

Proper and Common Nouns

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Overview

In 1782 Jean de Crèvecoeur published *Letters from an American Farmer* in which he defined an American as a "descendent of Europeans" who, if he were "honest, sober and industrious," prospered in a welcoming land of opportunity which gave him choice of occupation and residence. Students will look at life histories from the interviews of everyday Americans conducted by Works Progress Administration officials between 1936-1940 to see if his definition still holds true in this country 150 years later. Students will conclude by working toward a modern definition.

Objectives

Students will:

- understand that the meaning of "being an American" has enlarged and become more complicated since 1782;
- recognize key ideas from a famous document of American history;
- become familiar with rich on-line collections of primary sources;
- be able to read an oral history and use such materials in historical analysis;
- be able to use simple on-line search techniques; and
- be able to combine text and graphics in a single document. (optional)

Time Required

Two weeks

Recommended Grade Level

Grades 8-12

Topic

[Need Topic Link?](#)

Era

Format of Primary Sources Used

Standards

McREL 4th Edition [Standards & Benchmarks](#)

Historical Understanding

1. Standard 2. [Understands the historical perspective](#)

Language Arts

1. Standard 7. [Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts](#)
2. Standard 9. [Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media](#)

Credits

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Preparation

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Materials Used

- [Search Terms Worksheet](#)
- [Problem Log](#)
- [What is an American Worksheet](#)
- [Sample Biography](#)

Resources Used

Library of Congress

- [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project 1936-1940](#)
- [About the Federal Writers' Project](#)
- [Introduction: Who were the Federal Writers and What Did They Do?](#)
- [Circus people is like other human bein's](#)
- [Maude Cromwell, trapeze performer \(surrogate image 1\)](#)
- [Maude Cromwell, trapeze performer \(surrogate image 2\)](#)
- [Using Primary Sources](#)
- [American Memory Collection Finder](#)
- [How to Search American Memory Collections](#)
- [Collection Finder: Photos & Prints](#)

Other Online Sources

- [Letters from an American Farmer](#)
- [What Is An American?](#)

Print and Film Sources

- *The Story of America* by John Garraty or similar U.S. history textbook
- [Letters from an American Farmer](#) by Jean de Crevecoeur, Chapter 3 [What Is An American?](#) [Online version: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*; and, *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, reprinted from the original ed., with a prefatory note by W. P. Trent and an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn. New York, Fox, Duffield, 1904.]

Procedure

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Activity 1: Setting the Stage - September

Students write a paragraph answering the question "What is an American?"

Activity 2: Being an American in 1782

1. Introduce Crèvecoeur's "[What Is An American?](#)" (Curriculum Context: Colonial America or Constitution) with selected text.
2. Discussion question: What does Crèvecoeur's piece tell us about late 18th century America?

Activity 3: Life Histories as Historical Sources

1. Introduce oral histories as primary sources
2. Students read [Using Primary Sources](#) on the Learning Page
3. Introduce students to [American Life Histories, 1936-1940](#), in American Memory.
4. Students read [Introduction to Federal Writers Project](#).

Activity 4: Finding a Life History

- Modeling:
 1. Whole class reads and discusses [trapeze performer example](#) using [What Is An American? Worksheet](#).
- Give Instructions:
 1. How to search in American Memory. See [How to Search American Memory Collections](#).
 2. Keyword development: class brainstorms occupations, using [Search Terms Worksheet](#) to list possibilities.
- Practice:
 1. Students search for a life history by occupation.
 2. Students record their search in a [problem log](#).
 3. Students copy and paste a "life history" onto a wordprocessing application.
 4. Students look at their life history through the lens of Crèvecoeur definition using [What Is An American? Worksheet](#).
 5. Students write a short biography of their chosen American.
- Give Instructions on how to:
 1. Search for photos and prints. See [Collection Finder: Photos & Prints](#)
 2. Save images (and edit them, if possible)

3. Insert images in text file (optional)
- Practice:
 1. Students search [American Memory](#) for a surrogate image to illustrate their life history.
 2. Students save image.
 3. Students insert image into text file.

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Activity 5: Making a Biography

Students produce a single page biography, with an image. [\[Sample Biography\]](#)

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Activity 6: Sharing Life History and Drawing Conclusions

1. Oral presentations by students -- words and pictures.
2. Each student adds name and image to wall map.
3. Class charts lives by Crèvecoeur's categories using categories table.
4. Class discusses how the meaning of being an American had changed.
5. Students write a paragraph on how the definition has changed.
6. (Optional) Teacher compiles biographies in "What Is An American?" book or electronic book.

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Activity 7: Curtain Call - June

1. Students write own definition for today.
2. Students compare new definition to one they wrote in September.

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Evaluation

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Evaluation

- Pre-lesson paragraph on "What Is An American?"
- [Crèvecoeur life history worksheet](#)
- Biography of informant (page of writing and image)
- Presentation of informant to class
- "How the definition of being American has changed" paragraph
- June paragraph on "What Is An American?"