

AN INTRODUCTION

# The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum

*American History and Civics Lessons  
for K-12 Classrooms*



HILLSDALE COLLEGE



# Welcome

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The first question is, why study civics? As the classical authors teach us, living under laws is natural for human beings. After all, we can think in different ways than other creatures, and we can talk. Whatever we can think, we can say. That makes a natural closeness among us, and the political community is an expression of that closeness. For that reason alone, civics is one of those subjects that the educated person must know.

The second reason is that politics is important. Great harm is done by bad laws, and great good by good laws. We are citizens. We have an obligation to our fellow citizens and an interest for ourselves to make the laws as good as they can be.

The third reason is that the United States of America, our country, is a remarkable place. In 2026, we will reach the 250th anniversary of the founding of our nation. By any reckoning, this is a significant milestone. Our nation has grown from a few people huddled in a strange land along the eastern seaboard to a huge nation that spans the continent. Through the vast changes that have come upon the world and the United States in these centuries, the nation has been governed under a written Constitution, long the oldest surviving in human history. Under the principles of the Declaration of Independence, that Constitution provides for a government operating under the authority of the governed. This achievement is unprecedented.

The nation suffers deep divisions, divisions especially about the meaning and the goodness of that founding. Because that founding begins in the Declaration of Independence, which states that human equality is grounded in the nature of things, in the “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” a controversy about the founding is a controversy about our understanding of ourselves and nature and therefore of everything. This is a serious matter.

It is a happy thing that this controversy has so much to do with history. History is complete and cannot be changed. To the extent one can find out about it, he is finding a truth that will abide. Also, controversies about history, like controversies about everything, can only be resolved by looking at the facts. The historical facts are available for us to see.

The facts of the American Revolution are in some ways complex, although we assert that they are wonderful. Also, they are simple. The United States begins on a certain day, July 4, 1776, with a statement of the meaning of the nation and its purposes. One begins with that. And he proceeds in the same way, by studying the record of the American Revolution and later American history in order to see what it is.

This curriculum is a work of education. Education is important to each citizen and to the nation as a whole. The seeds from which a nation's future grows are planted and nourished in the education and formation of its citizens. Our nation's founders knew this and articulated it in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which states: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall ever be encouraged." The ordinance is unequivocal that without appropriate education the government cannot be good and the people cannot be happy. These two are intertwined with one another and stand upon a foundation of good education.

The curriculum is the work of teachers rather than officials or bureaucrats; it is informed by experience in the classroom as well as long and loving study of the history and principles of our country; and it seeks to cultivate in students the knowledge and virtue necessary to live good lives as citizens. It is an expression of the work of Hillsdale College since its founding in 1844, located in the very Northwest Territory established by the Northwest Ordinance. For the last 177 years, through civil war, depression, pandemic, and world war, Hillsdale College has remained committed to its founding principles. Admitting from its inception all students "irrespective of nation, race, and sex," Hillsdale has studied and taught, and also fought, for the blessings of liberty championed in the American founding. This curriculum is an invitation to students, parents, and schools to join us in the work upon which the nation itself depends: to educate a people for liberty.

Dr. Larry P. Arnn  
President  
Hillsdale College

# AN INTRODUCTION

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## CONTENT

# Engaging an Inheritance

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In history and civics classes, American students should have one aim above all: to understand what they have received, i.e., their inheritance as Americans. To understand clearly, students and teacher alike must adopt a stance of humility. And this humility is fostered by the recognition on the part of the student that the world in which we live, with all its benefits and also its faults, is not of our own creation. This is the beginning of American history and civic education.

From this starting point, the field of discovery in history and civics is, if not endless, then impossible to explore completely in any number of lifetimes. Principles must therefore be discerned and applied to determine where to begin, on what to focus, and in which order. The need to choose and choose carefully is all the more pressing within the limits of thirteen years of formal education.

This curriculum rejects many fashionable ways to make decisions about what students should learn. Such trends include basing what students learn on political ideology and activism; corporate interests for preferred kinds of consumers and workers; the interests of higher education, standardized testing, and textbook corporations; and the color of one's skin. As to this final criterion, to base the content of a civics curriculum on such a standard is to resurrect and reinforce in students that they ought to judge, value, and treat people differently based on traits that a person does not control instead of on what he or she believes, says, or does. To teach students to so discriminate undermines the inherent dignity of each person and the equality found in each person's equal possession of natural rights.

In defense of both the student and the historical figures he or she studies, this curriculum rejects all of these demands for deciding what students should encounter.

Instead, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* determines what students should learn in history and civics based on the answers to a single question: What ideas, words, and deeds have most significantly formed the world into which students were born? Studying the answers to this question provides students the fullest understanding of the world in which they will live their lives.

Of course, this question is not easy to answer. But this curriculum insists and does its utmost to abide by an honest commitment to the truth as it is, not as what some might want it to be. Rather than predetermining what we hope to find—and cherry-picking, obscuring, or even fabricating “facts” to fit our preconceived notions—this curriculum begins with searching for what actually happened and the contemporaneously stated reasons for why it happened.

So, what has most significantly shaped the world into which students were born? From where has their inheritance come?

First, the past. Much of what has immediately affected the student has happened since his or her birth: family, upbringing, and sometimes local current events. But students are already familiar with these influences, and it is not the place of the school to belittle the student by assuming his only interests or capacities for learning depend on what he already lives with on a daily basis. Nor is it the place of the school to draft the student into the civic work or outright political activism of adults. The world of the student was formed before he was born, and it is in history that he may search for understanding of his world.

Second, that which is most proximate. As a child's life is shaped first by her parents, her home, her relatives, and her neighborhood, so has the student's broader world been shaped most by figures within her own country's past. This curriculum therefore brings students into encounters with American history and American civics, with due regard for the influences of figures from the world and particularly from the cradles of Western Civilization in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe—figures who informed the very first Americans.

Third, individual persons. Ideas, words, and actions do not exist in a vacuum. They do not have a mind of their own. And history is not some fatalistic force compelling people to act a certain way, as Karl Marx claimed. The past, and therefore the present world of the student, is the creation of certain individual Americans who have had an outsized impact on the world the student has inherited. Moreover, these individual people are just like the student. They may look different or have come from a different background and have lived in a different time and place, but their desire to find what they thought was good in order to be happy, their high ideals, and their fallibility were all the same as those of the student. For all people at all times share the same human nature. This curriculum thus asks students to exercise the same imaginations that allow them to sympathize with talking animals and mythical demigods. These imaginations bring students into encounters with certain past American figures—not only on the basis of the extraordinary impact that these individuals have had on the student's present world but also because in learning about them, students learn about themselves.

*The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* determines what students encounter based on what has shaped their world the most. As a result, students will have presented before their minds the following content, which may rightly be regarded as their birthright, their inheritance.

## **PERSONS**

Because history and civics are composed of the actual thoughts, words, and actions of unique individuals, the study of individuals is of paramount importance in the curriculum. The curriculum is a person-driven encounter for students. Biographies lie at the heart of the content, and students focus on individuals and individual actions rather than studying merely groups of people or social factors. Students study any given individual insofar as knowledge of him or her reveals the nature of human beings, helps students to understand circumstances that are foreign to them, or explains the cause of historical events and changes that were of extraordinary impact in forming the students' world.

## **PRIMARY SOURCES**

What makes human beings human, distinct from animals, is our capacity for reason: to have thoughts and formulate ideas, and then to share those ideas through speech, both oral and written. The principal content of the curriculum, therefore, is primary sources, curated for the appropriate grade level. Primary sources



capture the inner workings of past Americans, revealing their thoughts and desires, their virtues and vices. Although supplemental discoveries by historians and research are necessary and helpful, they often involve more conjecture than is warranted. It is the primary sources that are our chief evidence about the past and the origins of the student's world. Within history and civics, documents, speeches, private correspondence, firsthand accounts, and the like reveal to students the interplay between human thoughts and events and lend insights into the ideas on which America was founded.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND PLACES**

Students learn about space. Each student has a physical existence. She occupies a certain part of physical space that no other person occupies. Students need to learn how to make sense of their places in the physical world. In American history, students must see how the fact that we are embodied beings living in a particular physical space has formed the thoughts and actions of historical figures and themselves.

## **EVENTS AND DATES**

Students also learn about time. This knowledge includes gaining a general sense of temporal existence and of where their own lives and ages fit relative to the lives of those who have come before them. It also includes learning by heart certain dates of events or spans of time. Learning dates by heart should not be drudgery, but purposefully employed as guideposts for students in piecing together the chronological relationship between historical causes and their effects.

## **TERMS AND TOPICS**

Typical curricula often require students to know the definitions of things. To reduce learning to the mere memorization of definitions and facts saps the wonder from history and civics and allows for easy manipulation of students. Instead, teachers should think in terms of topics—themes, events, and ideas ranging from the abstract to the particular; they should contemplate the full diversity of realities that had arisen in the lives of figures living and thinking and acting in a certain time and place. This curriculum does not reduce history and civics to memorizing definitions but instead drives students to engage terms and topics—and to question them. Above all, students seek to understand these terms and topics, their relations to the figures who also engaged with them in their own times, and to ask what they mean and what they show us about human beings and their country.

## **TO KNOW BY HEART**

America's founding and history is one of the best documented in the history of humankind. American students have before them an array of the truest of statements posited in beautiful words that have informed and inspired Americans for more than two centuries. In light of this unique opportunity, the curriculum nourishes the privileged capacity of childhood: the ready ability to learn and know things by heart. Students bring from this curriculum not only knowledge and skills, but also words and poetry and songs to carry in their hearts for the rest of their lives.

## STORIES FOR THE AMERICAN HEART

The word history means story, and in studying history, students learn from a thoughtful retelling of what happened. American history is full of more than four centuries of stories, some of which are the stuff of illustrative legend, while others are documented in detail. These stories—of individual Americans, events, heroic exploits, tragic turns of events, letters, firsthand accounts, etc.—captivate the attention of the student, draw him into the historical scene, bring people of the past alive, and paint within the student’s moral imagination vivid images and examples of human conduct. Cumulatively, students gain a kind of seeing that can guide their understanding of history and their own conduct as human beings and American citizens.

## QUESTIONS FOR THE AMERICAN MIND

Beyond initial sensory perception and physical experience, a student’s understanding deepens when the mind grapples with reality, brings what is known to bear on what is new and unknown, and attempts to see how they fit together and how they do not. The chief means to this fitting of the intellect to the world—to the truth—is through questions that challenge the student to reorient and apply herself to reality. But not all questions are the same. The first questions are matters of simple facts: the who, the what, the when, the where. These give the student knowledge. But true learning, real education, seeks something deeper, more full and complete and meaningful. To achieve understanding and practice in the virtue of wisdom, students must be asked the all-important question that has motivated all inquiry through all time: *Why?* This curriculum offers teachers a collection of possible questions that put the mind into action, pushing students into the more fertile territory of *why* something is the case and *how* they know something to be true. The asking of and grappling with thousands of such question for the student through this curriculum engenders in him a more complete understanding of his country and of himself.

## IMAGES

Like the stained-glass windows of great medieval buildings, images tell a story. With today’s technology, the student can encounter magnificent works of art, facsimiles, maps, and photographs daily in class. Each image may reinforce a historical figure or episode or become a jumping-off point for an entire lesson. Innumerable observations may be made and questions asked of the image, driving the class with the natural inquiry the student possesses, and providing a vivid lens into America through the decades.

This is what students who are taught this curriculum encounter. This is their inheritance.

## PEDAGOGY

# Sharing a Love

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What does a guest see upon entering a history and civics classroom?

The guest first notices walls alive with the past, with facsimiles, maps, portraits and paintings from American history. He sees the students with a pencil and paper and perhaps the text of a document or historical account upon their desks. And he sees their gaze moving from their desktops to a projected image or map, and finally and most consistently, to the teacher herself.

In a word, our guest sees harmony. It will look different based on grade level and school, on teacher and students. But sound history and civics classrooms will embrace an ordering and arranging of parts, just as the members of a symphony orchestra or athletic team move in complement to one another toward a common end, led by a director or captain or coach.

And what does our guest hear? He hears the teacher speaking, telling a story and asking questions about it.

First, with variations in voice and tone, with movement, with a hint of acting, she is telling a story. She uses descriptive words and her own careful study and imaginations of historical people and scenes to paint pictures in her students' minds. She is conscious of her goal to transport students to the time and place they are studying, to bring the figures and scenes alive for her students. She sets the stage by describing the geography, landscape, and climate in which events will take place. She introduces individual figures by describing their backgrounds, sometimes including details and anecdotes from their childhoods, proceeding to physical descriptions and the telling qualities or shortcomings of their characters and temperaments, especially those that are relevant to the events to come. She introduces the hopes and thoughts of these characters, and she draws out the circumstances in which they act. Quotations are read aloud, and images of scenes, maps, and the figures are projected for reference and student observation. The true story of history proceeds apace in the present tense, and the underlying drama that has lodged the historical moment in the enduring memory of a nation breaks through, arriving at a crescendo of action in an event and leading gloriously or malignantly to its consequences for subsequent events, for today, and for the student. This is the first kind of speech our guest hears.

The teacher's second kind of speech repeatedly punctuates this kind of story and moves it along through questions to her students. Questions of *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, but more often and more importantly, questions of *why* and *how*: "Why does he do this? Why does she think that? Why does this happen? How did this come about? What will he, she, or they do, and why do you think that?" Question upon question, lending suspense and drawing students into the telling of the story with their answers and thoughts and wrestling with what really happened, and with the final questions of "Why?" and the all-important "What does this mean?" "What does this show us about America, about human beings, about ourselves?"

These questions are not rhetorical, and the class is therefore not a mere lecture. Instead, students seek to answer the questions throughout the class period, raising their hands, offering answers and reasons, engaging one another with respect. The result is a dynamic exchange of thoughts and reasoning, moving the class forward, and involving teacher, students, and historical figures all in the same story and conversation.

While civics class may have less of the story element, our guest will also observe in both history and civics the words of the past speaking directly to the students through primary sources. In history, students read or the teacher reads aloud portions of the foundational and most influential documents in American history, gleaned direct insights into the minds of American figures, and linking the episodes presented via story. In civics, the close and careful reading of the primary sources fills the minutes to their fullest. In both classes, portions of such works are granted to students to learn and know by heart. And in both history and civics, lively, civil conversations are held among all the students and the teacher as the class revolves around the text in search of what it is saying. And then, students attempt to answer the questions once more: “Is it true?” “Why?” and “What does it mean?”

And what is the goal of it all? What is the goal of each lesson and unit?

Knowledge, surely, and understanding and images to furnish the moral imagination. And wise and virtuous citizens who will engage in and fulfill their civic responsibilities. But above all and as with all learning, the goal is the experience of having encountered and discovered something that the student had not known before, something that has changed what he knows of reality, that pulls him to desire and dare to learn more, that pierces him with a fearful joy: wonder, the source of all learning and of wisdom itself.

For at the heart of history and civic education, as with any subject of study, is a sharing of love. The teacher loves both her content, which she deeply seeks to know, and her students. In loving each, she desires what is good for both content and students. For the sake of each, she brings content and students together through a moment of wonder, that students might know and then love what they study.

In the case of American history and civics, such a sharing of love in teaching offers students the wonder, opportunity, and capacity to honor and preserve what is good in their country, while condemning and correcting its flaws, for the good of America and their fellow Americans.

Such a knowledge and love is none other than the very highest meaning of patriotism.

## K-12 SEQUENCE

# For the American Student

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*The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* asks simply, in light of the vastness of reality and the limits of human existence, “What do American students in particular need and, most importantly, deserve to encounter and consider in their K-12 civic education?” The answer is first knowledge and understanding of American history and of the American republic as governed by the Constitution and morally grounded in the Declaration of Independence. The teachers who contributed to this curriculum are mindful of and experienced in the great and important changes in student development between grade levels, yet are also deferential to the circumstances and autonomy of local communities. This curriculum thus organizes the teaching of American history and civics into grade-level bands to provide the greatest accuracy in usefulness as well as breadth for adjustment by states, districts, schools, teachers, and parents.

There are four grade level bands: Kindergarten through 2nd grade, 3rd through 5th grade, middle school, and high school. A school may use the units for any of the grades within a grade band. The curriculum has attempted to address the differences in student ability, but ultimately schools and teachers, given the students they have in their charge, must determine the appropriate adjustments for their situations.

The development and release of units begins with history units in each grade level band on the American Founding and the Civil War, 15 weeks of middle school civics lessons, and a complete government course for high school. Note that there are many topics that are not mentioned in these initial units but will be included in future units, e.g., the beginning of slavery in what would become the United States. Forthcoming units on colonial America, the early republic, and the Gilded Age will treat of this topic and others at the chronologically appropriate places. Even then, one should recognize that this curriculum outlines simply what is most essential, and that far more details of comparably less historical influence can and will be taught in relationship with these topics based on each teacher’s own study of the recommended resources.

Regarding integrating civics with other subjects, civics should play its role in history as well as in the other subjects, but it should not take over any given subject. Rather, civics topics should arise where naturally appropriate instead of reducing literature, science, mathematics, etc., to mere components of politics or, worse, political activism.

This curriculum respects the inherent dignity of both the student and historical figures. It does not whitewash or rewrite. It also does not ignore “warts,” if those “warts”—as with America’s noblest moments—are significant enough to fit the time restraints of K-12 schooling. It does not claim to be immune to conversation or disagreement, or to be “the last word.” But it does argue that this content is true, and that it is what American students should learn first.

Paying greater attention to injustices may in fact be warranted. But to force all of history through this myopic lens not only misses the whole picture but is no better than the histories such an approach claims to correct.

There is no reason to ignore the bad and emphasize the good, or vice versa: both deserve to be taught as they were and students deserve to know the entire truth.

Lastly, this curriculum only very carefully takes the stance of “consider the times,” for this phrase can easily give the impression that truth and morality (good and evil) are merely relative to one’s viewpoint or time period. “To consider the times” in which historical figures lived is not to excuse moral injustices or to justify relativism, but it requires us to understand the circumstances at the time and weigh them against principles that transcend time. It is recognizing the reality of history and honestly assessing how figures at the time acted within their circumstances in light of the truth.

The sequence, including initial and future units, is outlined as follows.

## **INITIAL UNITS**

### **Elementary School**

#### **Kindergarten–2nd Grade**

##### **American History**

Unit 1 | The American Founding (1763–1789)

Unit 2 | The American Civil War (1848–1877)

#### **3rd–5th Grade**

##### **American History**

Unit 1 | The American Founding (1763–1789)

Unit 2 | The American Civil War (1848–1877)

### **Middle School | 6th–8th Grade**

#### **American History**

Unit 1 | The American Founding (1763–1789)

Unit 2 | The American Civil War (1848–1877)

#### **American Civics**

Unit 1 | The Declaration of Independence

Unit 2 | The United States Constitution

Unit 3 | Politics and Policy

Unit 4 | Challenging and Defending America’s Principles

## High School | 9th–12th Grade

### American History

Unit 1 | The American Founding (1763–1789)

Unit 2 | The American Civil War (1848–1877)

### American Government and Politics

Unit 1 | The Principles of America

Unit 2 | A Constitution of Principles

Unit 3 | Governing in the Constitution

Unit 4 | Equality in America

Unit 5 | Progressivism and the State

Unit 6 | Institutions and Policy

Unit 7 | Politics in Practice

Unit 8 | Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Government and Politics

Capstone Conversation | The Meaning of America

Optional Civics Activities | Fostering Civic Responsibility

## FUTURE UNITS

### Elementary School | Kindergarten–2nd Grade

#### American History

Colonial America (1492–1763)

The Early Republic (1789–1848)

### Elementary School | 3rd–5th Grade

#### American History

Colonial America (1492–1763)

The Early Republic (1789–1848)

### Middle School | 6th–8th Grade

#### American History

Colonial America (1492–1763)

The Early Republic (1789–1848)

The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era (1877–1917)

The Great War and the Roaring Twenties (1917–1929)

The Great Depression and the Second World War (1929–1945)

The Cold War and Modern America (1945–Present)

### High School | 9th–12th Grade

#### American History

Colonial America (1492–1763)

The Early Republic (1789–1848)

The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era (1877–1917)

The Great War and the Roaring Twenties (1917–1929)

The Great Depression and the Second World War (1929–1945)

The Cold War and Modern America (1945–Present)





## STRUCTURE

# Clarity and Simplicity

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It may well be the case that great teachers have a natural gift for teaching others. But *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* subscribes to the belief that any American who loves to learn, loves students, possesses a determined work ethic, and is open to improvement can become a high-quality teacher. In both cases and whatever the experience and abilities, every teacher deserves guidance that is clear, simple, and helpful, and such order and ease on the part of the teacher's materials will translate into clear lessons for students.

The form of this curriculum, therefore, follows these principles of its intended function. It strives to demystify teaching from the cumbersome lingo, administrative complexities, and “bells-and-whistles” busyness associated with many curricula. What proceeds below is a brief outline of the order and structure that guide these materials, as found in each unit packet.

We hope and trust that teachers will find this layout clear and refreshing.

## UNIT PREVIEW

Provides a cursory overview of what a unit covers and general suggestions and resources for how to approach the unit.

### Structure

Offers a table of contents for lessons and appendices, including the number of classes found in each lesson and, where relevant, the years each lesson spans. Note that in this curriculum, a “lesson” covers more than one class period. Attempting to break all of learning down into compartmentalized singular class periods is unnatural. The direction and pace of learning will vary, and a curriculum should account for the organic and particular circumstances of a certain teacher with certain students in a certain classroom. In general, the average number of lessons per unit is 4, the average number of classes per lesson is 4–5, and the average amount of time between summative tests is 3–4 weeks.

### Why Teach This Unit

Everything that we bring before students ought to have a reason for including it. This section briefly outlines why students should spend time with a given unit of content.

## Enduring Ideas from This Unit

In the history units, often just a few major areas of understanding lend permanency to a period of history or civics topic. Developing a sense of what these are as the teacher helps guide planning and instruction. Students should end up considering such ideas during and well after the unit is complete.

## Primary Sources Studied in This Unit

Previews for teachers the primary sources recommended for students to read and that are included in an appendix. Teachers may use their discretion to determine which they will have students study and how they may best be read with students.

## What Teachers Should Consider

Offers some initial considerations on what is covered in a unit and how the teacher might go about approaching its various parts.

## How Teachers Can Learn More

Teaching is born first out of love for one's content. But such love and wonder cannot arise or be sustained without a habit of always learning more. These recommendations can deepen and enrich the teacher's understanding of the content in the particular unit, either in preparation for lesson planning or during the summer months.

### **TEXTS**

Hillsdale College professors recommend these texts for their historical accuracy, quality of writing, and overall enjoyment.

### **ONLINE COURSES | [Online.Hillsdale.edu](https://www.hillsdale.edu)**

For the last decade, Hillsdale College has brought its excellent instruction to the homes of millions of Americans through its online courses. These free lessons taught by Hillsdale College faculty are superb opportunities for teachers to grow in their understanding of content specific to their instruction.

## Lesson Planning Resources

Provides a concise list of the types of texts teachers and students should have at their disposal for the unit, including recommended teacher histories, teacher guides, student textbooks, student workbooks, and primary sources.

# LESSON PLANS, ASSIGNMENTS, AND FORMATIVE QUIZ

## Lesson Outline

### LESSON OBJECTIVE

A brief statement of the content students will learn in a given lesson.

### TEACHER PREPARATION

Outlines the resources teachers should use to plan their lessons.

#### Student Texts

Lists specific chapters or pages of textbooks and primary sources that may be assigned to students and that form the basic outline of the lesson for the teacher's presentation.

#### Teacher Texts

Lists specific chapters or pages from authoritative texts that teachers should read in order to bring greater detail and understanding to the lesson, beyond what the student text offers.

#### Online.Hillsdale.edu

Lists specific lectures from Hillsdale College's online courses for teachers to watch or listen to as they plan the lesson. While small segments of certain online course lectures may be helpful to play for older students in class on occasion, online courses should be reserved mainly for deepening the teacher's own knowledge and helping him to better understand the content.

### STUDENT PREPARATION

Presents potential assignments for students to complete at home prior to certain parts of the lesson. Depending on the grade level, approximately 2–3 preparatory assignments are offered for each lesson. Usually, this does not mean that students would or should have preparatory homework every night. In the upper grades, most of these assignments simply involve reading and annotating. Most reading assignments include brief quizzes for accountability, while the curriculum pairs some primary sources with guiding questions for students to complete as they read at home.

### CORE CONTENT IN THIS LESSON

Suggests the kinds of content that teachers should consider incorporating into their lessons. The curriculum determines this content by the principles outlined above in "Content: Engaging an Inheritance." Content includes the most consequential ideas and actions that shaped history,

readings from the associated texts, and due regard for the grade level and the spiraling nature of the curriculum. Students should be expected to know the core content, the connections between the content items, and their relevance to a given period of history or civics topic. Within each kind of core content, items are generally presented in the order in which they might most logically and naturally be taught. Core content areas include:

<b>Geography &amp; Places</b>	Locations relevant to the lesson.
<b>Persons</b>	Characters who play important roles in the lesson.
<b>Terms &amp; Topics</b>	Ideas, phrases, items, and vocabulary encountered in the lesson.
<b>Primary Sources</b>	Firsthand accounts, letters, laws, writings, speeches, etc.
<b>To Know by Heart</b>	Phrases, quotations, or primary source excerpts to learn by heart.
<b>Timeline</b>	Order of events, dates, and timespans to assist comprehension.
<b>Images</b>	Potential images to share with students.

### **STORIES FOR THE AMERICAN HEART**

Lists stories, anecdotes, biographies, letters, legends, etc., that may be worthwhile in forming parts of the lesson, in keeping with the storytelling nature of history classes.

### **QUESTIONS FOR THE AMERICAN MIND**

Essential questions that teachers should weave throughout the lesson and ask students during the lesson to drive inquiry, the story, and student understanding. This list is by no means exhaustive. It also includes questions from the 2020 Civics Test used to naturalize immigrants as new U.S. citizens.

### **KEYS TO THE LESSON**

This curriculum does not tell the teacher exactly what he needs to teach or tell students. To dictate such content robs teachers of the joy of learning, robs students of the vibrancy of being taught by teachers who have genuinely studied their content, and disrespects the intellect and capacities of teachers to learn and teach according to their own pursuits of truth. What this curriculum offers instead are recommended resources and approaches that teachers may learn from but also engage with and question as they seek what is true.

The Keys to the Lesson include an initial recommendation on how to approach teaching the lesson in general, followed by a series of bullet-point suggestions on specific content areas, topics, and parts of the lesson. These suggestions usually highlight points of emphasis, ways to approach certain texts or topics, and clarifications for accuracy of instruction. The order of these suggestions is generally the order in which the lesson may be best taught. As the name denotes, these statements are considered the keys to teaching the lesson with accuracy, effectiveness, and with a mind toward cultivating student engagement, class conversation, and meaningful, enduring understanding. They are meant to be guideposts for teachers to consider, not exclusive requirements to be followed blindly.

## **STRENGTHENING UNDERSTANDING: POST-LESSON ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES**

Most lessons include at least one assignment or activity that can be formative or reinforcing of the lesson. These assignments and activities were designed to go beyond merely needing a grade for a grade book or having students regurgitate content verbatim. Instead, such assignments (and, for the lower grades, activities) should ask students to reflect on what they have recently learned and to engage with it. The assignments ask students to put into action the full powers of their minds to strengthen their understanding of a topic, its significance, their country, reality, or human nature. Many assignments involve students answering a deeper, more comprehensive question on the lesson or part of the lesson through writing, or retelling part of the story as a storyteller and thus coming to understand it better. The practice afforded to hone writing ability is also of great importance in these assignments. For grades K–5, the “Talk about History” assignments encourage conversation about history with parents at home and provide the transparency owed to all parents.

### **Reading Quiz**

Most secondary source readings in history include a sample reading quiz or recommendations on how to create a reading quiz.

### **Formative Quiz**

Each unit has at least one sample formative quiz after the first two weeks or so of a unit. Formative quizzes are necessary for building long-lasting understanding in students and to bridge the time between the first class and the eventual summative assessment.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Study Guide**

A sample suggested study guide is available at the end of each unit (or sooner, in the younger grades). The study guide draws from but scales back the content outlined in each lesson. Teachers should adapt the study guides to fit the abilities of their students and the actual content taught in class. This should involve adding to, subtracting from, and otherwise modifying the study guide to make it unique to the class.

### **Test**

One or more corresponding sample tests are available per unit. The tests further reduce the content to the most essential. Teachers should adapt the tests to fit the abilities of their students and the actual content taught in class. This should involve adding to, subtracting from, and otherwise modifying the test to make it unique to the class.

## Writing Assignment

Except for the lowest grades, a sample recommended writing assignment is included with each unit. The prompt tends to focus on strengthening student understanding by having students reflect on the entire history covered in a unit. The prompts aim to be comprehensive, asking students fundamental question about why the history or civics topic studied is the way it is and what it means. Teachers should adapt the writing assignments to fit the abilities of their students and the actual content taught in class.

## APPENDIX B

### Primary Sources

Primary source handouts with applicable guiding reading questions (where a primary source is meant to be given as a preparatory assignment) are all available at the end of the unit. Each primary source includes information on its author, its date, and its location, and a very straightforward explanation of how it came to be. The goal of this information is to help bring the author and document alive for students by calling to mind the very real person and the circumstances in which it was drafted. The text of the sources themselves has line numbers for ease of reference during in-class conversations, ample spacing between lines for annotations, and a wider right-hand margin for notetaking during reading or a seminar conversation. The number, length, and use of primary sources vary by grade level, but at the very least reading aloud short portions of primary sources are an important part of instruction in even the youngest grades. Teachers should adapt the scope of the primary sources to fit the abilities of their students and the actual content taught in class.

**USE**

# The Freedom to Teach

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The best and most sincere teachers understand teaching to be a vocation. Love for content and students draws them to such a hard, demanding, and high-stakes career. Often this calling was first awakened when the teacher was herself a student. She experienced the wonder that one or more of her own teachers had cultivated and allowed to flourish through their instruction. The sense of great responsibility for the formation of a child called to them. It is not uncommon for a teacher to say that the reason she teaches is because of a teacher or professor she had as a student. How disappointing and tragic, then, that many teachers nowadays rarely get to focus on the art of teaching.

What are teachers doing instead? The list seems to grow by the school year: almost endless administrative paperwork, mostly tied to ever-evolving state and federal reporting requirements or test preparation; unnecessarily bureaucratic expectations for lesson plans; ever-changing and ever-increasing complexity in new technology, curricula, and pedagogical methods; student discipline policies that neither correct nor form student behavior and character, leaving teachers to attempt to manage a kind of chaos in some schools; and constant “box-checking” for teacher certification requirements and maintenance.

And when teachers are able, from time to time, to escape these burdens and actually arrive at teaching, they are handed what is little more than a script from which to read, dictating to them exactly what to say, how to say it, and what to do next by this kind of instruction manual. Some skill-based subjects may be best conducted in this manner, but history and civics teaching is not one of them.

While it remains to other efforts to address many of the above infringements on actually teaching, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* attempts to restore and defend teachers’ freedom to teach in at least this final respect. Although it outlines content that students should probably encounter, vets resources, and offers some considerations for teachers, it defers entirely to the knowledge, creative ingenuity, and love each teacher possesses to actually plan out and present lessons. Sound, tried and true pedagogical principles—framed in by genuine love of a subject—should shape lesson planning and teaching<sup>1</sup> (see “Pedagogy: Sharing a Love”). This curriculum empowers the teacher to rediscover that original love of learning and that original sense of wonder and care for students that led her to become a teacher. Each lesson taught using this curriculum should be unique to the teacher and students of a particular classroom at a particular school. The curriculum is designed with independence for teachers in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stockard, T. W. Wood, C. Coughlin, and Khoury C. Rasplica, “The Effectiveness of Direct Instruction Curricula: A Meta-Analysis of a Half Century of Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 4 (2018):479–507.

What we wish to offer, then, are a handful of suggestions on how teachers might consider using *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, whether their school has officially adopted the curriculum or they use it to supplement and enhance their existing lessons.

## PLANNING THE LESSON

1. **Read through the Unit Preview.** Gain a sense of the unit’s scope and of the major ideas and themes your lessons should attempt to place before students for consideration.
2. **Read the Teacher Preparation Resources.**
  - **Read the student text(s) (where applicable) to develop a cursory outline for how you might plan.** These texts generally provide the baseline material that students should eventually know and that may later be assessed.
  - **Read the teacher resources(s) and watch or listen to relevant online course lectures.** Teachers should always be at least one level deeper than their students in their understanding to effectively bring the classes alive for students. If the content is already familiar to the teacher, then further learning that goes deeper is all the more necessary to keep alive the sense of wonder and love that propels good teaching. In either case, draw from these teacher resources to enhance the detail and fullness of a topic.
3. **Write out your notes.**
  - **For History Classes:** Write and craft the lesson plan as much as possible as a narrative—a good story, and a true one. Taking on the mindset of a film director can be helpful in this process, asking, “What words must I use and in what order must I present things to bring the figures and scenes alive for my students?” Reflecting on the student and teacher resources we have reviewed, ask other questions, such as: What background information should I pull in? What should I dwell upon in detail, and what may I summarize? What will students want to know more about? What can I anticipate them asking? What do I want to know more about? What specific stories will I tell? Which questions will I ask? When? Where should I build suspense? At what actions or scenes or choices do I wish students to wonder? What images will I show and when? How might a specific class period conclude? Between the student and teacher resources consulted before crafting the lesson, much of what this curriculum outlines in a given lesson should automatically make its way into the lesson plan. After the teacher’s notes have been drafted, review the Core Content, Stories, Questions, and Keys to the Lesson sections of the curriculum lesson to see if anything has been missed. If so, figure out the best way and places to incorporate this content, these questions, and these considerations.
  - **For Civics Classes:** Review the Terms and Topic, Questions, and Keys to the Lesson outlined in the curriculum lesson. With these in mind, read through the primary sources and craft a lesson plan that mainly uses the reading and discussion of primary sources to drive the lesson. Most lessons can be conducted as a full or partial seminar conversation.



- **If applicable, check what you have planned with state standards or standardized test items.** In our view, state standards can sometimes impose a tyranny of low academic expectations while raising the stakes and pressure for teachers and students alike. Nonetheless, we recognize that standards and testing are realities at present. And we are confident that this curriculum will meet and surpass almost any standard or testing requirement. To ensure your lesson includes certain standards, begin with the lesson already planned independently of these requirements. Only then check to see what standards you have already included naturally (it will be most of them). Whatever you have not addressed, simply incorporate into the lesson already drafted.
4. **Determine what Preparatory and Post-Lesson Assignments and Activities may be warranted.** Out-of-class assignments are more common in grades 3–12, whereas in-class activities and read-aloud books are more common in grades K–2. In either case, assignments and activities should not be used merely to fill class time or a grade book but instead should be carefully chosen to foster knowledge and understanding in support of actual teaching itself. The curriculum either provides assignments for optional use or suggests ways to structure certain assignments or activities. In both cases, the curriculum seeks to avoid overcomplicating these reinforcements or overburdening teachers and students. As a general rule, reading, writing, answering “Why” and “How” questions, and sometimes drawing are the best ways to encourage reflection, foster understanding, and practice fundamental skills. Answer Keys are not provided for assignments or assessments in order to allow teachers the freedom to reflect on their own knowledge and seek out areas where they may need to learn more. The high school government course lists a series of Optional Civics Activities. While students should by no means be used by politically active groups or interests to engage in activism, practicing certain fundamental components to citizenship in a school club, at home, or as an extra-curricular activity may be appropriate if approached with prudence by the teacher.
  5. **Decide what images and stories to share with students.** The curriculum provides lists of potentially helpful images and stories. Most are readily available through a search engine such as Search.Brave.com.

## PRESENTING THE LESSON

1. **Begin with review.** Open a class period with questions targeted at reviewing what was taught in recent classes. Students’ answers are empowering for them and prime them for another round of new events, new people, and new ideas.
2. **Become a storyteller and/or let the primary source tell its story.** Like a good movie, play, or book, employ storytelling practices and variations in tone, voice, and pacing. The teacher should have the disposition of an actor or performer without reducing class to a reenactment. A certain gravitas, seriousness, and drama should come through. For teachers who have studied their content and care for it, such wonder and sincerity will naturally animate their presentation. Seek to arrange for moments in which students may experience wonder. If class is composed mainly of a primary source, read and discuss the text with the same principles in mind, seeking to understand the speaker on his or her own terms first.

3. **Ask an abundance of questions.** Help students to remain engaged, to grow in understanding, and to enter into the history or primary source by having them tell the story with you through their answers to your questions. Questions of fact will of course arise, but focus especially on asking questions of “How,” “Why,” and “Why do you think that?” Class is not a lecture but rather a dynamic, teacher-led conversation among all the students, turning around the topic at hand in pursuit of truth. As reminders to prompt future recall and consideration, be sure students in grades 3–12 note or annotate with you what is unveiled in the course of the class period.

## REFINING UNDERSTANDING

1. **Formatively assess students.** Where appropriate, the curriculum includes formative quizzes. In addition to the post-lesson assignments and activities, formative quizzes give students the opportunity to review and reengage with what they have recently learned. Doing so allows students a fresh perspective and new insights into what they are now familiar with and ensures for teachers that their instruction is effective. If a pattern of misunderstanding is revealed among students, reteach the relevant part of the unit, mindful of how the misunderstanding may have occurred.
2. **Summatively assess students.** Tests are a somewhat useful but imperfect tool to measure a certain kind of learning. But perhaps the more important and more overlooked use of quality tests are the opportunity they afford students to reflect, review, and more accurately understand what they have learned. The great value of tests in this curriculum, therefore, is how they can help students reflect and understand by studying for the test. To this end, the study guide is the most important item in Appendix A in each unit. Each study guide is based on a refined version of the lesson outline. In grades 3–12, students should personally review their notes, along with reviewing as a class, to re-engage with what they have learned. In this sense, the study guide is a true *guide* to studying. It is meant to lead students back through what they learned through their notes. Students should grow in familiarity with the unit’s stories and ideas and how they are connected; they should be able to recount episodes and answer the deeper questions. This type of study and review is the greatest opportunity for students to synthesize the various parts of what they have learned, to see how it all fits together, and to adjust their understanding of reality accordingly. For grades K–2, in-class review sheets should suffice for preparation. The test, then, is merely a further reduced opportunity for students to demonstrate this growth in knowledge and understanding. For both the study guides and the tests, teachers should feel free to reduce, expand, supplement, and otherwise modify in accordance with their school’s requirements, the abilities of their students, and, most importantly, the content their specific class uniquely encountered. After the test, go over the story and ideas once more, emphasizing areas in which you saw a pattern of misunderstanding, so that students might gain a more accurate view of history.
3. **Allow students the time to reflect, think, and write.** After a unit test, use the writing assignments to provide students with the space and time to consider a question that strikes at the heart of the entire unit. Students may have some time in class to work on their response and be instructed in good writing, but some writing will inevitably be reserved for home. With the broad topic having been reviewed and tested, students should benefit from the freedom to engage one final time with the topic in a way that applies their intellect to form a deeper, long-lasting understanding.

## TWO INSIGHTS

First, teachers ought to make each lesson their own. The structure, recommendations, and resources provided in this curriculum are meant to be a trustworthy starting point and guide but should by no means be restrictive. They are meant to offer a sense of order within which teachers rediscover the freedom and joy of teaching.

Second, this curriculum eschews a number of relatively novel curriculum and pedagogical trends. We are well familiar with these practices, often theorized in academia and promulgated through preparation programs and bureaucratic agencies. Should a practice not appear in this curriculum, it is not necessarily ineffective or wrong (though we believe some are), but we simply argue that it is not the best method for students. We have made these determinations over time, through careful thought and classroom experience, and have opted for what has been tried and true for decades, centuries, and even millennia: tried, because they have formed the civilization we have inherited, and true, because they accord with the way the world is, the way people are, and the way people come to know the world.



## SUCCESS

# What Is Needed

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It is common in education policy to release a new program, curriculum, initiative, etc., followed with directives on what needs to be done to make them succeed. Here we, too, outline what is necessary, but our recommendation is very different. It is not more money, more government action and control, or more hoops to jump through. Instead, what is needed for civic education to succeed in America is freedom and prudence.

## FREEDOM

In education, the United States must restore the freedom to make decisions to those who are most directly affected by them.

Decision authority on what curriculum is used, how to teach, how to assess, and what schools to attend should be reclaimed from Washington, DC, the Department of Education, state bureaucracies, and teaching colleges and departments. The power to make such choices should be repossessed by state legislators, local school districts, and school boards, all of whom are accountable to voters, and to the administration and teachers of each school, who are accountable to parents when they elect to enroll their students at the school.

The preparation of teachers should be reclaimed from exorbitantly costly and time-consuming university system and certification agencies. The process for forming high-quality teachers should be repossessed by local school districts and schools, where new hires can earn a living while being mentored and coached by the best veteran teachers, who are themselves compensated for their support. This is how teachers learn to be great teachers: by observing and being observed by the great teachers before them.

The creation of lesson plans should be reclaimed from corporate textbook publishers and state and federal mandates. This process should be repossessed by teachers, as this curriculum permits, in order to restore the freedom to teach with passion and ingenuity by empowered teachers.

State standards should be specific on the most important content and skills students should access, particularly as content pertains to the principles of the American founding, but state standards should otherwise allow a broad range of flexibility for schools and teachers. National standards and civics funding tied to such standards, moreover, violate the principle of federalism and allow one ideological indoctrination to crowd out the insights and sovereignty of local citizens, parents, and teachers. Federal policymakers should not force national civics standards and funding onto states, districts, and local schools.

While it may be fitting to require high school students to pass the 2020 Civics Test used to naturalize immigrants as new U.S. citizens, accountability in history and civics does not require another new

standardized test. Instead, states should simply require that schools and school districts publish on their websites outlines of the specific lessons they teach students in history and civics. Parents can read for themselves if fundamental knowledge about America is being taught and if it is being taught accurately. And for recourse they can elect new school board members or else vote with their feet and move their students to a different school. Many of the assignments included in this curriculum are aimed at including parents in the education of their children, or at least making sure they are not barred from knowing what their children are being taught.

It is true that civic education is funded a paltry sum compared to STEM subjects. But STEM itself is probably overfunded, and the answer is not more money for civic education. After all, each of the above-mentioned restorations of freedom will save money, not increase expenses, for schools and teachers alike.

What is needed is greater freedom of time.

Teachers need time to learn more—not about how to teach but more importantly about *what* to teach, i.e., about their subject matter. Teachers need to drink deeply from great histories, from free online courses such as what Hillsdale College offers, and have time to plan dynamic lessons rather than be encumbered by administrative paperwork.

And students need time—time in the day to learn and engage with and think about history and civics.<sup>2</sup> The most meaningful change that state policymakers and schools can make in this regard is to defend and perhaps even expand the amount of time a given school day allots for American history and civics instruction. But this instruction should be devoted to engagement with content, not merely time-filling activities or action civics in which students become the pawns of adults who push an ideology in politics.

## PRUDENCE

For any of the above to happen, prudence must rule in the hearts and minds of those who have the power to make them realities. This prudence requires a clear-sightedness for the principles of America and of civic education, and a humility to seek out what these principles are. It requires courage and discretion in order to shift control over education away from powerful and centralized interests and back to local schools, individual teachers, and the voting citizens of a community. It requires a care for the well-being of students, a respect for their inherent dignity and rational yet impressionable hearts and minds, which deserve nothing but the often beautiful but sometimes ugly truth of American history. And it requires an American's love for his or her country, a love that can see and appreciate the good in America, recognize the bad, and strive always to preserve what is good and condemn what is not—all for the sake of the truths on which America was founded, in honor of those who sacrificed and died to defend them, and for the good of today's and future generations of young Americans.

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek, *Social Studies Instruction and Reading Comprehension: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study* (Washington DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 2020).

**GRATITUDE**

# Real Teachers, Real Classrooms, Real Students

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*The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* is a reflection of Hillsdale College's *K-12 Program Guide*, which serves as the basis of instruction in Hillsdale-affiliated schools. The *K-12 Program Guide* itself reflects parts of the education of which college students partake on Hillsdale's campus. The specific materials in this curriculum, however, are the creation of the very best K-12 teachers, both past and present. In particular, we wish to thank faculty members at St. Johns Classical Academy, Seven Oaks Classical School, Founders Classical Academy of Lewisville, and Golden View Classical Academy for their contributions to this curriculum. We also wish to thank Good Comma Editing for their services on this project.





## Dear Teacher,

As you know, teaching is one of the most important professions in human history. As an institution whose purpose it is to teach, we at Hillsdale College are acutely aware of what it takes to teach and to teach well, especially today. We thank you for taking up this charge in general and this curriculum in particular. We hope and trust that it will serve you and your students in the ways that you and they most deserve.

The pursuit of truth is an unapologetic pursuit. For those who strive for honesty, it cannot be otherwise. As such, you the teacher should be aware of the truths which Hillsdale College holds to be accessible to human reason, proven through the ages, and true of all people and all times. This curriculum is based on these truths. They are as follows.

- That truth is objective, according to the first law of logic, the law of contradiction: that something cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same way. The first object of the human mind and the first end of education is this objective truth about the world.
- That the good is that at which all actions, however misguided or distorted, aim. The good shows us how we ought to act, which we call right moral conduct.
- That human nature is good but also limited, flawed, and prone to do what is wrong.
- That while an individual may conduct himself and form his character to align with what is good over his lifetime, human nature itself does not fundamentally change or progress.
- That because this is the nature of human beings, and human beings make up government, government will always be capable of tyranny and mismanagement.
- That individuals should be judged based on their specific actions tending toward a certain character instead of their label, group identity, sex, religion, or skin color.
- That civic knowledge, personal virtue, patriotism, respect for the rule of law, and civil free speech are absolutely necessary for young students to learn for a free and self-governing society to persevere.
- That the more important thing in American history is that which has endured rather than that which has passed, that is, America's founding principles which have outlasted and extinguished from law various forms of evil, such as slavery, racism, and other violations of the equal protection of natural rights.
- That although the United States of America is by no means perfect, it is unprecedented in the annals of human history for the extraordinary degrees of freedom, peace, and prosperity available to its people and to those who immigrate to her shores.
- That these unprecedented benefits are the result of its founding ideas and of those who have bravely sacrificed to prove these principles true—the principles that all men are created equal in their human dignity and possession of certain natural rights, that government exists solely to protect these rights and to promote the public good, and that people ought to govern themselves and respect the rights of one another.
- That for these reasons, America is an exceptionally good country.

With these principles in mind, dive into your subject.

Learn it, wonder at it, love it, and teach so your students will, too.

Dr. Kathleen O'Toole, Assistant Provost for K-12 Education





# K-12 Education

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# The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum

*American History and Civics Lessons  
for K-12 Classrooms*



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