

## A More Perfect Union Lesson—Working Draft

**Grade Level and Setting:** Middle or High School (U.S. History or Civics/U.S. Government)

**Lesson Title/Topic:** A More Perfect Union

**Timeframe:** This lesson can be spread over a series of days during a unit that aligns with the content or can be used as a Project Based Learning (PBL) activity.

### Virginia Standards of Learning:

- GOVT.4b The student will apply social science skills to understand the Constitution of the United States by (b) evaluating the purposes for government stated in the Preamble
- Various parts of CE.2 through CE.4 and U.S. History standards as determined by the teacher
- English Standards as determined by the teacher

### Compelling Question and Supporting Questions (or Essential Questions):

CQ: Is American Exceptionalism really exceptional? **or** How could our “more perfect union” become more perfect for everyone?

SQ1: What does, “a more perfect union” mean in the Preamble?

SQ2: What events in U.S. History support American greatness/exceptionalism?

SQ3: What events in U.S. History challenge American greatness/exceptionalism?

SQ4: Does examining and studying difficult periods in U.S. history weaken or strengthen us as a nation?

### Specific Observable Lesson Objective(s):

Student will be able to:

Obj1: Identify the Preamble to the Constitution

Obj2: Compare and evaluate events in U.S. History and determine how various events contribute to the nation in positive and negative ways

Obj3: Analyze the meaning of the poems, “Let America Be America Again” and “Allowables”

Obj4: Explain the attainability of a perfect union and the concept of American exceptionalism

### Essential Vocabulary:

- Literary terms as needed for the poetry: anaphora, imagery, personification, symbolism, irony
- Words from the Poem: (What words might be difficult to understand within the poems?)
- Preamble; Exceptionalism; Perfect

### Assessments:

- Students will complete a response (oral, written, or visual) to the compelling question.

### Materials/ Equipment/Technology: (What’s needed to teach the lesson)

- Constitution and a variety of historical resources as determined by the teacher
- Question Exploration Routine Template
- “Let America Be America Again” poem located at <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>

## A More Perfect Union Lesson—Working Draft

- Video of "Let America Be America Again" located at <https://youtu.be/b6Im4b3kdfc>
- “Allowables” poem located at <https://clinicalaffairs.umn.edu/covid-19-updates/allowables-poem-nikki-giovanni>
- Video of “Allowables” poem located at <https://youtu.be/xX65aKk5P5o>

### Student Considerations: (Accommodations & differentiation to meet diverse learning needs)

- Students with IEPs should benefit from the multiple formats in which the poem is shared and the Socratic seminar allows for independence. The assessment can be completed in a variety of formats. The QER is a teaching device that reaches a wide variety of learning needs and it has a strong research-base.

### Universal Design for Learning (How does the lesson address these categories?)

Representation – Options for presenting content	Engagement – Options for engaging student interest	Expression – Options for demonstrating student learning	Cultural Considerations
<p>Artifacts Pictures Graphic organizers Video Clips Audio Recordings Lab Lecture Other _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>CONTENT</b></p>	<p>Cooperative Group Work Partner Work Manipulatives Movement Debates Role plays or Simulations Other _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PROCESS</b></p>	<p>Written response Illustrated response Oral response Model creation or construction Other _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PRODUCT</b></p>	<p>Nature of content and race/ethnicity/SES of students</p> <p>Other <u>The poems examine ethnicity/race across America</u></p>

### Procedures:

(Be sure you address the **Learning Environment** and **Personnel** in the classroom within this section. It should provide enough detail that a substitute teacher could implement the lesson.)

Personnel: Co-teachers could co-facilitate the discussions using Team Teaching and also use two stations to analyze the poems with one co-teacher at each station.

### The Beginning (aka Anticipatory Set or CUE):

1. Do Now: Have the following questions up around the room for students to answer as they enter the room. What did our founders mean by “a more perfect union” in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution? How do people view America today? How might people view America in the next decade or quarter century?
2. For this learning activity, we are going to examine this idea of “a more perfect union” through the use of a higher order thinking routine called a Question Exploration Routine and we will analyze the poetry of Langston Hughes and Nikki Giovanni. We are beginning to explore the compelling question: How could our “more perfect union” become more perfect for everyone? **or** Is American Exceptionalism really exceptional?
3. We will follow linking steps to guide us through the learning process. These linking steps spell out the word ANSWER. We already Asks a compelling question and now we will Note any key terms and definitions that will help you complete this activity.

## A More Perfect Union Lesson—Working Draft

### The Middle (or Do):

1. The next step is to **S**earch for supporting questions and answers. Divide students into small groups to examine the following questions: What does “a more perfect union” mean in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution? What events in U.S. History support American exceptionalism/greatness? What events in U.S. History challenge American exceptionalism/greatness? Does examining and studying difficult periods in U.S. History weaken or strengthen us as a nation? Give them 3-5 sources to help them respond to these questions. Allow students to suggest and add additional sources or rewrite/add supporting questions as needed.
2. Now, we will **W**ork out a main idea answer. Students will take their responses from the supporting questions and develop either a short essay or presentation to help answer the compelling question. Responses will vary based on student research and the opinions formed.
3. To help us make more connections to the main idea we are addressing, let’s **E**xplore the main idea within the related area of U.S. literature. (*Note: You can co-plan/co-teach with an English teacher to support this part of the lesson*) Share the poem. “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes. Have students read the poem while listening to it: <https://youtu.be/b6Im4b3kdfc> Ask students to do the following during the poem (pause at least 3 times): (1) Mark any phrases or words you found interesting (2) Identify any words we should consider defining as a class (3) place question marks next to any words or phrases where you want clarification.
4. Share the poem. “Allowables” by Nikki Giovanni. Have students read the poem while listening to it: <https://youtu.be/xX65aKk5P5o>. Ask students to do the following during the poem (pause at least 3 times): (1) Mark any phrases or words you found interesting (2) Identify any words we should consider defining as a class (3) place question marks next to any words or phrases where you want clarification.
5. Set the norms for the next activity. Before we begin, each of you will agree to do at least one of the following during seminar: (1) Speak at least 3 times (2) Ask one or more questions (3) Build on the comments of others (4) Take a risk and talk about something you are unsure about.
6. Students will form a circle and will be led through a Socratic seminar structure. Some possible questions: (Some questions adapted from a National Paideia Seminar Lesson Plan developed by Jeremy Spielman)

### Opening of the “Let America Be America Again” Poem

- What is the one word that comes to mind when describing the tone of this poem? (Round-robin response)
- Why did you choose that word? (Spontaneous discussion)

### Body of the Poem

- In sentences 9 and 10 the speaker asks “...who are you that mumbles in the dark... and draws your veil across the stars?” Who is the ‘you’? Why do you think this?
- What groups does the speaker include in this poem? What is the relationship between these disenfranchised groups?
- How does Hughes use repetition to reinforce certain ideas? Is that use of repetition effective? Why or why not?
- Do you hear a shift in tone? If so, at what point in the poem? Refer to the text (a sentence or stanza).
- Look at first part of sentence 34: “O, let America be America again - The land that never has been yet.” What do you think Hughes means by this?

## A More Perfect Union Lesson—Working Draft

### Opening of the “Allowables” Poem

- What is the one word that comes to mind when describing the tone or emotion that is expressed in this poem? (Round-robin response)
- Why did you choose that word? (Spontaneous discussion)

### Body of the Poem

- How does Giovanni use imagery and irony to reinforce certain ideas? Is that use effective? Why or why not?
- Do you hear a shift in tone? If so, at what point in the poem? Refer to the text (a sentence or stanza).
- Look at lines 12-16: “I don’t think I’m allowed To kill something Because I am frightened” What do you think Giovanni means by this statement?

### The End (aka Closing or Review):

1. **Option 1:** Today, there are differing views about how we should teach U.S. history. Some believe that it’s okay to highlight our flaws and challenges, while others feel that the focus should be on our strengths as a nation and those aspects that are identified as exceptional. How do you think U.S. history should be taught in our schools? Develop an action plan for lobbying to support your view about the teaching of U.S. History.
2. **Option 2:** What can you do as an individual to help your community, state, or country become “more perfect” place to live? Create a personal action plan you can implement.

Action Plan Steps: DO IT!

**Define** the problem/issue you want to address

**Outline** options to address the problem/issue and potential outcomes for each option

**Identify** a goal statement and objectives using measurable words

**Take action** by developing an action plan that includes assigned tasks, responsibilities, and a timeframe for completion

**! Get Excited!**

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## Question Exploration Routine Sample

### Ask a Compelling Question

Is American Exceptionalism really exceptional?

or

How could our “more perfect union” become more perfect for everyone?

### Note and Explain Key Terms

Preamble

Exceptionalism

Perfect

Union

Civil rights

The vocabulary chosen is determined by both the teacher and the students. The terms identified should help the student access and better understand the content being studied. This step is particularly important for students with disabilities that impact reading and comprehension.

### Search for Supporting Questions and Answers

These are some suggested questions:

1. What does “a more perfect union” mean in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution?
2. What events in our history support American greatness/exceptionalism?
3. What events in our history challenge American greatness/exceptionalism?
4. Does examining and studying difficult periods in U.S. History weaken or strengthen us as a nation?

Students will complete research related to these questions and then develop responses. The teacher will provide some sources and allow students to add additional sources. The responses will then be used to help form an answer to the compelling question. This step is particularly important for students who need a structure for breaking down a larger question into smaller workable parts.

Students may rewrite these questions or develop new questions of their own based on their level of understanding.

### What is the Main Idea (Compelling Question) Answer?

Students will research and respond to the supporting questions and then develop either a short essay or presentation to help answer the compelling question. Responses will vary based on student research and the opinions formed.

### Explore the Main Idea Within a Related Area

American literature frequently reflects periods in our history. Students will be asked to examine two poems: “Let America be America Again” by Langston Hughes and “Allowables” by Nikki Giovanni and consider the messages in these poems as they relate to their compelling question responses

### Relate the Main Idea to Today’s World

Option 1: Today, there are differing views about how we should teach U.S. history. Some believe that it’s okay to highlight our flaws and challenges, while others feel that the focus should be on our strengths as a nation and those aspects that are identified as exceptional. How do you think U.S. history should be taught in our schools? Develop an action plan for lobbying to support your view about the teaching of U.S. History.

Option 2: What can you do as an individual to help your community, state, or country become “more perfect” place to live? Create a personal action plan you can implement.

Adapted from Bulgren, J. A., Lenz, B. K., Deshler, D. D., & Schumaker, J. B. (2001). The content enhancement series: The question exploration routine. Lawrence, KS: Edge Enterprises. Sharable link to the template located at: <http://bit.ly/QE-Guide-Doc>

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## Question Exploration Routine Blank

**A**sk a Compelling Question

**N**ote and Explain Key Terms

**S**upporting Questions and Answers

**W**hat is the Main Idea (Compelling Question) Answer?

**E**xplore the Main Idea Within a Related Area

**R**elate the Main Idea to Today's World

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