



# American Writers Museum “My America” Curriculum Outline

This curriculum outline offers sets of activities based on four of the themes used in the “My America” exhibit: motivation for writing, identity, influences, and the meaning of “American.”

## Preparing for the exhibit

### Opening question

**Student learning objective:** To activate and build background knowledge related to the theme they will explore at the museum.

**Class time needed:** About 30 minutes

### Instructions

1. Have each student rank the four themes (motivation, identity, influences, and the meaning of “American”) in order of preference.
2. Put students into groups based on their top theme preferences, ensuring that a roughly equal number are assigned to each theme.
3. Have each student write about the opening question suggested for their theme, with a focus on activating prior knowledge and making personal connections.

### Suggested opening questions for each theme

**Motivation:** What motivates you and your friends to share stories that reveal personal experiences?

**Identity:** What terms would you use to describe your own identity, and why?

**Influences:** Who or what has most influenced your opinions about people and the world?

**Meaning of “American”:** How would you describe what it means to be “American”?

# Encountering and responding to the exhibit

## Viewing and noting responses

**Student learning objective:** To watch selected author videos purposefully in order to gather responses that will later be synthesized in writing.

**Museum time needed:** About 45 minutes

## Instructions

1. Have each group of students watch four to six video clips of authors addressing the theme they were previously assigned, using the graphic organizer to record specific details and reactions. Encourage students to watch a video again if they need more time to make notes.
2. Optional: If time allows, have students in the same theme group pair up and share insights they are interested in writing about.
3. Have each student write a response to the question related to their theme, using the final portion of the graphic organizer.

## Suggested writing questions for each theme

- **Motivation:** What are the most important motivations these authors have for writing about their experiences of coming to the United States from another country?
- **Identity:** In what ways did coming to the United States from another country shape the way these authors think of their identities?
- **Influences:** What were the most important influences on their own writing that these authors shared?
- **Meaning of “American”:** How did these authors describe how they define being “American” and how they see themselves in relationship to that idea?

*Have each student write a one-sentence response to this question:* What is the main reason you think this exhibit is important?

## Further exploration (to be completed at school)

### Shared Inquiry Discussion

**Student learning objective:** To synthesize and evaluate ideas in response to the exhibit by sharing reactions, supporting them with specific details, and listening to each other.

**Class time needed:** 30-45 minutes

#### Instructions

1. Choose one of the suggested focus questions, and ask students to write a brief response to it. Encourage students to look back at the notes they made at the museum to find specifics that will help them explain their ideas.
2. Seat everyone in a circle, or other arrangement that allows all students to see and hear each other.
3. Share the following discussion guidelines with students:
  - » Support your ideas with details from the exhibit, so everyone can follow your points.
  - » Listen to other participants and respond to them directly.
  - » Expect the leader to focus on asking questions.
4. Begin the discussion by asking students to share the answers they wrote.
5. Ask follow-up questions such as those suggested below to help students develop ideas, give evidence, and respond to each other. To keep the focus on students' thinking, avoid giving your opinion or praising specific answers.
6. Close discussion by asking students to look back at their initial answers and share how they have expanded or changed them as a result of what they heard in discussion.

**Suggested discussion focus questions** (choose one):

- What are the most important ways immigrants have shaped American literature?
- How has experiencing this exhibit expanded or changed your ideas about writing and immigration?

**Sample follow-up questions:**

- What in the exhibit made you think that?
- Can you share a quotation from an author that supports that idea?
- When you say [word or phrase], what do you mean?
- Why is that idea important?
- Can you tell [student] what you think of that idea?
- Who has an idea we haven't heard yet?