



How did America grow from 13 colonies to a continental nation—and what should every citizen be able to find on its map?

Students earn a Park Ranger badge: they watch the Citizenship 101 episode “U.S. Geography,” then learn the land by matching oceans, rivers, and regions (Level 1), complete a field-map assignment marking everything from the two coasts to the capital to a territory offshore (Level 2), sort the statements that separate a state from a territory—including the one that belongs to both (Level 3), and design the Great American Expedition: a five-stop route from sea to shining sea that must satisfy a geographic checklist, every stop justified (Level 4)—climbing from recall to creation as they rise through the ranks.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the geography of the United States—the oceans on each coast, the states along each border, the two longest rivers, the territories, and the capital, which remains a question on the official U.S. naturalization exam.
- Apply geographic knowledge by completing the field-map assignment—placing the oceans, a border state on each side, the two great rivers, the capital, Alaska and Hawaii, and one territory accurately on a map of the United States.
- Distinguish a U.S. state from a U.S. territory: full membership and representation versus U.S. control with Congress holding final authority.
- Create a five-stop, coast-to-coast expedition route that satisfies every geographic constraint, with each stop justified.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Contiguous United States:** The 48 states that sit together between the northern and southern borders; Alaska and Hawaii are situated apart.
- **Territory:** An area under U.S. control but not fully represented in the federal government. Territories may have a local government and constitution, but the U.S. Congress has final authority. The territories are Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam.
- **Washington, D.C.:** The District of Columbia, the capital of the United States—home to the White House, both houses of Congress, and the U.S. Supreme Court.
- **The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans:** The oceans that bookend the United States—the Atlantic on the East Coast, the Pacific on the West Coast.
- **The Alaska Purchase:** The U.S. acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867 for \$7.2 million.
- **The Missouri and Mississippi Rivers:** The two longest rivers in the United States, cutting through the middle of the country—vitally important to its ecosystem, agriculture, and economy.
- **“From sea to shining sea”:** A phrase from one of America’s most treasured songs—and an accurate description of the country’s place on the map.



- **Border states:** The states sharing a border with Canada (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Alaska) or with Mexico (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California).

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

Academic Subject Areas: U.S. Geography, Civics

What You'll Need

- Video: *Citizenship 101: "U.S. Geography"* ([Watch Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Citizenship 101: U.S. Geography* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencils, whiteboard or projector; recommended: printed blank U.S. outline maps (one per student)—the worksheet includes a sketch box for classes without them; optional: a wall map and feature cards for the relay extension

Lesson Plan (45–55 minutes)

Warm Up: Sixty-Second America (5–7 minutes)

- Open with the sketch challenge: *You have 60 seconds. Draw the United States from memory—no peeking, no erasing.* Time it. Then ask students to hold up their maps; enjoy the results together. (Students will fix their maps by the end of class—that's the point.)
- Follow with three rapid-fire questions students jot silently: *What ocean is on the West Coast of the United States? Name one state that borders Mexico. What is the capital of the United States?*
- Reveal: The capital question is on the U.S. naturalization test to this day—and for years, so were the other two. The test has changed; the map hasn't, and a ranger is expected to know all of it.
- Deliver the twist: "The National Park Service is hiring—and a ranger has to know the whole country. Badge ceremony is at the end of class."

Ranger Orientation: Watch and Learn the Land (10–13 minutes)

- Distribute the worksheet (one per student). Preview **Level 1 | Junior Ranger**: students complete the Level 1 matching activity as they watch the "U.S. Geography" video. Every item is covered directly in the episode.
- **Ranger's briefing (direct instruction, 2 minutes):** Before pressing play, frame the growth. The United States began as 13 colonies hugging the Atlantic—and grew into 50 states spanning a continent and reaching into the Pacific, "from sea to shining sea." Ask students to watch for the following in the episode:
 - The two oceans that bookend the country.
 - The states along the northern and southern borders—and the \$7.2 million purchase.
 - The difference between a state and a territory.
 - The capital and the two longest rivers.
- Watch *Citizenship 101: "U.S. Geography"* (5 minutes, 14 seconds).

- Give students 1–2 minutes to finish the matching with a partner, then quickly check the letters as a class—the basics must be airtight before field work begins.

Fieldwork: The Map Assignment (10–12 minutes)

- Students move to **Level 2 | Field Ranger**: marking and labeling the full checklist—oceans, a state that borders Canada and a state that borders Mexico, Washington, D.C., the two great rivers, Alaska and Hawaii, and one territory (arrow offshore)—on a printed blank map if you have one, or in the worksheet’s sketch box if not.
- **Teacher guardrails for this section:**
 - **Labels, not art.** Spelling counts; beauty doesn’t. A lumpy map with nine correct labels beats a beautiful map with three.
 - **Arrows are legal.** Alaska, Hawaii, and the territories sit off any classroom map’s edge—an arrow with a label is exactly how a ranger would mark them.
- Have pairs swap maps and check each other’s against the checklist before you confirm.

Specialist Exam: State or Territory? (7–9 minutes)

- Students advance to **Level 3 | Ranger Specialist**: six statements sorted into STATE, TERRITORY, or BOTH, plus the ranger’s Log fill-ins (a border state on each side and one territory).
- **Watch for the trap statement.** Statement C—“may have a local government and constitution”—belongs in BOTH: territories can have them, just as states do. What actually separates a state from a territory is representation and final authority: states are full, represented members of the union; territories are under U.S. control, and Congress has the last word.
- **Key idea to surface:** the state/territory distinction is about *representation*, not geography or distance—Hawaii is farther away than Puerto Rico, yet Hawaii is a state.

The Expedition: Head Ranger (7–10 minutes)

- Students complete **Level 4 | Head Ranger**: a five-stop route from sea to shining sea that must start at one ocean and end at the other, cross a great river, include one Canada-border and one Mexico-border state, and stop in Washington, D.C.—every stop justified (“why this stop counts”).
- Invite two or three head rangers to trace their route aloud. Reward routes that genuinely travel in order across the country—and clever trail names.
- **Teacher tip: two extensions** for energy or a second day. (1) **The wall-map relay**—write features on cards (oceans, rivers, border states, D.C., territories); teams race, one runner at a time, to place each card correctly on a wall map. (2) **Postcard from the trail**—students design a postcard from one expedition stop; the message on the back must correctly answer one citizenship-test geography question.

Wrap Up (3–5 minutes)

- Bookend the warm-up: *60seconds—redraw America*. Students compare their two sketches; the difference is the day’s learning, visible.
- Exit ticket (spoken or written): Name the ocean on each coast and one U.S. territory.

- **Success criteria:** A strong response places the Atlantic on the East Coast and the Pacific on the West Coast and names any of the five territories: Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Guam.
- 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 (the sketch box means no printed map is required). Students complete Level 1 while watching and Levels 2–3 after; assign the Level 4 | Head Ranger expedition 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.)