

**mll**  
middle level learning

# Hard Times in the USA

## The Great Depression

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# “Maybe You Could Help?”

## Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1934-1942

MARY MASON ROYAL

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT could be called a Superstar First Lady. In the era when women’s suffrage was first being exercised, she was “pushing the envelope” of what the President’s wife, and women in general, might be expected to do in civic life. She wrote syndicated columns for magazines and newspapers, the most famous of which was entitled “My Day,” a daily column that continued from 1936 until shortly before her death in 1962. Mrs. Roosevelt had a successful career as a radio broadcaster, talking not only about home and family, as might be expected of a female public figure, but also commenting on the news. She used these forums to promote the New Deal, the great economic and social policy reforms of

her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt. For her work in these media she was paid, which was itself controversial at the time, because many people expected a woman to rely solely on her husband’s earnings.

Through her vast public exposure, the public came to know the First Lady as just “Eleanor.” Early in FDR’s first term as president, she wrote in a column for the magazine *Woman’s Home Companion*, “I want you to write to me. I want you to tell me about the particular problems which puzzle or sadden you, but I also want you to write me about what has brought joy into your life.” Little did Eleanor know what was about to happen: she received an estimated 300,000 letters in 1933. Year after year, the flood of correspondence continued. Eleanor was, of course, unable to respond personally to most of the letters, but she did pass many of them on. At first, she sent them to friends and contacts who might be able to help in a particular region of the country, and then to the appropriate government agencies created by New Deal legislation.<sup>1</sup> She also discussed them in her radio show and daily newspaper column.

Many of the letters to Eleanor were written by young people. During these years of the Great Depression, they wrote about their families’ material and financial needs in food, clothing, and shelter; their health problems, including polio and tuberculosis; their hopes for their own education and the future; and the lack of income that so severely affected all aspects of their lives. Often, they asked for an outright loan.

The hand-written letters, collected over the years of the Roosevelt administration, are archived at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, where they are available to students of history.<sup>2</sup>

### Lesson Plan: Letters to Eleanor

In this cooperative learning activity, I share photocopies of several hand-written letters obtained from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum to teach my students about the Great Depression. Five handouts, which are excerpts of letters, follow. This one-hour classroom lesson helps give a personal meaning to the statistics and textbook descriptions. Students enjoy reading and analyzing a letter by someone close to their own age. It is interesting, for example, how many concerns are shared across the generations, from romance and celebrations (like high school graduation) to hardships and doubts (such as problems with parents or the high cost of life-saving medications).

In the lesson outlined below, I ask students to read a letter carefully and then categorize the concerns of the young person who is writing: Do the topics of this young person’s letter reflect a social, political, or economic concern? Students discuss in small groups the contents of the letter and how parts of it might fit into one or more of these categories. Sometimes the categorizing is simple, and yet sometimes the task is more complex. The final class discussion relates the letter writers’ concerns with what my students are learning from other sources about the causes and consequences of the Great Depression.

It would be misleading to have students count the results of their categorization. There should be no numerical “summing up” of concerns: the sample size of letters is much too small and the categories are not precisely defined. See page 5 of Robert Cohen’s *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt* for a summary of letter topics.<sup>3</sup>

The point of the lesson is to personalize descriptions of what life was like for many Americans during the Great Depression.

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### On the Cover

A young drought refugee from Oklahoma, 1935.  
© Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of  
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### Middle Level Learning

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## Auctions and Evictions

Throughout the middle west the tension between the farmers and authorities has been growing ... as a result of tax and foreclosure sales. In many cases, evictions have been prevented only by mass action on the part of the farmers. However, until the Cichon homestead near Elkhorn, Wisconsin, was besieged on December 6 by a host of deputy sheriffs armed with machineguns, rifles, shotguns, and tear-gas bombs, there had been no actual violence ... Cichon is not a trouble-maker. He enjoys the confidence of his neighbors, who only recently elected him justice of the peace of the town of Sugar Creek. ...

Source: *The Nation*, 1932, quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1980), 379.

Interesting questions can follow:

- Do students see any connection between the experiences of individual citizens and the policies of the federal government?
- What about the young people (and adults) in the 1930s who were not literate or afraid to write a letter: how would their living conditions have compared with the situations of those who were able and bold enough to write Eleanor?
- To what degree should government get involved in the economy when unemployment becomes a common problem?

Similar questions are relevant in today's discussions of public policy.<sup>4</sup>

### Classroom Procedures

The teacher divides the class into small groups of five students each, and hands each group a folder that contains the handouts that follow on pp. 4-8 (letters to Eleanor) and a copy of these steps:

1. The students determine the group member whose birthday is the closest to today. This person is the group leader, who keeps the group on task. The person sitting to the left is the recorder, who notes the outcome of the group's discussions. The next person to the left is the timekeeper, who helps delimit discussions by timing them.

The next person is the reporter, who will eventually share this group's findings with the class. Next is the group liaison, who is the only person who can talk to the teacher during the exercise.

2. The group leader distributes letters to Eleanor to members of the group (see following five handouts, for example).

3. Each member reads the letter in hand, examining it specifically for evidence of the social, economic, and political consequences of the Great Depression.

4. The timekeeper allows group members a couple of minutes to read their letters. Then each student gets 3 to 5 minutes to describe his or her letter to the group, addressing specifically the social, economic, and political consequences of the Great Depression as they were affecting the young author of the letter. Some topics may overlap into more than one category, and the group may devise its own method for dealing with these topics.

5. The liaison may ask the teacher's advice at any point. The reporter summarizes the discussion as it happens.

6. The leader should encourage all of the group members to speak. The similarities and differences between the letters could also be discussed. If there is time, ask this question: What has been learned from these letters beyond what was explained in the class textbook (or other readings) about

the Great Depression?

7. At 35 minutes into the lesson, the reporters share their groups' findings with the whole class.

8. At the end of the hour, the liaison should gather the reporter's work and all of the letters into the folder and return it to the teacher. 📁

### Notes

1. Maurine H. Beasley, Holly D. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001): 112, 355, 377, 426, 593.
2. Photocopies of the hand-written letters may be obtained (at fifty cents a page) by contacting the FDR Presidential Library and Museum. Send your request by fax (845-486-1147), attn: Archives Department. Provide as full a citation as possible. The FDR Presidential Library and Museum is located at 4079 Albany Post Road, Hyde Park, NY 12538. Phone: (845) 486-7770; Website: [www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu).
3. A large selection of letters is in Robert Cohen, *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), as reviewed in *Social Education* by Wynell Schamel May/June 2004 on page 289. Students who want to read the full text of the letters excerpted in the handouts below (pp. 4-8) can find most of them in this book.
4. Lesson plans and excerpts of letters can also be found in Robert Cohen, "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Cries for Help from Depression Youth," *Social Education* 60, no. 5 (September 1996): 271-276. The theme of that issue was "The Great Depression," which is archived at [www.socialstudies.org/members](http://www.socialstudies.org/members), for NCSS members.

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## Handout 1

Stillmore, Georgia  
October 14, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Probably you are wondering who is writing you. I am Welthie S\_\_\_\_\_. I was born in Louisiana and lived there until the year 1933 when we moved to Georgia. I am in the eleventh grade. The reason I am writing you is because I wish to ask you to loan me one hundred dollars (\$100). Please if you can lend it to me because I really need it. I will pay you back. ... The reason for my asking you to lend it to me are these.

First, I wish to have my teeth attended to. I'm having a terrible time with two of my teeth. One I keep filled with a piece of cotton with camphor on it, the other I can't because it won't stay in and under my jaw on that side there is a hard ball in the inside caused whenever my tooth gets sore and it hurts all the time. All my teeth are decayed except for my front teeth and they are starting to decay. I can't have them fixed because my daddy hasn't the money to fix them ....

The second reason is I want to buy me some clothes. I haven't bought any this year. All I have except two were given me by my sisters, they are married. Papa won't buy me any. It's always wait, take your time. Anyway I can't get along with them and its not my fault. Papa hates me and every time he gets angry, he takes it out on me. Anything that gets lost he blames on me and he says that I hid it. I'm not that kind of a person and I don't. Mama and me are always quarreling and its her,

she's always picking at me and I can't help but answer her back when she talks to me. She sure believes in whipping. We've been in fusses lately here lately and she told me he wasn't going to have anything to do with me, papa said so also. Papa is always threatening to whip me and tells me that he is going to use his shoe on me. ...

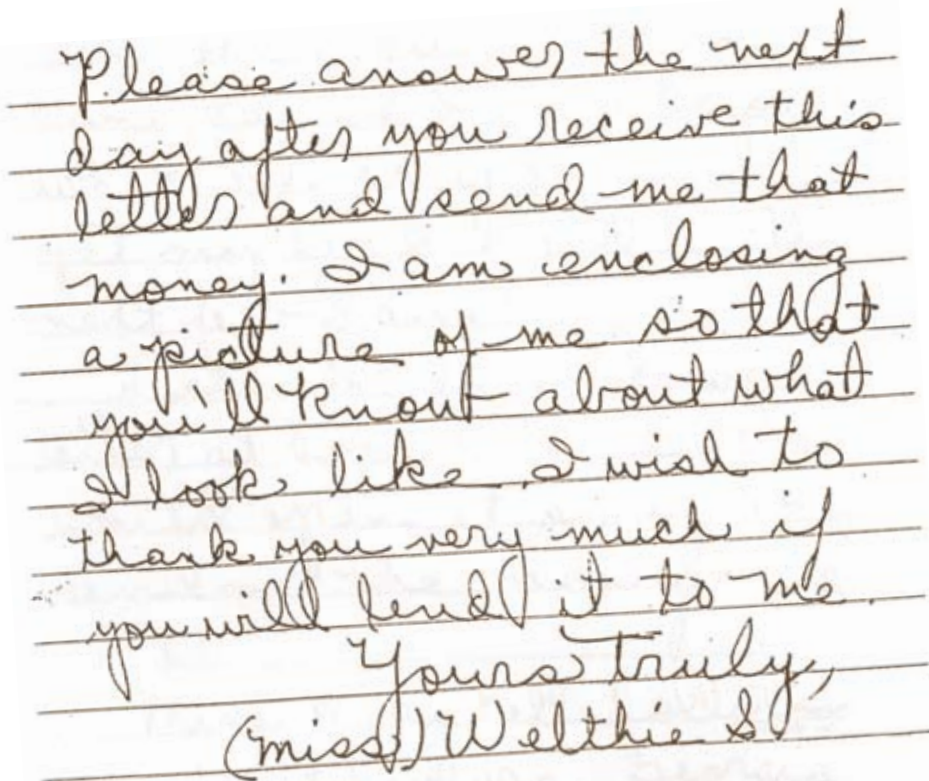
The third reason is that I want to have money enough to buy my clothes when I graduate. I will have to buy invitations and my diploma also.

The fourth reason is that when I graduate I'm going to go into training to be a nurse. To enter I will need about \$15.00. Mama and papa do not intend for me to work,. They expect me to stay home the rest of my life unless I get married. Mama says a decent girl cannot get a job. ...

My family is not a low class, they are among the nicest people of the town, but nobody knows what is under the surface of a family. So please do not ever mention this to any one. I trusted that you wouldn't ever tell this, so please destroy this letter. I have told mama I'm going to leave, she doesn't know where I'm going, she said I was crazy and doesn't believe I'll leave. ...

I'm a good student in school, my marks are A's and B's, mostly A's. I'm leaving home next week so won't you lend me this money?... Please answer the next day after you receive this letter and send me that money. I am enclosing a picture of me so that you'll know about what I look like. I wish to thank you very much if you will lend it to me.

Yours truly,  
(Miss) Welthie S.



Please answer the next day after you receive this letter and send me that money. I am enclosing a picture of me so that you'll know about what I look like. I wish to thank you very much if you will lend it to me.

Yours truly,  
(Miss) Welthie S.

## Handout 2

Washington C. H., Ohio  
April 30, 1936

Dearest Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt,

I sincerely hope you read this letter and give it just a small ounce of thought as I know you must receive so many you just discard them without perusing them.

By the way, I'm twenty-one and old enough to vote this year. Even if I didn't like President Roosevelt, which isn't true, my father said I had to vote for him. Even so, no one should have to be told to cast their ballot for him. They should know he cannot be beaten.

This isn't a plea, sob story, etc. I'm merely presenting my case which, no doubt, won't seem nearly so pathetic to you as it does to me.

Nevertheless, my boyfriend & I have been going together six years, and cannot possibly get married. Why? No job, no money, & no place to get either one. You'll probably say to yourself, well, he could get a job if he tried hard enough, but he has been all over our town, all over adjacent towns, in fact every nook & cranny he can find to go to. We live in what you might term a village, went to a small town high school, and, of course, when you cannot afford to go on to college, you have to trade, whatsoever. Where does that put you? Simply in that lower class who yell "strawberries," or "Lady, do you want your trash hauled today?" etc. Mrs. Roosevelt, we are both from very decent and respectable families but are just of the middle class of people; can make a living comfortably but can give no help. We have tried to get small loans to get married and go to housekeeping on, but they say we are only young kids and can't take the responsibility of paying a

loan. Then too, they charge such a high rate of interest and make the payments so high, you just couldn't possibly do it. ...

Well, last week my boyfriend got a job which varies from ten to twenty dollars a week, according to the weather. And again we tried, but was turned down as we had to have fifty or seventy-five dollars, down payment on furniture.

I'm asking you, would you loan us two hundred dollars, make your own terms and interest, and you'll get every cent of it back? We would sign a note, or an I.O.U. or whatever you like. Please, please think this over. We counted, added, & did everything last night and found we could furnish a house very nicely for two hundred seventy eight dollars and fifty three cents. ...

I have listened to practically all of your talks, and also, the Presidents. I'm sure I could love you both if I had the chance.

My father is an architect and contractor and you know what chances they had, during the depression. Absolutely none. Well, since President Roosevelt has been in that work has picked up from year to year and is now good enough to make my parents a comfortable living. Daddy is sixty-three and Mother is fifty-six. They are the dearest, sweetest dad and mother in the world.

Well, I've probably bored you to death with troubles that don't mean a thing to you ... If you loan us the two hundred dollars, you'll get every cent in return and more, according to your rate of interest. Please let me hear from you.

Sincerely yours,

Miss Willa D. \_\_\_\_\_

Dearest Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt:

I sincerely hope you read this letter and give it just a small ounce of thought as I know you must receive so many you just discard them without perusing them.

By the way, I'm twenty-one and old enough to vote this year. Even if I didn't like President Roosevelt, which isn't true, my father said I had to vote for him. Even so, no one should have to be told to cast their ballot for him. They should know he cannot be beaten.

This isn't a plea, sob story, etc. I'm

### Handout 3

Brunswick, Georgia  
Aug. 4, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Having the very highest respect for you as "First Lady of the Land" and feeling that you have much interest in and deepest sympathy for suffering humanity, I am appealing to you on the behalf of the aged people of my race and community who are in need of care and attention.

I am a colored girl of nineteen (19) years of age and a high school graduate. My main source of pleasure lies in caring for helpless people and especially the aged.

There are unfortunately in my community many people who are old and unable to care for themselves properly, and it is for these people I am seeking aid.

I am quite sure those in charge of this work are doing their duties yet the physical conditions of these people will not allow them to care for themselves properly.

My one hope is to have an institution established for the purpose of caring for the aged, one in which they might be able to enjoy real comfort, well-prepared meals which are so essential to health, happiness and peace, as well as comfortable surroundings.

I feel as though they deserve consideration along this line in as much as their lives have been for the most part, lives of hard work and sacrifice; and perhaps most of them have never actually known real pleasure, and being deeply indebted to them for their many sacrifices, I feel it my duty to appeal for aid on their behalf.

I am totally unable financially to carry out the plans I have in mind, as are other interested members of my race, however I shall be very happy to contribute my time and self in whatever way I might be of assistance. I am not asking for you for a personal donation, but am humbly begging that you consider my plans and aid me in securing funds for carrying them out.

Believing in you as I do, I am sure you won't refuse me your aid and though I shall never be able to repay you and they can never hope to do so, I know that you will find supreme joy in the knowledge that you have aided a deserving and needy group, moreover our Heavenly Father will reward you for this kindness even as he has blessed you with the honor of being the nation's First Lady.

Please help me, I beg of you in my effort to aid these unfortunates. And may I, please expect a reply?

Sincerely Yours,  
H. E. G."

*Hear Mrs Roosevelt,  
Having the very highest respect  
for you as "First Lady" of the Land"  
and feeling that you have much in-  
terest in and deepest sympathy for  
suffering humanity, I am appealing  
to you on the behalf of the aged  
people of my*

#### Handout 4

Birmingham, Alabama  
January 31, 1940

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am a negro boy who sang for you when you visited our school a few years ago in Birmingham.

I have attended College one year and one month. Due to the lack of money, I had to quit school and try to find work so that I could continue my education. I have looked everywhere, but Cannot find anything to do. I am very eager to finish schooling, but I cannot find work at all. Some days I walks over twenty miles trying to find work, but all in vain. All of my efforts have been a complete failure. So Mrs. Roosevelt I appeal to you for help.

The course that I was taking requires two years of college training then one is eligible to teach for a limited time of six years. I need only six more months of training then I will be able to help myself. Please Mrs. Roosevelt, send me a donation so as to help me in this dilemma. I do not have relatives that is in a position to give me any financial support, so you see Mrs. Roosevelt, my future is very dark and discouraging. You are the only one that I know to come to for relief, please look at my condition, and consider this matter noteworthy because I am striving to be somebody, and I am trying in my young days.

Please let me hear from you. I can get the other six months of College training for \$160. It wouldn't be that much but when I left, I wasn't able to pay my back loan and before I re enter I must pay it before I can get my credits.

Please don't think hard of me, Mrs. Roosevelt, but I didn't have any one else to call on but you.

Yours Truly,  
A. L.

Tulsa, Okla.  
Aug 16, 1934

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

If this letter ever reaches your hand please, please read it.

I am a negro girl, 17 years old, just finished the Washington High School and am trying to go to college. Mrs. Roosevelt I have [heard] of how you are helping the white women and girls; and the president has opened C.C.C. Camps for both colored and white but we negro girls don't get a break.

I have a mother dependent on me and I am working for S.E.A.'s of this address at \$6.00 per week. I am trying to save out of this to go to college in mid-term. My letter perhaps has no significance to you; but I am asking you for assistance. Would you please Mrs. Roosevelt give me \$25.00 before January 1st. By Dec. 25th I will have saved \$50.00 with \$25.00 more I would be able to pay room, board, tuition and books. Would have about \$15.00 left over for the second term.

If you get this letter and would like to find out something about me, you may write to the school from which I finished or the people for whom I worked. Hoping to hear from you.

Respectfully yours  
B. L.

January 31, 1940  
Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt  
The White House Building  
Washington D. C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am a negro boy who sang for you when you visited our school a few years ago in Birmingham.

I have attended College one year and one month. Due to the lack of money, I had to quit school and try

to find work so that I would be able to continue my education.

## Handout 5

Salt Lake City, Utah  
November 9, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt;

I read in the Current Events column about you being awarded a medal and \$1,000. I also read what you decided to use it for. You see I had a stroke of Infantile Paralysis four years ago last July the eleventh. I stayed in the state Hospital, at Oklahoma city, four months they just put braces on me. I've worn one for the last four years, they have told me they have done all they could. Aside from keeping braces on me, I might possibly out-grow it. I am only fourteen years old. And I think if I had money enough to go to Warm Springs I might be well. ... If you haven't already decided to give the money to some other child I would never be able to express my appreciation, if you would give it to me. I think it was awfully kind of you to use the money that if it doesn't help me it will do me good to know it helped some other child suffering from infantile paralysis. Won't you write to me and tell me whether or not you'll give me the money?...

Yours truly,  
R. W.

Cleveland, Ohio  
November 10, 1940

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am a boy of 17, I quit school 2 years ago in order to find a job. Since my dad died 3 years ago we haven't been able to do so good. We stretched his insurance money so far as it would go, but now we have to face it.

We are 2 months behind in our rent and the 3d falling due this Wednesday, the 13th. We pay \$15 a month for 4 rooms. There are 5 of us, mother, 3 boys and myself. I really wouldn't be writing this, but I can't see ourselves evicted from our house. We've got till Wednesday to get either all or at least a half of our rent paid up. It would be all right if it was only me because I could take care of myself one way or another. My mother can't get work because she just recovered from tuberculosis and must rest. I am afraid that if nothing comes up I will turn to crime as a means of getting financial help. ...

You might say, why don't we go on relief, well you just can't convince my mother on that. She said she would rather starve than get relief.

I am working as a grocery store clerk at \$8.00 a week. We could get along on this in summer but not in winter on account of the coal problem. ...

Will you please be so kind as to answer this letter in some way. And will you please congratulate your husband for us for winning the election. ...

Thanks Ever So Much  
V. B. F.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am a boy of 17,  
I quit school 2 years ago in order to  
find a job. Since my dad died  
3 years ago we haven't been able  
to do so good. We stretched his  
insurance money as far as it would  
go, but now we have to face it.

We are behind 2 months in  
our rent and the 3rd falling due  
this Wednesday, the 13th. We pay  
\$15 a month for 4 rooms. There  
are 5 of us, mother, 3 boys and  
myself. I really wouldn't be writing  
this but I can't see ourselves evi-  
cted from our house. We've got till



# Will the Senate Confirm “Karl B. Fennin”?

## A Classroom Simulation

WILLIAM E. AMBURN

STUDENTS CAN LEARN GREAT LESSONS when placed in decision-making roles. Simulating a Senate confirmation hearing can give students a glimpse of how government works and a chance to evaluate historical figures and issues. Any simulation, however, is an imperfect imitation of a real event. Having to make a decision based on incomplete information reveals some of the limits of our knowledge and wisdom. Middle school students wrestle with these challenges, and several others, in the following simulation.

### A Qualified Choice

Article II, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution states that the president “shall nominate, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall appoint ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, judges of the Supreme Court, and all other officers of the United States.”

The news media often closely cover debates in the Senate over the nomination of Supreme Court justices, cabinet secretaries, and heads of government institutions such as the Federal Communications Commission (the FCC) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Sometimes these hearings become heated debates, but historically, the Senate usually approves a president’s choice for an appointment. If such senate hearings are ongoing during the school year, this lesson links to current events as well as to civics and history.

An ambassador is one who lives in a foreign country while officially representing his or her home nation. The appointment of ambassadors is usually not contested greatly in the Senate. Ambassadors are routinely confirmed without much discussion, but in this activity, there may be some debate among students because they receive, in the simulation, information about the candidate that could prove to be controversial. In this simulation, students must ask themselves,

What should be the qualifications of an ambassador?

Does the fictitious nominee, Karl B. Fennin, meet these qualifications? Why or why not?

What else would I like to know about Mr. Fennin and his history of public service before deciding whether he is qualified to be an ambassador to France?

### Classroom Procedures

1. Tell students that you want them to learn about the process of appointing and confirming an ambassador to a foreign country, for example, France.

2. Select two students to write down ideas on the front board that their fellow students state about the possible qualifications of the job of

ambassador. Give the whole class about five minutes to brainstorm qualifications, then have students discuss the resulting list. Do the students think it would be important for an ambassador to

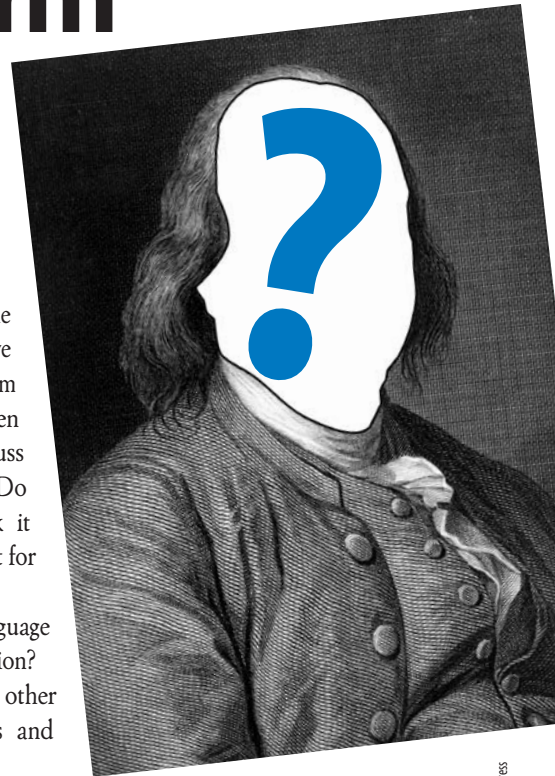
- speak the language of the host nation?
- be tolerant of other ethnic groups and cultures?
- be skilled at diplomacy and negotiation?
- be loyal to his home country?
- be candid and open? (Or be demure and circumspect?)
- be known for evenhandedness and a cool temper? (Or be known as loud and aggressive?)

3. Divide the class into groups of five students each. Pass out Handout 1 about ambassadorial nominee Karl B. Fennin, and ask students to silently read it. The handout includes quotes from Mr. Fennin’s writings, and it mentions a few of his activities. One might think, from reading these selections, that Mr. Fennin might be a rather narrow-minded and eccentric person.

4. Have the groups of students (i.e., the senators) develop questions to ask this ambassadorial candidate based on their list of qualifications and what they have now read about the nominee in the handout.

5. The students now act as members of the Senate subcommittee—they interview the nominee, “Karl B. Fennin,” as played by the teacher. In this role, the teacher should answer questions in the spirit of Benjamin Franklin (to the best of your ability), without revealing the actual source of this persona. Each group takes turns asking a prepared question, until all of them have been asked. (If you would rather not play this part, skip to the next step, 6).

6. A whole class discussion ensues. Do the senators think that this man might make a good ambassador to France? Why or why not? Students should discuss the pros and cons of Mr. Fennin as a candidate, based on information in Handout 1 (and the nominee’s remarks, if step 5 was undertaken). It is important that the students take charge of this part of the process, with one student acting as Vice President, who presides over the discussion by choosing who gets to speak.



Library of Congress

# Items of Interest regarding the Ambassadorial Nominee

## First Quote

[The immigrants] who come [to America] are generally of the most ignorant stupid sort of their own nation, . . . Their own clergy have very little influence over the people ... Not being used to liberty, they know not how to make a modest use of it ... they are not esteemed men till they have shown their manhood by beating their mothers... now they come in droves ... Few of their children in the country learn English ... the signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages ... They begin of late to make all their bonds and other legal writings in their own language, which (though I think it ought not to be) are allowed good in our courts ... they will soon so out number us, that all the advantages we have will not in my opinion be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.

## Second Quote

The Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. ... In Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased....

## A Few of the Nominee's Public Activities

He has written many opinion pieces to newspapers, often under a false name, or pseudonym.

He has drawn cartoons and written an advice column for a newspaper.

He has formed political discussion clubs and volunteer firefighter groups.

He has investigated physical phenomena, but not as a university professor or licensed engineer.

He is an avid body builder and a good swimmer.

# Incidents from the Life of Benjamin Franklin

## Squelching a Race Riot, 1763

Twenty five years before the American Revolution of 1776, many of the men who would found the new nation were loyal subjects of the British Crown. Benjamin Franklin worked for the King. His first diplomatic assignment was as Pennsylvania Indian Commissioner. He printed accounts of treaty councils conducted with Native American tribes. He studied Native American culture and politics, and discussed political ideas with the Indians,<sup>1</sup> but he was ready to call in the militia to fight if any settlers were attacked.

In 1763, the British and French signed a peace treaty, creating a truce that ended the French and Indian War, but it did not extend to Native Americans. Some Indian tribes continued to attack colonial settlers on the western Pennsylvania frontier. These attacks inflamed the hatred of many colonialists toward Native Americans in general. In retaliation, a gang of colonists massacred a group of peaceful Indians—twenty unarmed men, women, and children—the last of the Conestoga tribe, whose members had first welcomed pioneers into Pennsylvania.

Moravian farmers (a group of immigrants from Eastern Europe) protected another group of more than one hundred friendly Native Americans from attack near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and arranged to transport them to Philadelphia for safety. As a result, racial tensions flared in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania. The gang of armed frontiersmen (from the town of Paxton, on the Susquehanna River) gathered, wishing to massacre them all. Benjamin Franklin, at great political risk, lobbied to protect the Native Americans, writing

If an Indian injures me, does it follow that I may revenge that injury on all Indians? . . . If it be right to kill men for such a reason, then, should any man with a freckled face and red hair kill a wife or child of mine, it would be right for me to revenge it by killing all the freckled red-haired men, women and children I could afterwards anywhere meet with.<sup>2</sup>

As rioters approached Philadelphia, the governor made a midnight visit to Franklin for advice. Franklin swiftly gathered an armed posse of about one thousand men to defend the city. Franklin's wife, Deborah, armed herself and refused to leave the Franklin home, even though the residence was a target of the rioters. Franklin's well-equipped militia encountered the unruly mob, and Franklin negotiated with its leaders, persuading them to return home to their farms. The Native Americans were saved, and Philadelphia avoided an ugly fight. The murderers among the Paxton mob, however, were never brought to justice.<sup>3</sup>

## Promoting Abolition, 1789

While Benjamin Franklin owned slaves who worked as personal servants, he also approved language in the rough draft of the Declaration of Independence that strongly condemned the King of England for promulgating the slave trade. The Continental Congress, however, removed the anti-slavery passages from the final document.<sup>4</sup>

Decades later, Franklin was chosen to be president of one of the first anti-slavery societies in America, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. He also cooperated with various organizations to enhance legal, economic, and social opportunities for freed slaves. This campaign included an initiative to create black schools, assist free blacks to obtain work, promote family-friendly values, and improve the social conditions of black children.

In his will, Franklin freed his own slaves. In 1789, as one of his final public acts, Franklin wrote an anti-slavery treatise condemning the horrors of slavery, and signed a petition to the United States Congress urging abolition. Regrettably, Congress could not resolve the issue. The conflict over slavery in the United States continued for two generations, finally exploding into the Civil War.

### Notes

1. H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 118-119.
2. Whether or to what degree the Founders used the Iroquois Confederacy as a model for their own nation building is a matter of debate. See, for example, chapter 2 in Bruce E. Johansen, *Shapers of the Great Debate on Native Americans: Land, Spirit, and Power* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000).
3. Benjamin Franklin, "A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a Number of Indians, Friends..." *London Chronicle* (August 13, 1761), [www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFrWr.html](http://www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFrWr.html).
4. Brands, pp. 350-355.

7. The senators vote to accept or reject this nominee as the ambassador to France.

### De-coding and De-briefing

After a discussion of 10 or 15 minutes, the teacher challenges the class to figure out the nominee's true identity: "Karl B. Fennin is an anagram of a famous American. Can you unscramble the letters in the name to discover who?" If students struggle without solving the mystery, give them further hints. For example, "This person represented the newly independent America in France during the Revolutionary War. He was quite a success in that assignment, securing military and economic assistance from that nation."<sup>1</sup>

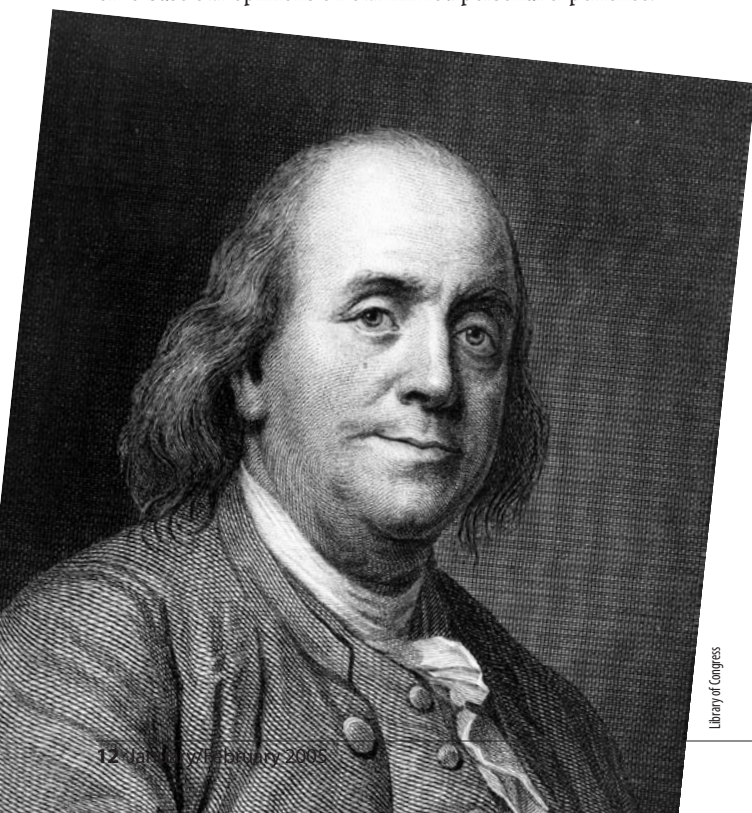
Are students surprised that Franklin was the author of the quotes in Handout 1?

This simulation is rather curious ("unfair" some students may say—and they are right!) because:

- Only a very narrowly selected bit of information was provided about the nominee in Handout 1.
- Ben Franklin lived long ago, and students, acting as senators, must make decisions about the world as it is today.
- Ben Franklin's own beliefs about ethnicity changed. They evolved over his life as he experienced more of the world and his fellow humans. The quotes in Handout 1 provide just a few "snapshots" of his thinking at a single moment. They are taken out of the context of his life and the era in which he lived.

Now provide students with a copy of Handout 2, the article, "Incidents in the Life of Benjamin Franklin," and invite them to silently read it (or, if the time is up, read it for homework) and be prepared to discuss Handouts 1 and 2, the nomination process, and the results of the classroom simulation.

Franklin's statement about a hypothetical prejudice against "freckled red-haired men" is worth reading aloud and then discussing in light of the all-too-human temptation to be intolerant of people's differences or to base our opinions on our limited personal experience.



Library of Congress

### Final Discussion Topics

There are many interesting aspects of this simulation that middle school students could wrestle with. In addition to the many interesting aspects of history (Franklin's biography,<sup>2</sup> immigration in America, and the gradual expansion of civil rights as evidenced in Constitutional amendments), a teacher could discuss the danger of judging character from one quote taken out of context, the error of maintaining a "foolish consistency" in one's opinions, people's "natural" reaction of fear or dislike (such as "culture shock") when confronted with foreign people and unfamiliar behavior, and the importance of keeping an open mind in one's own dealing with other human beings.

Some of the complexities of "judging" the writings of a historical figure follow in the short essay "Benjamin Franklin's Evolving Views on Race and Ethnicity," which the teacher can use for her own background or possibly distribute to the students.

### Assessments

Allow students to choose one of these assignments:

Explain why you accepted or rejected the nomination of Karl B. Fennin as ambassador to France (at a point midway in the lesson, before knowing his true identity). Give specific examples why this nominee fit or did not seem to fit the criteria for an ambassador to France.

Write a one-page essay about Benjamin Franklin, explaining why he was worried about non-English speaking people and how his beliefs changed over time.

Write a fictitious newspaper column, penned by Ben Franklin, in which he defends himself against political foes who would criticize his appointment as America's representative to France.

### Extension/Enrichments

Research the biography of a recent or current presidential nominee for Supreme Court justice, cabinet secretary, or chief administrator of a federal institution.

Review and discuss a section of the transcripts of a recent Senate confirmation hearing.

What made Ben Franklin such a successful diplomat in France? How did British officials view his earlier service in London as representative of the Thirteen Colonies? Allow a student who would like to explore Franklin's biography in more depth to do so. Any one of the aspects of Franklin's life listed at the end of Handout 2 would make a good research topic. 🌐

### Notes

1. Bob Benoit, "They Are Not Like Us!": Teaching about Immigration in Rural Schools," *Social Education* 55, no. 6 (October 1991): 396-397. Includes a lesson plan.
2. David A. Adler, *B. Franklin, Printer* (New York: Holiday House, 2003); Candace Fleming, *Ben Franklin's Almanac* (New York: Atheneum Books, 2003).

### Web Resources

[bensguide.gpo.gov](http://bensguide.gpo.gov), A student's guide to government.  
[usembassy.state.gov](http://usembassy.state.gov), A list of all U.S. embassies.  
[www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), The Senate's website for the public.  
[www.appointee.brookings.org/sg/c2-1.htm](http://www.appointee.brookings.org/sg/c2-1.htm), A "Survivor's Guide for Presidential Nominees."

**William E. Amburn** is a social studies teacher at Central Middle School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

# Benjamin Franklin's Evolving Views on Race and Ethnicity

STEVEN S. LAPHAM AND ANDREW SAUNDERS

HOW DO STUDENTS react when they read this passage (see page 10)?

[The immigrants] who come [to America] are generally of the most ignorant stupid sort of their own nation, . . . Their own clergy have very little influence over the people ... Not being used to liberty, they know not how to make a modest use of it ... they are not esteemed men till they have shown their manhood by beating their mothers... now they come in droves ... Few of their children in the country learn English...

The author is none other than Benjamin Franklin—inventor, diplomat, and founder—writing in 1753 about German immigrants to America.<sup>1</sup> Without knowing that, however, some readers might guess that the author was writing in the second half of the 1800s, during the great wave of Chinese immigration, or in the early 1900s, when immigrants from Eastern Europe crowded onto Ellis Island. Others might guess that it's a letter to the editor from a current newspaper.

## “Swarthy” Germans and the Peculiar Institution

Franklin was clearly unhappy about the great number of Germans who were immigrating to his home town of Philadelphia, even though many supported him by patronizing his printing business.<sup>2</sup> Before the Revolutionary War, he grumbled about Philadelphia's bilingual (English and German) street signs and complained that the Pennsylvania parliament needed to use translators. After the war, people considered whether English or German should be the national language, and Franklin did not

like the German option. For example, he wrote

Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.. Which leads me to add one Remark: That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. ...<sup>3</sup>

More telling than his negative comments about Germans' shortcomings, was Franklin's early attitude to slavery. In the 1730s, Franklin's newspaper, the *Philadelphia Gazette*, carried advertisements for black slaves, and he himself apparently participated in the slave trade, acting at the very least as the contact man for buyers and sellers.<sup>4</sup>

After reading the passages above, it might be easy for readers to jump to the conclusion that Ben Franklin was simply a racist. Before becoming attached to that opinion, however, it is worth taking a moment to read about a couple of other things that Franklin did in his long life.

## Squelching a Race Riot, 1763

Benjamin Franklin's first diplomatic assignment was as Pennsylvania Indian Commissioner. He printed accounts of treaty councils conducted with Native American tribes. He



studied Native American culture and politics, and discussed political ideas with the Indians,<sup>5</sup> but was not averse to calling in the militia to fight tribes that attacked settlers.

In 1763, in the aftermath of the French and Indian wars, a gang of armed frontiersmen (from the town of Paxton, on the Susquehanna River) gathered, wishing to massacre communities of innocent Indians who were not involved in the fighting. Benjamin Franklin, at great political risk, lobbied to protect the Native Americans, writing

If an Indian injures me, does it follow that I may revenge that injury on all Indians? . . . If it be right to kill men for such a reason, then, should any man with a freckled face and red hair kill a wife or child of mine, it would be right for me to revenge it by killing all the freckled red-haired men, women and children I could afterwards anywhere meet with.<sup>6</sup>

Franklin formed a well-equipped militia that encountered the unruly mob, and he negotiated with its leaders, persuading them to return home to their farms. The Native Americans were saved, and Philadelphia avoided an ugly fight. The murderers among the Paxton mob, however, were never brought to justice.<sup>7</sup>

### Promoting Abolition, 1789

While Benjamin Franklin owned slaves who worked as personal servants, he also approved language in the rough draft of the Declaration of Independence that strongly condemned the King of England for promulgating the slave trade. The Continental Congress, however, removed the anti-slavery passages from the final document.<sup>8</sup>

Decades later, Franklin was chosen to be president of one of the first anti-slavery societies in America, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. He also cooperated with various organizations to enhance legal, economic, and social opportunities for freed slaves. This campaign included an initiative to create black schools, assist free blacks to obtain work, promote family-friendly values, and improve the social conditions black children.

### 20-20 Hindsight in the 21st Century

It would be easy to condemn Franklin as a racist if one looked only at the first two passages quoted in this article and did not consider the rest of his life's work. There is much more that could be written about Benjamin Franklin's contribution to the idea that "all men are created equal." It is especially easy to criticize him from our vantage point here in the twenty-first century, after a Civil War, constitutional amendments, a Civil Rights Movement, and the science of genetics have all weighed in against the concept of race and its social expressions as slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other discriminatory practices.<sup>9</sup>

Today, when nearly a quarter of U.S. citizens claim German ancestry to some

degree, Franklin's worries about German immigrants sound silly.<sup>10</sup> But Franklin did not have the knowledge that we have gained through two centuries of struggle, immigration, legislation, and learning. He was writing in these letters to his contemporaries about real problems that he observed in society (such as those that arise when neighbors do not understand each other's language) and what he thought about them. His general opinions in 1753 about ethnic groups were common for his time.

What is notable about Franklin's opinions about race and ethnicity is how they evolved over his lifetime, becoming more tolerant and egalitarian as he grew older. Biographers point to many aspects of Franklin's life, and the changing social world of which he was a part, to account for this evolution of thought. For example,

- Franklin crossed the Atlantic Ocean eight times and lived abroad for almost a third of his life. Thus, he was exposed to, and worked intimately with, people from various cultures.
- Franklin lived during a great revolution of thought, the Enlightenment, as well as a political revolution of independence, both of which advocated the equality of all men despite conditions of birth (such as bloodline or ownership of land). He corresponded regularly with many of the great social philosophers of his day.
- During his lifetime, Franklin observed the Quakers (the Society of Friends) undergo a gradual, century-long process of discussion about slavery, culminating in 1776, when Philadelphia Quakers prohibited any member of their meeting from owning a slave.<sup>11</sup>
- Franklin had personal encounters that led him to question the truthfulness of the claim that one ethnic group was superior to another. One encounter was his visit to a school where young African children were being taught. In 1763, he wrote, "I was on the whole much pleased, and from what I then

saw, have conceived a higher opinion of the natural capacities of the black race, than I had ever before entertained."<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Benjamin Franklin's opinions and behaviors evolved over his lifetime means that he never stopped learning, and never stopped asking questions. 🌐

### Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin, "The German Problem in Pennsylvania" (Letter, 9 May 1753). The complete and unedited text of this letter can be found in *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2, John Bigelow, ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1887): 291. A lesson plan based on a modern phrasing of this letter was published in 1991: Bob Benoit, "They Are Not Like Us!": Teaching about Immigration in Rural Schools," *Social Education* 55, no. 6 (October 1991): 396-397.
2. Ben Franklin had good things to say about Germans and German immigrants. See, for example, [www.pbs.org/benfranklin/about.html](http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/about.html). A vast collection of primary documents is at FrankLinks, [www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFRWr.html](http://www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFRWr.html). The Franklin Institute Online has a list of useful resources at [sln.fi.edu/franklin/books.html](http://sln.fi.edu/franklin/books.html).
3. Benjamin Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c." (1751), [www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFRWr.html](http://www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFRWr.html).
4. H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 118-119. Also: "In later life Franklin would come to view slavery as a pernicious institution incompatible with justice, humanity, or emerging republican values. But in the 1730s, at a time when slavery existed in all of England's American colonies...Franklin's conscience apparently pained him little on the subject [of slavery]."
9. *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (video; New York: PBS, 2002). See the timeline at [www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race); Kevin T. Brady, "Abolitionists Among the Founding Fathers," *Middle Level Learning* 20 (May/June 2004): 2-3.
10. German Embassy, [www.germany-info.org/relaunch/culture/ger\\_americans/paper.html](http://www.germany-info.org/relaunch/culture/ger_americans/paper.html).
11. Margaret Hope Bacon, *The Quiet Rebels: The Story of Quakers in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1969, rev. 1985); The Philadelphia Meeting allowed a schedule for gradual emancipation.
12. *Citizen Ben*, [www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3\\_citizen\\_abolitionist.html](http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3_citizen_abolitionist.html).

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*Images of Ben Franklin: page 12, engraving by H. B. Hall from a 1783 painting by J. A. Duplessis; page 13, detail of 1763 portrait by John Trumbull, Yale University Art Gallery.*

# The Game of History: A Creative Review Activity

CHRISTINE BELL

**PICTURE THIS.** It's the last full day of classes before exams. In most rooms the students are nose-deep in notes and books, studying and cramming for the final. But in my class the students are ... playing board games! If you were to step into the room you would hear, not sighing and moaning, but giggles and guffaws. In one corner of the room the students are actually kneeling on the floor participating in a version of "Twister!" In another corner students are screaming out in joy! "I won!" What is happening here? Has the teacher lost all control? Is rebellion occurring? Is there a need for some form of emergency intervention here? No, the students are actually in the final phase of preparation for their history final exam. I call this project the Cooperative Board Game Project.

## Get Ready

About eight days before the final exam, I give my students a study guide and a new assignment: to create their own board game. I form groups of three students each. They have a week or so to prepare their game, the form of which should be based on anything of interest. The key is that the content of their game must include one hundred questions, written on index cards, which are based only on important information that we have covered in class. The questions should be (1) likely to appear on the test, (2) substantial, and (3) accompanied by correct answers that must be found in class notes or in the class textbook.

Questions and answers are weighted much more heavily than any of the other parts of the game.

There is a participation grade for each student, which I average into each student's group grade. This way, instead of getting only one grade and allowing those who don't work very hard to get a good grade, every student in the group gets a grade that reflects his or her particular effort.

Students must create their own board, box, typed instructions, and moving pieces. They must relate the design of the box and board, in some way, to history. They may not use any game piece, artwork, or illustration from other marketed games.<sup>1</sup>

## Round Robin

On the day just before final exams, students present their games to the class, and then they set up the games around the room in stations. Each group is given ten to fifteen minutes to play its own game. Then it moves counterclockwise to the next game station. Each group plays the new game for ten to fifteen minutes, moving counterclockwise again until they've gone around the entire room and played all of the games. In this way, each student has an opportunity to play each of the board games. At the same time, the students are reviewing substantial subject material and are preparing for the upcoming final exam, which will include a few of the best questions written by students.

## Ready for Competition

How much more exciting and fun this is than the student's regular dry exam review! I've seen many truly creative solutions to this board game challenge: a game based on the Matrix movies complete with moving pieces that look like the characters, baseball games, football games, a time machine game, and even a game based on "Twister," which had its own huge oilcloth board, hats to distinguish team members, and very challenging questions.

I've even had students create a game based on my class. This one included pictures of me, my students, examples of work, and assignments. (Go back two steps for chewing gum in class, etc...) I emphasize to my students that the options for these projects are endless. I ask them to have fun with it and be creative, and they always come through with great history questions launched from unusual settings!<sup>2</sup> See the Back Page for directions to hand out to students. 🎲

## Notes

1. A scrap box filled with cardboard tubes, cereal boxes, and plastic bottles with caps is useful during the building phase.
2. I teach World History in high school, but I think this activity could work just as well with middle school students. A longer version of this article originally appeared as "Playing Games" in the *Virginia Journal of Education*, November 2003. Used by permission.

Christine Bell teaches at Lafayette High School in Williamsburg/James City County, Virginia.

# Your Move!

## Create a Board Game and Review History

A ONE-WEEK CLASSROOM ACTIVITY BY CHRISTINE BELL

### Day 1: Invent

1. Invent a board game (a game that fits into a box or a bag) with your team members. Base the game on anything you like: a favorite movie, television show, computer game, sport, or another board game. The game should fit on a tabletop or a small space on the floor. For example, your game could have small pieces moving around on a path on the board, or you could create a game that is similar to “Twister,” in which the game board is printed on a large ground mat. Read through *all* of these instructions before you start thinking about your design—there are more requirements.

2. Sketch out a design showing how the game will look. The design of the board game must relate to the period of history you have just studied. For example, if you have been studying the American Revolution, the game pieces could be named for British, American, French, and citizens of other nationalities who were involved in that war. Silly combinations are okay. For example, your game could include Sponge-Bob characters dressed in clothes from that period of history.

3. Homework: Each team member gathers and brings in lots of the materials needed to build your board game.

### Day 2 - 4: Build

4. Create the various parts of the board game. Every game needs these seven things:

History cards (explained below)

a board or playing field of some kind

an attractive box that the game fits into, with the names of the team members listed on it

game pieces that move around (or students themselves can be the “pieces,” as in “Twister”)

a way to move the pieces around (like spinning an arrow or tossing a coin onto a board of numbers).

a way to keep score

written directions telling other kids how to play your new game

5. Create 100 History Q&A cards. Questions go on one side and correct answers on the other. Draw your questions from the period of history we have been studying. Create the sort of questions you might find on a history test in this class. Use resources in the classroom (such as maps, text books, other books, an encyclopedia, and your class notes) to be sure that your questions are interesting and challenging and answers are correct.

6. Design the game so that these history cards are used frequently while the game is played.

7. Prohibitions: No dice or regular playing cards. No parts from other store-bought board games. No computers of any kind. Your board game will be “retro,” homemade, challenging, and fun.

8. Homework: Each team member helps to finish writing the history cards. Check that each question is unique and correctly answered.

### Day 5: Play

9. On Round Robin Day, groups of students cycle around the room in ten-minute intervals, trying to play the different games, one at a time. Follow the written directions that go with each game as best as you can.

10. Describe any problem on a sheet of paper and leave it with the game. The creative team will study this problem later and maybe amend their work. Types of problems: one part of the directions is not clear; the game does not seem to work quite right; or one of the questions or answers on an index card seems unclear or incorrect.

11. After 15 minutes, move along even if you have not finished playing the current game. Try to sample them all. Go through as many cards as you can at each station. Remember, this is a review in preparation for your history test! You may want to make note of any questions that you answer incorrectly!

12. Homework: Study any problems with the game that other groups discovered. Each team member writes down ways that your team’s game might be improved, or the directions clarified, or the history questions sharpened. And review any history questions that you missed!

### Assessment

Here is how your teacher will evaluate your efforts on this three-day project:

Participation:	On task every minute and follows directions	= 30
Game Design:	Contains all necessary parts, well constructed	= 10
	Cleverness and creativity	= 10
History Content:	100 cards with challenging history Q & A	= 50
<b>Total</b>		<b>= 100 points</b>