

American Democracy | Lesson Plan



What are the founding principles of American democracy, and could you teach them to a brand-new American?

Students step into the role of a U.S. citizenship coach: they watch the *Citizenship 101* episode "American Democracy," then help four fictional applicants by building an answer key through matching key terms (Level 1), grade a practice test (Level 2), use primary source material to answer applicants' hard questions (Level 3), and deliver the welcome speech at a naturalization ceremony (Level 4)—climbing from recall to creation as they rise through the ranks.

Learning Objectives:

- Recall key facts about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the rule of law, as tested on the official U.S. naturalization exam.
- Evaluate sample citizenship-test answers—right, wrong, and almost right—and write accurate corrections.
- Apply founding principles to applicants' questions, citing exact language from the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble as evidence—including the difference between disagreeing with a court ruling and defying it.
- Create a naturalization-ceremony welcome speech that connects the three founding principles: God-given rights, "We the People," and the rule of law.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Declaration of Independence:** The 1776 document that announced the American colonies' separation from Great Britain and affirmed that all people possess God-given natural rights.
- **Natural (unalienable) rights:** Rights that belong to every person and cannot be taken away by any government, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- **Constitution:** The written framework, drafted in 1787, that establishes the United States government, defines its powers, and protects the basic rights of Americans; the supreme law of the land.
- **Representative democracy (republic):** A system of government in which the people hold ultimate power and elect representatives to govern on their behalf under a constitution.
- **Amendment:** An official change or addition to the Constitution. There are 27 in total.
- **Bill of Rights:** The first ten amendments to the Constitution, ratified in 1791, which protect essential freedoms such as speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition.
- **Rule of law:** The principle that the law applies equally to everyone—citizens, elected officials, and the government itself. No one is above the law.
- **Naturalization:** The process by which a person born in another country becomes a U.S. citizen—including passing the civics test.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.4, CCRA.R.9, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Civics, U.S. Government, U.S. History



What You'll Need

- Video: *Citizenship 101: "American Democracy"* ([Watch Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Citizenship 101: American Democracy* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencils, whiteboard or projector

Lesson Plan (45–55 minutes)

Warm Up: The Job Offer (5–7 minutes)

- Without announcing the topic, ask students to jot down answers to the following three rapid-fire questions: *What are "natural rights"? What is the supreme law of the land? What is the "rule of law"?*
- Reveal: these are real questions from the U.S. naturalization test. Immigrants must answer 12 of 20 correctly to become citizens—and surveys show many native-born Americans would fail.
- Deliver the twist: "Today, you're not taking the test. **You're giving it.** You've just been hired as citizenship coaches to help aspiring citizens—and four applicants are counting on you to get them ready. But no coach walks into the class without knowing the test material and the answers—so you've got to learn them first!"

Coach Training: Watch and Build the Answer Key (10–12 minutes)

- Distribute the worksheet (one per student). Preview **Level 1 | Trainee**: students complete the Level 1 matching activity as they watch the "American Democracy" video. Every term and meaning is covered directly in the episode.
- **Coach's briefing** (direct instruction, 2 minutes): Before pressing play, frame the stakes. In most of human history, rights were gifts from rulers—and what a ruler gives, a ruler can take away. In 1776, the Founders declared something radical: rights come from God, governments exist to secure them, and government power comes from the people. Ask students to watch for the following in the episode:
 - What the Declaration of Independence did, and the three natural rights it names.
 - Why the Constitution is called the "supreme law of the land," and its first three words.
 - What an amendment is, and what the first ten are called.
 - Why the rule of law was groundbreaking "for the first time in human history."
- Watch *Citizenship 101: "American Democracy"* (5 minutes, 47 seconds).
- Give students 2–3 minutes to finish the matching with a partner, then rapid-check the letters as a class—the answer key must be airtight before grading begins, since every later level depends on it.

Practice Test: Grade the Applicants (10–12 minutes)

- Students move to **Level 2 | Grader**: a grading chart with four applicants, each answering a real test question. One passes; three need correction; and the trickiest answers are *almost* right. Students rule Pass or Fix It on each row and write corrections in the chart. Work in pairs so graders must defend their rulings to a colleague.

- **Teacher guardrails for this section:**

- **Don't confirm the answers yet.** Let pairs commit to their four rulings first; disagreement between partners is where the learning happens.
- **Watch for the two traps.** Marisol describes the Constitution when asked about the Declaration (the classic document mix-up), and Lucas gives an answer that is true but incomplete—citizens must obey the law, but so must leaders and the government itself. Students who pass Lucas have missed the episode's deepest point. Amara's answer wrongly assumes that the government creates natural rights—which in fact exist independently of any government.
- **Enforce the examiner's standard.** Partially correct still means Fix It—the real exam doesn't give half credit!

- Debrief the four rulings as a class, spending the most time on Marisol and Lucas.

The Hard Questions: Senior Coach Cases (8–10 minutes)

- Students advance to **Level 3 | Senior Coach**: a Briefing Chart graphic organizer. Three applicants ask questions that aren't on the test—about where rights come from, who gave the government its power, and whether a president can ignore courts. In the chart, students write an answer for each applicant and support it with **exact phrases** copied from the two founding-document Exhibits printed above the chart (Lucas's answer draws on the episode instead).
- Briefly pre-teach the period language so vocabulary isn't a barrier: "self-evident" (obvious without proof), "endowed" (given), "unalienable" (cannot be taken away), "ordain" (to officially establish).
- **Key idea to surface:** in Lucas's question, a president who *criticizes* a court ruling is exercising free speech; a president who *refuses to follow* it is breaking the rule of law. Disagreement is not defiance—this is the distinction students most often miss.
- **Optional live version (if time allows):** run one case as a mock interview—one student plays the applicant reading the question aloud, a volunteer coach answers on the spot, and the class checks the answer against the exhibits.

The Ceremony: Head Coach's Welcome (7–10 minutes)

- Students complete **Level 4 | Head Coach**: a 4–6 sentence naturalization-ceremony welcome speech that must weave in all three big ideas (rights come from God, not government; "We the People" hold the power; no one is above the law).
- Invite two or three Head Coaches to deliver their speeches aloud. If the class has energy for it, have students stand for the speeches as new citizens would—it lands.
- **Teacher tip:** for early finishers or as an extension, have students design one new test question with its correct answer and one plausible "tricky wrong answer" like those in the worksheet (not an obviously silly wrong answer). Inventing a convincing near-miss requires knowing exactly how the facts are commonly confused—collect a few favorites for a bell-ringer quiz next class.

Wrap Up (3–5 minutes)

- Return to the warm-up: re-ask the three opening questions. Every hand should go up.
- Exit ticket (spoken or written): In one sentence, what does the rule of law mean—and why was it revolutionary?

- **Success Criteria:** A strong response states that the law applies equally to everyone—including leaders and the government itself—and notes that before America's founding, rulers stood above the law.
- Collect worksheets as a formative assessment, or have students keep them as the start of a citizenship-test study guide if you plan to use other episodes in the series.

Don't have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (25–30 minutes)

Hand out the worksheet and play the episode—the worksheet's "mission brief" gives students everything they need with no setup. Students complete Level 1 while watching and Levels 2–3 after; assign the Level 4 | Head Coach speech as homework. Check rulings against the answer key. (The worksheet is written directly to students as a mission, so it works handed out with the video alone—no lesson plan required.)