

Lesson 2 of 7

Identity and Names

From the Unit:

[My Part of the Story: Exploring Identity in the United States](#)

Essential Questions

- What is identity? What factors help shape who we are?
- How do our names relate to our identities?

Overview

If each individual in the United States contributes to the nation's collective identity, then it makes sense to start a course exploring United States history by thinking about the individuals who comprise the nation.

According to American author Ralph Ellison, "It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own."¹ Indeed, when we meet someone new, our name is usually the first piece of information about ourselves that we share. It is often one of the first markers of our identity that others learn. In this lesson, we use names to introduce the concept of identity and the idea that each of our identities is the product of the relationship between the individual and society.

Students will then broaden their exploration of identity and consider the other factors that influence who we are as individuals. They will consider the parts of our identity that are given to us as well as the parts that we choose.

Citations

1: Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 192.

Materials

- **Reading:** [Choosing Names](#)

- **Reading:** [Two Names, Two Worlds](#)
- **Handout:** [Online-Search Identity Chart](#)

Teaching Strategy

- [Think, Pair, Share](#)

Activities

1. Consider the Relationship between Names and Identity

In this brief activity, students will read through a list of famous people who have changed their names. They will consider what choices these individuals were making about their identities when they changed their names.

- Share the reading [Choosing Names](#). Ask students if they recognize any names from the list and if they have any ideas about why those individuals might have changed their names.
- Lead a discussion about the choice to change a name, using the questions below:
 - What reasons might people have for changing their names?
 - Do any of these name changes surprise you? Why?
 - Most of the people on this list are celebrities. Why do you think these people might have changed their names as they became more recognizable? What image might they have been trying to convey?
 - The last two names on the list are of people who were emancipated from slavery after the Civil War. Why might they have chosen to change their names?
 - How are names related to our personal histories? How might they be related to our national history?
 - Are names the same as who we are? How much of you changes when your name changes?

2. Explore the Broader Identity a Name Represents

Students will continue their discussion of names by reflecting on how well they think their own name reflects who they are. They will then turn to other facets of identity, using the metaphor of an online search results page to think about the characteristics that make up who they are.

- Give students five minutes to journal about their names, using one of the following prompts:
 - I was given my name because ...
 - I like/dislike my name because ...
 - My name is/isn't a good fit for my personality because ...

- Describe a time when someone made an assumption about you because of your name.
- Describe a time when your name affected your behavior.
- Provide students with copies of the reading [Two Names, Two Worlds](#), and ask them to follow along as you read the text aloud.
- After reading the text, lead the class in a discussion based on the questions below. You might consider using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy for the final question to offer students the opportunity to reflect more deeply.
 - What do you think Jonathan Rodríguez means when he uses the phrase “two names, two worlds”? What two worlds does his name represent?
 - Rodríguez says, “I’m not the typical kid from suburbia.” He also says he is not a “smooth Latin cat.” What does he mean by this? What evidence does he give to support his claims?
 - Who is Jonathan Rodríguez? Make a list of ten words he uses to describe himself.
- Introduce the concept of *identity*. Ask students: If names are one way we are given an identity and our identity is introduced to the rest of the world, how else do we become who we are?
- Ask students what they do when they want to know who or what someone or something “is.” Someone will likely say, “Google it!” If not, introduce this idea, and then explain to students that you would like them to start thinking about their own identities—“who they are”—by imagining what they would like to see among the results if they were to do an online search for their own name.
- As a class, brainstorm a list of what types of things determine someone’s identity. Record these ideas, or categories, on the board. Examples might include:
 - Religious/spiritual affiliation
 - Culture, race, or ethnicity
 - Appearance/style
 - Language or nationality
 - Hobbies/interests
 - Gender
 - Sexual orientation
 - Beliefs and values
 - Group/organization/community membership
 - Personality traits
- With these and other categories in mind, ask students to create a mock online-search results page for themselves in their journals. They can use the handout [Online-Search Identity Chart](#) to brainstorm ideas. On the page they create, instruct

students to show what they would like to see in the results if they did an online search for themselves. Tell students that the “results” could include websites, images, videos, shopping profiles or reviews, and other types of pages or links. Consider creating a search results page for yourself as a model for your students, including images representing one of your interests, the website of a school you attended, and other basic information you are comfortable sharing.

- For homework, ask students to reflect on this activity using the following prompts:
 - How does your mock online search page answer the question, “Who am I?”
 - In what ways do you think this activity failed to capture aspects of your identity?
 - What characteristics do you think are important to your identity?

Unit

[Return to Unit: My Part of the Story: Exploring Identity in the United States](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/my-part-story-exploring-identity-united-states/identity-and-names)

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