



Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence
An Invitation to Washington State's Elementary Teachers

The Civic Learning Council America 250 Project

The Civic Learning Council (CLC), in partnership with Washington State's America's 250th Anniversary Commemoration, and in collaboration with the Washington State Council for the Social Studies, invites you to engage your young students in the statewide celebration of the [250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence](#).

The CLC recognizes that classroom materials to engage young students in the 250th Anniversary can be difficult to find. In response, the Council has designed a flexible and engaging project to:

- Help your students learn about our nation's founding by exploring symbols that recognize and celebrate the promise of democratic ideas in their community.
- Begin with a symbol that the students easily recognize: The US flag.
- Explore current and/or historical symbols unique to your community.
- Provide you with an opportunity to partner with your local history museum or cultural center.*
- Explore the democratic values of your community by examining the local symbols.

The CLC has [grants available](#) to you for this project. These grants are easily accessed and can support the purchase of materials, the cost of getting your class to a museum, or bringing a representative from a cultural center to your school or other activities that commemorate this historic event.

Please join us!

*The project encourages collaboration with a local museum or cultural center, but that collaboration isn't required to complete the project.

The [Civic Learning Council](#) is a non-partisan organization created to promote and support the people of Washington in becoming more knowledgeable and engaged lifelong participants in democracy.

Civic Learning Council America 250 Project: Why do we have symbols like the United States flag?

Primary Grades Project

<p>Compelling Question</p>	<p>Why do we have symbols like the United States flag?</p>		
<p>Standards and Practices</p>	<p>SSS2 – Uses Inquiry-Based Research: Knows how to ask quality questions and find appropriate materials to find answers to those questions. H4: Can use the historical inquiry process that is based in materials, including primary source documents, to study and analyze the past and understand current issues and events. C1: Understands key ideals and principles of the United States, including those in the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and other foundational documents.</p>		
<p>Staging the Question</p>	<p>Point to the flag in the classroom. “Every day you see this flag in our classroom. Have you ever wondered why we have a flag?” Ask students to suggest reasons we might have a flag. Observation: Display the flag and ask students to talk with a partner about what they notice about the flag (red and white stripes—how many of each, in what order?), blue background in the corner covered with stars (how many stars), number of points on the stars. Are all the stars the same? Write down observations. Making Inferences/Asking Questions: What does looking at the flag make you wonder about? What questions do you have? For example, “I wonder why the colors are red, white, and blue? Do they mean anything?” Record student questions, helping students reword them as necessary if they are unclear. Making Connections/Comparing and Contrasting: How does the American flag compare to other flags you’ve seen? Washington State? Other countries? Other kinds of flags? Encourage a variety of responses. Consider having a resource available for students to see flags of other countries and/or states. Check with your school’s library or https://www.countryflags.com/. Introduce the idea that this year we are celebrating 250 years since the United States of America became a country. In celebrating this important anniversary, we can learn about our history by studying our flags and how they symbolize our democratic values. We will examine flags and think about our history and values as a democratic nation.</p>		
<p>Supporting Question 1</p>	<p>Supporting Question 2</p>	<p>Supporting Question 3</p>	
<p>What are the symbols on the American flag, and how have those symbols changed over time?</p>	<p>Why do people display flags?</p>	<p>What symbols have people created for your community? Why do you think these symbols were created?</p>	
<p>Formative Performance Task</p>	<p>Formative Performance Task</p>	<p>Formative Performance Task</p>	
<p>Identify the symbols on the flag and explain what they represent. Circle areas of difference on two American flags from different times. Explain possible reasons for the changes.</p>	<p>Individuals or small groups choose one image and talk about how the flag(s) in the image are being used—what do they represent?</p>	<p>Small groups choose a local symbol and use evidence to report what they think it represents.</p>	

Featured Sources 1	Featured Sources 2	Featured Sources 3
<p>America’s Flag Story by Karen Robbins</p> <p>Short History of the American Flag</p> <p>Images of American Flags from 1775 to the present.</p>	<p>Mini Lesson: Using Flags as Symbols</p> <p>Teach the mini lesson that follows to engage students in thinking about how flags are used to symbolize many different events. Selected photos are included to discuss with students.</p> <p>Use questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you notice about this photo? • What is going on in this photo? How do you know? • What else do you see? • How are the people using the flag(s) in the photo? • Why do you think the flag is being displayed like this? What does the flag(s) mean in this case? 	<p>Engage your students with symbols from your local museum or cultural center, asking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you notice about this symbol? • Who created this symbol? • What do you think the people want to tell us by displaying this symbol? Why do you think this? <p>Washington Museum Directory. Search by location to locate a museum or cultural center near you.</p>
<p>Summative Performance Task</p>	<p>Argument</p>	<p>Option One: Students analyze (alone/with a partner/small groups) a symbol from a local museum or cultural center using the Library of Congress (LOC) primary source analysis tool.</p> <p>Option Two: As a class, students create a bulletin board/display discussing the multiple meanings of the American flag (or local symbol provided by the local museum or cultural center).</p>
	<p>Extension</p>	<p>Circle observations of other symbols on a photocopy of the symbol with arrows that explain what they have noticed and what they make of it.</p>
<p>Taking Informed Action</p>	<p>*Option One: Collaborate with a local museum or cultural center to display students’ analyses of symbols and their answers to the question, “Why do we have symbols like the American flag? Why are they important to our community?”</p> <p>Option Two: Publicly display your students’ analyses of symbols and their answers to the question, “Why do we have symbols like the American flag? Why are they important to our community?”</p> <p>*Option Three: Have students (individually or with a partner) create a symbol to commemorate the 250th Anniversary and display their symbols in a public place, ideally at the local museum or cultural center. (*Local history museums and cultural centers received an invitation to participate in this project.)</p>	

See Enrichment Activities that follow for additional ideas for this project.

Featured Source 2

Using Flags as Symbols

Overview: In this lesson the focus is on how symbols can have multiple meanings and when people display the United States flag, it can symbolize many different ideas.

Introduction: Explain to students that many words in English have more than one meaning. We rely on the other words around it (the context) to figure out which meaning of the word the speaker is using. For example, the word “coffee” has lots of meanings. Coffee is a drink that adults usually drink hot but sometimes cold. Explain there are many other meanings, such as coffee color.

Use these sentences to help students think about the meaning in context—the drink or color:

- I love the smell of coffee in the morning. [the drink]
- I think coffee-colored skin is beautiful [the color]
- Coffee and blue go beautifully together. [the color]
- I think you should paint one wall coffee. [the color]
- My mom has a cup of coffee first thing every morning. [the drink]

Discussion: Next introduce flags as symbols and that symbols, like words can have more than one meaning. People display flags to send a message about something they believe is important. To figure out what people mean when they display a flag, we look at what is going on around the flag. (See photos that follow also available as a [PPT Flag Photos](#).)

- Ice cream car: Let’s look at one example. [Ice cream car with a flag outside of it] Ask, what do you notice about the setting of the flag? (Guide students to identify ideas such as: I love my country. I am an American. American money accepted here!)
- Tombstone: Model answering the question, ‘What do you notice? Wonder?’ (The photo is the grave of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Guide the discussion so that students think about such ideas as: The flags might be saying thank you or saying, an American is buried here. Or even, American’s are brave to take a stand—or make a “declaration.” Or we should respect this person’s grave.)
- Look at the example of the flag hanging alone in the woods. Ask what students notice. What is going on around the flag. Why might someone hang a flag in the woods? What might they want to communicate? [I love my country. I’m an American and I’m proud of it.]
- Go through other examples asking what students notice, what they think might be going on in the photo, how the people are using the flag, and ultimately what the flag means in each case.
- Share with students other symbols that they know. For example, a school mascot, a local community symbol such as community/city logo, a local sports team and so forth. Ask students to think about what the symbols communicate.

Featured Source – Question 2

Why do people display flags?





Photo 1: American Flag
Outside an Ice Cream Parlor

Photo 2: American Flag at Matthew Thornton's Gravesite—A Signer of the Declaration of Independence



(Source: <https://flic.kr/p/nVhefY> Creative Commons--display with attribution to James Walsh)

Photo 3: American Flag Hanging
in a Forest



(Source: <https://flic.kr/p/fmSfff> Creative Commons—display with attribution—2013, Andy Arthur)

Photo 4: Legislative Building in the Washington State Capitol in Olympia



(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Washington_State_Capitol_Legislative_Building.jpg
Creative Commons Photograph taken by Tradnor on May 28, 2005)

Photo 5: The Annual Yakama Nation Treaty Day Parade in Toppenish, Washington

The parade is part of the Yakama Nation's annual commemoration of its signing a treaty with the United States government June 9, 1855. Think about how the Yakama Nation, as a sovereign nation, views the US flag.



(Source: Gordon King/*Yakima Herald-Republic*, June 5, 2015 . Used with permission.)

Photo 6: The U.S. Flag Flying at Half-Staff Atop the White House in Honor of Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md. (October 17, 2019)



Source: (Official White House Photo by Andrea Hanks—Public Domain)

Photo 7: United States [Peace Arch](#) Monument, Blaine, Washington, USA
Located on the United States-Canada border.



Source: Photo by Arnold C. Wikipedia



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apollo_15_flag,_rover,_LM,_Irwin.jpg

Photo 8: James Irwin on the Moon Saluting the Flag during the Apollo 15 Mission

Photo 9: European
Union Flags



Source: © European Union 2014 - European
Parliament" (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs
Creative Commons license)



Photo 10:
Flags Flying
Over a Hotel
in Scotland.

Enrichment Activities:

Create a 5-point star with a single cut. Legend suggests that Betsy Ross demonstrated this technique to convince the decision makers to use the 5- point star rather than the 6-point star they originally envisioned. Note: This is a complicated process and may not be suitable for young children. Teachers should practice the folds and cut until they can do it easily before attempting to teach this process to students.

<https://www.ushistory.org/betsy/more/flagfoldcut.htm>

Which star belongs to Washington?

Provide the 38-star flag (1876) to students along with the flag that was created (1890) after Washington was admitted to the union. Can they figure out which star might represent Washington? It isn't possible to identify a specific star because the 1890 flag increased by 5 stars. The exercise can raise issues of what is involved in redesigning the star each time a state is added. Where do you put the extra star(s)?

<https://www.ushistory.org/betsy/flagfact.html>

Create a Symbol Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the United States

The project focuses on understanding symbols. This extension gives students a chance to create a symbol to help others appreciate 250 years of US history. Their symbols could be shared throughout the school and with people outside of the school (for example, store windows, or professional offices). Students might examine the symbols they find on the Washington 250 website for ideas. <https://america250wa.org>.

Learn About the Original Design of the Washington State Flag

Share with students how Charles Talcott designed [the original Washington State flag](#).

Re-design the Washington State flag

In the 2025 legislative session, some Washington [lawmakers introduced a bill to redesign the Washington State flag](#). While this bill was ultimately withdrawn, it creates an opportunity for students to consider what the Washington State flag communicates and

explore alternatives. Should the bill pass in a future legislative session, students would be poised to submit their design for consideration.

Design or redesign a symbol or flag for your county, city, or town.

Many communities in Washington are in the process of designing or redesigning their community's flag. Ask students to design or redesign a flag and submit their suggestions to city hall or your county's administrative building. Consider working with a city or county councilperson to identify a symbol that officials might be willing to change and how best to display your students' work.

The Meaning of the Flag in Protest Settings—An Extension for Older Students

If you wish to deepen students' understanding of the way that context gives different meanings to the display of the US flag, consider showing students photos where the US flag is displayed at protests. Protesters frequently utilize the flag at marches and rallies for their own purposes. Ask students to consider if the flag's meaning changes when displayed by people advocating a particular cause. This extension is intended for use with older elementary students. Two examples are included below.

In the first example, protestors take opposite views on gun regulation. With some background in the American tradition of protesting and of the issue of gun regulation, students can consider how the display of the flag supports their cause. Is the meaning of the flag the same in both cases? Teachers should think carefully about the impact of talking about gun regulation on students in your setting.

In the second example, links to Library of Congress photos of protestors for and against the Vietnam War are provided. The Vietnam War is distant from students' experience. This distance is a disadvantage and an advantage. The *disadvantage* is students will need help understanding that support of the war was the policy of the US government. While some saw the Vietnam War as an unjust war that was costing American lives, others saw the war as standing up to anti-democratic forces in the world. The *advantage* is that the Vietnam War is not a current issue, and students may find it easier to investigate the meaning of the flag without becoming engaged in the issue itself.

At this point in the lesson, your students should be practiced at and enjoy noticing details in images as they try to understand what is going on. It can be helpful to place the photos side-by-side *after* each one has been explored individually.

Example One: US flags and Gun Protests

Flying an American Flag at a Protest Advocating Gun Regulation



Flying American Flags at Anti-Gun Regulation Protest



Example Two:

Anti-Vietnam War Demonstration in New York

<https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/gtfy.06811>

Pro-Vietnam War Demonstration

<https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/gtfy.08430>