



What did the 20th century's trials—war, depression, the struggle against communism, and terror—reveal about America?

Students produce a documentary called “The American Century”: they watch the Citizenship 101 episode “Recent U.S. History,” then build the archive by matching the era’s presidents, wars, and turning points (Level 1), recut the scrambled “reel” into chronological order (Level 2), write the film’s central contrast—America’s founding principles against life under communism—using only evidence from the episode (Level 3), and voice the closing narration over the film’s final images, performed aloud (Level 4)—climbing from recall to creation as they rise through the ranks.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the wars the United States fought in the 1900s and the presidents, leaders, and turning points attached to the era’s trials—from the Great Depression to September 11, 2001—as tested on the official U.S. naturalization exam.
- Sequence the major events of the 20th century from World War I through September 11, 2001.
- Contrast America’s founding principles—God-given rights and limited government—with life under communism, using evidence from the episode, and explain why the United States entered wars in Korea and Vietnam to stop its spread.
- Create an original closing narration, written to be spoken, that names an event, what it revealed about America, and why it still matters.

Key Vocabulary:

- **The Great Depression:** A dark period after World War I, when economies across the globe saw a severe downturn—high unemployment, large-scale business failures, and incredible hardship for millions of people.
- **Pearl Harbor:** The American naval base in Hawaii bombed by Japan on December 7, 1941—the attack that compelled the United States to enter World War II.
- **The Allies:** The nations that fought together in World War II—the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union—against Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and fascist Italy.
- **Cold War:** The decades-long struggle between the democratic world, led by the United States, and the communist world, led by the Soviet Union—and, after 1949, China.
- **Communism:** A system in which the government controls all levels of society—from business and the economy to families and individuals—suppressing individual liberty and denying citizens their fundamental rights.
- **The Civil Rights Movement:** The broad effort, from the early 1950s through the late 1960s, to end racial discrimination in the United States.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** The most notable leader of the Civil Rights Movement, whose campaign for equal rights for all Americans tragically ended when he was shot and killed in 1968.



- **September 11, 2001:** The day 19 Islamic terrorists hijacked commercial airplanes and attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing thousands of innocent Americans; a fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania after passengers courageously fought back.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.3, CCRA.R.4, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.SL.6, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: U.S. History, Civics

What You'll Need

- Video: *Citizenship 101: "Recent U.S. History"* ([Watch Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Citizenship 101: Recent U.S. History* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencils, whiteboard or projector; optional: index cards labeled by decade for the jigsaw extension

Lesson Plan (45–55 minutes)

Warm Up: One Century, One Reel (5–7 minutes)

- Display or read aloud: *If a film could show only one event from 1900 to 2001—one moment every American should remember—what would you choose?* Collect a quick list on the board. Students will revisit their answer at the end of class.
- Follow with three rapid-fire questions students jot silently: *Name one war fought by the United States in the 1900s. Who was president during the Great Depression and World War II? What did the civil rights movement do?*
- Reveal: all three are real questions from the U.S. naturalization test.
- Deliver the twist: "A studio just hired you to produce 'The American Century.' The archive opens in two minutes—and the closing narration is due by the end of class."

Production Meeting: Watch and Build the Archive (10–13 minutes)

- Distribute the worksheet (one per student). Preview **Level 1 | Researcher**: students complete the Level 1 matching activity as they watch the "Recent U.S. History" video. Every item is covered directly in the episode.
- **Producer's briefing (direct instruction, 2 minutes):** Before pressing play, frame the century. The United States has faced—and overcome—numerous challenges, nowhere more evident than in its wars. Knowing these conflicts is how citizens appreciate the sacrifices of the men and women of the U.S. military, past and present. Ask students to watch for the following in the episode:
 - The five wars the United States fought in the 1900s.
 - The presidents attached to the era's trials—Wilson, Roosevelt, Eisenhower.
 - Why democratic societies like the United States resisted the spread of communism.
 - The movement at home to end racial discrimination, and its most notable leader.
 - What happened on September 11, 2001—and how Americans answered it.
- Watch *Citizenship 101: "Recent U.S. History"* (5 minutes, 44 seconds).
- Give students 1–2 minutes to finish the matching with a partner, then quickly check the letters as a class—the archive must be airtight before editing begins.

Editing Bay: Cut the Reel (7–9 minutes)

- Students move to **Level 2 | Film Editor**: eight scrambled scenes to number in chronological order. Work in pairs so editors must defend their cuts.
- **Teacher guardrails for this section:**
 - **Flag the two tricky cuts.** The United States entered World War I in 1917—about three years after the war began in Europe—so those are two separate scenes. And Korea and Vietnam belong to the Cold War era, after World War II, not alongside it.
 - **Screen the rough cut.** When pairs finish, read the correctly ordered reel aloud as a class, scene by scene—the century in sixty seconds. Hearing the sequence fixes it.

Story Department: Two Systems (8–10 minutes)

- Students advance to **Level 3 | Story Department**: the film’s central contrast—America and communism compared on where rights come from, who controls daily life, and what happens to those who disagree—followed by the big question: why did the United States enter wars in Korea and Vietnam?
- **Require episode evidence.** Every cell must be defensible from the video: America enshrines God-given rights such as life, liberty, and property; under communism, the government controls all levels of society, and citizens who disagree are denied rights, brutalized, even killed. Generic answers (“America is free”) get sent back for a rewrite.
- **Key idea to surface:** the contrast explains the century. The United States didn’t fight in Korea and Vietnam for territory—it fought to stop the spread of a system that denies the rights America was founded to protect. Foreign policy flowed from founding principles.

The Closing Narration: Executive Producer (7–10 minutes)

- Students complete **Level 4 | Executive Producer**: a 4–6-sentence closing narration—either September 11 and how Americans answered it, or the one event the century should be remembered by, defended.
- **Perform it.** This is the one capstone written to be *heard*: invite two or three executive producers to deliver their narration aloud while the class listens for the three checkboxes—the event, what it revealed, why it matters. A strong final line earns applause.
- **Teacher tip:** two extensions for early finishers or a second day. (1) **Decade jigsaw**—deal out index cards labeled by decade; each team owns its decade’s events from the episode and teaches them back in order. (2) **Oral history**—students interview a veteran or family member about one event from the episode they remember and bring back a single quote to share. It is one thing to study the century; it is another to talk to someone who lived it.

Wrap Up (3–5 minutes)

- Return to the warm-up: *one century, one reel—did your event change?* Let a few students explain what moved them.
- Exit ticket (spoken or written): Name one war fought by the United States in the 1900s and the main concern of the United States during the Cold War.
- **Success criteria:** A strong response names any of the five wars—World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or the Persian Gulf War—and identifies the Cold War concern as the spread of communism.

- Collect worksheets as a formative assessment, or have students keep them as part 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 | Executive Producer narration as homework. Check answers 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.)