

# Chapter 7

## **What Questions Can We Ask From American Symbols? (Dimension 2: History)**

Rachel K. Turner, Utah State University

Figure 1. *The Liberty Bell*



**Note.** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. *The Liberty Bell*. (1935–1945). [Photograph]. Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/item/2017872326/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017872326/)

## What Questions Can We Ask From American Symbols?

C3 Disciplinary Focus History	C3 Inquiry Focus Dimension 1: Developing Questions & Planning Inquiries	Content Topic American Symbols
<p><b>C3 Focus Indicators</b></p> <p><b>D1.1.K-2.</b> Explain why the compelling question is important to the student.</p> <p><b>D1.4.K-2.</b> Make connections between supporting questions and compelling questions.</p> <p><b>D2.His.10.K-2.</b> Explain how historical sources can be used to study the past.</p> <p><b>D3.1.K-2.</b> Gather relevant information from one or two sources while using the origin and structure to guide the selection.</p> <p><b>D4.3.K-2.</b> Present a summary of an argument using print, oral, and digital technologies.</p>		
<p><b>Suggested Grade Level</b> K-2</p>	<p><b>Resources</b> Library of Congress digital collections; see Appendix</p>	<p><b>Time Required</b> 2-3 days (30 minutes each)</p>

Many elementary social studies standards focus on American symbolism. Symbolism that represents the beliefs, values, and traditions of our nation. American symbols can help citizens recognize and appreciate aspects of our nation, both historic and present. In this chapter, American symbols serve as inspiration for students to generate their own compelling and supporting questions. This chapter utilizes a digital collection of sources from the Library of Congress, organized around the four dimensions of the C3 framework. Teachers will engage with strategies to support students' developing compelling and supporting questions based on primary sources as well as developing a plan and determining sources for answering their questions. By the end of this chapter, teachers will feel confident in planning lessons that focus on student questioning and planning inquiries.

## Connections to the C3 Framework

Most states include learning goals about American symbols in their social studies curriculum standards, particularly in the early elementary grades. For example, in California, Florida, and Texas, curriculum standards around American symbols include students learning about the national flags, patriotic symbols such as the Liberty Bell or the Statue of Liberty, and patriotic songs such as "My Country 'Tis of Thee." See [Appendix A](#) for examples of three state curriculum standards about American symbols. The three states were chosen to highlight the various ways American symbols are used within state standards.

American symbols are included in our early elementary classroom curriculum to provide

a foundation for future learning in history, government, and civics. This study of American symbols is “often an elementary student’s first attempt at conceptualizing higher-order topics” (Roberts, 2013, p. 23). Common symbols studied include the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, and the bald eagle, among many others. These symbols help students make connections to physical and abstract images that represent values such as freedom, democracy, liberty, and independence (Brugar & Dickman, 2013). Understanding the importance of these symbols and what they represent is a foundational skill for elementary students and can be explored through inquiry using the C3 Framework.

The C3 Framework was developed as a way to address standards while focusing on inquiry skills. These inquiry skills are developed through the Inquiry Arc, a framework designed to help students develop and answer questions based on disciplinary skills. It includes four dimensions:

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

While each dimension will be addressed, a focus will be placed on Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries. A variety of primary sources will be used, and each can be found within the Library of Congress digital collections. This unique website provides access to primary sources around many historical topics, including those of interest to elementary teachers such as geography and places, American history, sports and recreation, and women’s history, to name a few.

## **Inquiry Arc**

This chapter explores how to address American symbols within the early elementary curriculum using primary sources. Through the inquiry, students will learn to identify various American symbols while also exploring their significance to history. In Dimension 1, students will work together to develop compelling and supporting questions through a variety of instructional strategies. In Dimensions 2 and 3, students will explore how primary sources can help answer questions and determine which can be best utilized to answer their developed questions. In Dimension 4, students will develop a symbol that represents their school and explain its significance to their school community.






### **Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries**

This inquiry focuses on building students’ skills in generating questions. The students will generate questions based on common American symbols that the teacher provides them. Students will generate questions using two unique strategies: *The Question Game* and *Think-Pair-Share*.

First, allow students an opportunity to explore symbols and the purpose of symbols. Students can discuss symbols that they have seen in their everyday life. These could include highway signs with symbols, bathroom signs, electronic symbols, and others. See Table 1 for an example of everyday symbols that can be used to spark discussion.

Discuss with students the importance of symbols and why we find them in real life. Be explicit with examples students may be familiar with such as street signs and symbols seen around school and within the classroom. Be sure and highlight how symbols are pictures or figures used to send a message about something. You can also provide new examples that students may not have thought of.

**Table 1. Everyday Symbols in Student Life**

Example	Represents	Picture
1	Power on/off	
2	Restroom	
3	Stop sign	
4	Recycle	
5	Slow down—watch for children	

Now that students have a better understanding of symbols, it is time for them to begin generating questions. First, provide students with graphic examples of common American symbols including the Liberty Bell, American flag, Great Seal of the United States, Uncle Sam, and the Statue of Liberty (see Figures 1–5). This portion of the inquiry is designed to get students thinking about symbols and representation. Explain to students that later they will interact with primary sources that show each of these symbols.

As a whole group, or in small groups, show students each image and play *The Question Game*. Explain that all questions are valued here. Allow students to ask any and all questions regarding any of the pictures. Then, for each picture, set a timer for one minute, and have students generate as many questions as they can. You can record these on chart paper or allow students to write them independently. For younger students, play *The Question Game* as

a whole group so that you can write down each question. For older students, have them work in small groups and designate one student to be the scribe.

Next, have students work in small groups to *Think-Pair-Share*, regarding the generated questions. Provide time for students to talk about why the question may have been asked or talk about what they notice about the picture. Explain to students that they can add more questions to the list as they discuss with their classmates.

Lastly, bring students back together to discuss the questions that were generated. Provide students with the compelling question at this time: “What questions can we ask from American symbols?” Then, explain that this is a large question and is dependent on which symbol we are looking at. Share each picture again and show the questions generated for each picture. Explain that these are considered supporting questions because they can help us answer the compelling question, yet they are specific to each picture. (D1.1K-2 & D1.4.K-2)

## **Dimension 2: Connections to Disciplinary Concepts and Tools**

In Dimension 2, the focus of the inquiry shifts to exploring historical sources. Elementary students need opportunities to explore the past, and primary sources provide a unique opportunity. Through primary source analysis, students gain understanding of history while also gaining skills in observation, evaluation, and interpretation (D2.His.10.K-2).

Prior to providing students with the sources (see [Appendix B](#)), students need to understand what sources are and what role they play in history. Share with students two pieces of information: a textbook entry and a letter. Have students share what makes the texts different and what makes them the same. Some examples include an author, the person who received the letter, or a known date. Explain that both texts provide us with information, but one text is unique. Explain that primary sources can be used to tell us about history and that today they will get to interact with sources to learn about American symbols

Provide students with a few examples of primary sources such as letters, documents, photographs, and diary entries. Allow time for students to rotate through each source, spending time with each. Have them discuss what they notice and what can be learned from each item. Provide prompting questions for students to discuss, such as “What do you notice?” “What connections can you make with the source?” and “Why do you think this is an important source?” These items do not have to be focused on American symbols. This is simply to give students who may have no experience with primary sources an opportunity to learn about them. If students need more practice generating questions, have them ask questions about each primary source. Then, introduce students to the *Question Parking Lot*. *The Question Parking Lot* could be a large piece of chart paper, the white board, or any other part of the room the teacher designates. Explain that this will be a place to include more

questions they may have as they interact with sources in the next part of the activity.

### **Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence**

Explain to students that now they will be evaluating unique primary sources about American symbols. Remind students of the symbols they explored previously and what their compelling question is: “What questions can we ask from American symbols?”

Split students into five groups. Each group will be given a topic focused on the following American symbols: Liberty Bell, American flag, Great Seal of the United States, Uncle Sam, and Statue of Liberty (see Figures 1–5). In five stations within the classroom, place each of the five sources in a separate area. Additional information about each source can be found in [Appendix B](#). First, task each group with finding what source would help them learn about their topic. Have each group share aloud what about the source helped them know that it would be helpful for their topic. (D3.1.K–2)

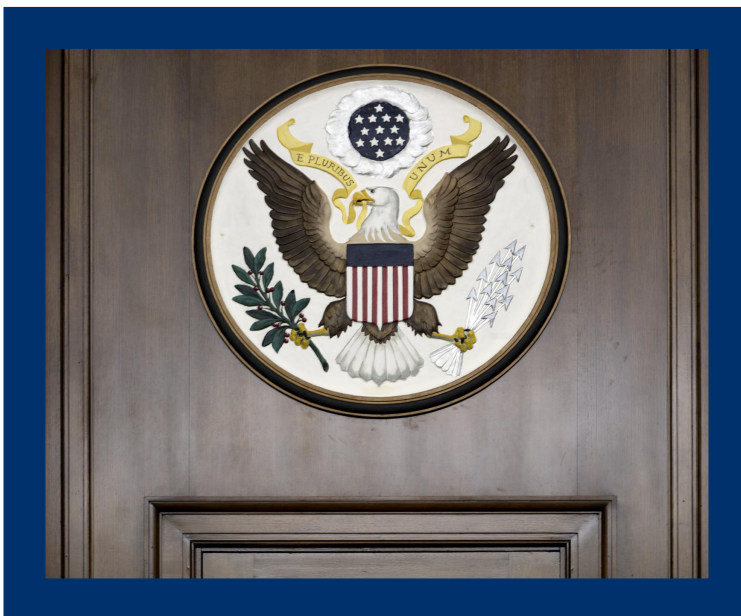
Next, point out the information provided about each source, such as the creator and date of creation. Explain to students that this helps us learn even more about the source. Then, task students with evaluating each source using the *I See, I Think, I Wonder* method. For younger students, work through each topic together by asking each group to make observations aloud (I see). Then, have students share aloud what they think and lastly what questions they still have. For older students, provide them with a graphic organizer (see Figure 6) so that they can write what they see, think, and wonder. Lastly, facilitate a whole group discussion to give students an opportunity to share what they learned.

**Figure 2. American Flag**



**Note.** Palmer, A. T. (1942). *High above, over a true “home of the brave,” the floating folds of the Star Spangled Banner symbolize the American way of life to soldiers in training for the battles that will bring freedom to an unhappy, wartorn world, Fort Knox, Ky* [Photograph]. Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/item/2017878394/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017878394/)

**Figure 3. Great Seal of the United States**



**Note.** Highsmith, C. M. (2017). *Great Seal of the United States United States Post Office and Courthouse, Athens, Georgia* [Photograph]. Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/item/2017661007/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017661007/)



Figure 4. *Uncle Sam*






**Note.** *I want you for the U.S. Army.* (1941). [Poster]. Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/item/2002718900/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2002718900/)

Figure 5. *Statue of Liberty*



**Note.** Overall view of Liberty Island looking northwest with Jersey City in background. (ca. 1968). *Statue of Liberty, Liberty Island, Manhattan, New York County, NY* [Photograph]. Historic American Engineering Record, Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ny1251.photos/?sp=1](http://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ny1251.photos/?sp=1)

**Figure 6.** *I See, I Think, I Wonder* Graphic Organizer

Names:		Date:
<b>I See</b> 	<b>I Think</b> 	<b>I Wonder</b> 
<i>What observations can I make from the source?</i>	<i>What conclusions can I draw from the source? What inferences can I make?</i>	<i>What questions do I have about the source?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

## Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

After exploring unique sources about American symbols, students now have a clear understanding of what symbols are, and they have a few examples. They have also practiced generating questions and learned how sources can help us answer questions. In Dimension 4, students will now take informed action by creating a symbol that represents their school. Students will also write about their symbol to explain the significance.

Explain to students about how symbols can help people know where to go, such as a bathroom sign, and they can also help people feel pride, such as the American flag. Explain to students that they will be creating their own symbol to represent their school. Have students work together to brainstorm things that represent their school, such as the name of the school, the person it was named after, the mascot, colors, location, etc. Then, allow students time to create a drawing of their symbol. Show students examples of symbols as they work to help them generate ideas. Remind students that their symbols can be simple or intricate. After students have completed their pictures, have them write about the symbol, including what it means and how they wish it to make others feel. To take the task a step further, ask the school principal if the school can vote on which symbol is their favorite and if it can be displayed in the school. This will help students see that what they learn and investigate can be used to inspire change and pride in others. (D4.3.K-2)

# References

- Brugar, K. A., & Dickman, A. H. (2013). [Oh, say can you see? Visualizing American symbols in the fifth grade.](#) *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 25(4), 17–22.
- Roberts, S. (2013). [Let freedom ring: Using the “circle of knowledge” strategy to examine American symbols.](#) *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 25(4), 23–26.

# Appendix A

Examples of State Standards Addressing American Symbols			
	California	Florida	Texas
Kindergarten	HSS-K.2: Students recognize national and state symbols and icons such as the national and state flags, the bald eagle, and the Statue of Liberty.	SS.K.CG.2.4: Recognize symbols that represent the United States.	(9) The student is expected to: (A) identify the United States flag and the Texas state flag; (B) recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States Flag and the Pledge to the Texas Flag; and (C) use voting as a method for group decision making.
1st Grade	<p>HSS-K.1.3: Students know and understand the symbols, icons, and traditions of the United States that provide continuity and a sense of community across time.</p> <p>HSS-K.1.3.1: Recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing songs that express American ideals (e.g., “My Country ’Tis of Thee”).</p> <p>HSS-K.1.3.3: Identify American symbols, landmarks, and essential documents, such as the flag, bald eagle, Statue of Liberty, U.S. Constitution, and Declaration of Independence, and know the people and events associated with them.</p>	SS.2.CG.2.4: Recognize symbols and individuals that represent the United States.	(13) The student is expected to: (A) explain state and national patriotic symbols, including the United States and Texas flags, the Liberty Bell, the Statue of Liberty, and the Alamo; (B) recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States Flag and the Pledge to the Texas Flag; (C) identify anthems and mottos of Texas and the United States; (D) explain and practice voting as a way of making choices and decisions; and (E) explain how patriotic customs and celebrations reflect American individualism and freedom.
	California	Florida	Texas

<p><b>2nd Grade</b></p>	<p>None</p>	<p>SS.2.CG.2.4: Recognize symbols, individuals and documents that represent the United States.</p>	<p>(11) The student is expected to: (A) recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States Flag and the Pledge to the Texas Flag; (B) sing, recite, or identify selected patriotic songs, including “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “America the Beautiful”; (C) identify symbols such as state and national birds and flowers and Uncle Sam; and (D) identify how selected symbols, customs, and celebrations reflect an American love of individualism, inventiveness, and freedom.</p>
<p><b>3rd Grade</b></p>	<p>HSS-3.4: Students understand the role of rules and laws in our daily lives and the basic structure of the U.S. government.</p> <p>HSS-3.4.3: Know the histories of important local and national landmarks, symbols, and essential documents that create a sense of community among citizens and exemplify cherished ideals (e.g., the U.S. flag, the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Capitol).</p>	<p>SS.3.CG.2.4: Recognize symbols, individuals, documents and events that represent the United States.</p>	<p>None</p>

**Note.** California Department of Education. (2000). History–social science content standards for California public schools: Kindergarten through grade twelve. [www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf); CPALMS and Florida State University. (2021). [www.cpalms.org/public/search/Standard](http://www.cpalms.org/public/search/Standard); Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies, 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 113 (2018). [https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac\\$ext.ViewTAC?tac\\_view=5&ti=19&pt=2&ch=113&sch=A&rl=Y](https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.ViewTAC?tac_view=5&ti=19&pt=2&ch=113&sch=A&rl=Y)

## Appendix B

Primary Sources From the Library of Congress	
Symbol	Reference
The Liberty Bell	<i>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Liberty Bell.</i> (1935–1945). [Photograph]. Library of Congress. <a href="http://www.loc.gov/item/2017872326/">www.loc.gov/item/2017872326/</a>
American Flag	Palmer, A. T. (1942). <i>High above, over a true “home of the brave,” the floating folds of the Star Spangled Banner symbolize the American way of life to soldiers in training for the battles that will bring freedom to an unhappy, wartorn world, Fort Knox, Ky</i> [Photograph]. Library of Congress. <a href="http://www.loc.gov/item/2017878394/">www.loc.gov/item/2017878394/</a>
Great Seal of the United States	Highsmith, C. M. (2017). <i>Great Seal of the United States United States Post Office and Courthouse, Athens, Georgia</i> [Photograph]. Library of Congress. <a href="http://www.loc.gov/item/2017661007/">www.loc.gov/item/2017661007/</a>
Uncle Sam	<i>I want you for the U.S. Army.</i> (1941). [Poster]. Library of Congress. <a href="http://www.loc.gov/item/2002718900/">www.loc.gov/item/2002718900/</a>  From a painting by James Montgomery Flagg
Statue of Liberty	Overall view of Liberty Island looking northwest with Jersey City in background. (ca. 1968). <i>Statue of Liberty, Liberty Island, Manhattan, New York County, NY</i> [Photograph]. Historic American Engineering Record, Library of Congress. <a href="http://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ny1251.photos/?sp=1">www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ny1251.photos/?sp=1</a>  Part of Historic American Engineering Record, Survey HAER NY-138