could be a bulletin board, digital montage, slide show, a group mural, or a step in developing the multimedia project in in Activity Five. You could incorporate original visual art or photographs, copyright-free images from the Internet, written text that is artistically presented, etc. These could include or be based on the work done in Activities One and/or Two.

You may select the question that your visual art project will address or engage your students in the choice. Possible topics are:

- What does it mean to be American?
- What does it mean to be an American hero?
- Who are our American heroes?
- How can/have the actions of individuals and reform movements impacted the expansion of civil rights and liberties?
- How can/have active citizens affected change in their communities?

- What are the civic responsibilities of individuals within American society?

You could make these decisions before presenting the project to your class or you could engage students in making some of the choices. Ask students to consider how the images in Peyroux's video montage for "What Does It Mean to Be American?" answered the question in the title. How did they relate to the issues of voting rights and reforms in the Vote Worthy series? How can you use visual imagery to explore some of these same questions?

#### Activity Four: Music: Convey Meaning through Musical Collaboration

You could engage students in creating new verses for "What Does It Mean to Be American?" using Peyroux's melody, but keep in mind that this would be limited to an in-class project to avoid copyright infringement. If you want to do something that could be shared with a wider audience, you could use music that is copyright free such as the wide libraries of music found on Bensound at <https://www.bensound.com/>. If you are teaching a music class or have musically inclined students in your class, you could even consider original compositions.

Students who are not comfortable performing music can contribute to the creation of lyrics and also fill different roles in this activity if you include recording, such as audio technician, sound editor, or sound mixer. Some students are adept at using apps like Garage band and can contribute in that way.

You may select the question that your musical collaboration will address or engage your students in the choice. Possible topics are:

- What does it mean to be American?
- What does it mean to be an American hero?
- Who are our American heroes?
- How can/have the actions of individuals and reform movements impacted the expansion of civil rights and liberties?
- How can/have active citizens affected change in their communities?
- What are the civic responsibilities of individuals within American society?

You could make these decisions before presenting the project to your class or you could engage students in making some of the choices.

#### Activity Five: Media Production

You can use any of the products from Activities One through Four as part of a media production or start from scratch. The focus for this activity is integrating music into "talk heavy" productions, whether video or podcast.

Divide students into small groups and ask each group to select one of these topics to explore in their production (or assign a topic related to the Vote Worthy podcasts):

- What does it mean to be American?
- What does it mean to be an American hero?
- Who are our American heroes?
- How can/have the actions of individuals and reform movements impacted the expansion of civil rights and liberties?
- How can/have active citizens affected change in their communities?
- What are the civic responsibilities of individuals within American society?

You can assign the format (interview, discussion, report, reading, etc.), parameters such as length, and criteria. As part of the criteria, each project should integrate music appropriate to the topic. Music could be used as an intro, an outro, a bridge between segments, or background. It should contribute to but not dominate the tone and content of the production.

As Tom Martin explains, “Context and tone matter... It's important to remember that you are moving through a story, so dwelling on any given piece of music too long can distract, even derail train-of-thought. Also, always respect the artist by crediting them in the close of the podcast.”

Ask your students to submit a brief explanation of why they chose the music they did for their production and how they feel it contributed to the tone and content.

## Kentucky Academic Standards

### **Social Studies**

**HS.C.RR.1** Evaluate the civic responsibilities of individuals within a society.

**HS.C.RR.2** Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.

**HS.C.CV.3** Analyze the impact of the efforts of individuals and reform movements on the expansion of civil rights and liberties locally, nationally and internationally.

**HS.C.KGO.3** Describe how active citizens can affect change in their communities and Kentucky.

**HS.C.I.CC.1** Engage in civil discussion, reach consensus when appropriate and respect diverse opinions relevant to compelling and/or supporting questions in civics.

**HS.C.I.CC.2** Engage in disciplinary thinking and construct arguments, explanations or public communications relevant to meaningful and/or investigative questions in civics.

**HS.C.I.CC.3** Engage in disciplinary thinking and apply appropriate evidence to propose a solution or design an action plan relevant to compelling and/or supportive questions in civics.

### **Reading and Writing Literacy Practices**

- Recognize that text is anything that communicates a message.
- Employ, develop and refine schema to understand and create text.
- Utilize receptive and expressive language arts to better understand self, others and the world.
- Engage in specialized, discipline-specific literacy practices.
- Apply high level cognitive processes to think deeply and critically about text.

### **Reading Guiding Principles**

- Students will integrate and evaluate content presented in print/non-print forms of text found in diverse media and formats.
- Students will compose informative and explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.
- Students will use a variety of strategies to determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases, consulting reference material when appropriate.
- Students will acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to be transition ready.

### **Visual and Performing Arts**

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Anchor Standard 4: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic technique and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

***Resource created by Judy Sizemore, Education Consultant***