

PULITZER CENTER LESSON BUILDER

# Lesson Plan: Exploring "The Idea of America" by Nikole Hannah-Jones

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BY PULITZER CENTER EDUCATION



Artwork by Adam Pendleton in *The 1619 Project*, page 15. 2019.

## Lesson Overview:

“The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been born on the backs of black resistance...Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.” —Nikole Hannah-Jones

*The 1619 Project*, inaugurated with a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, challenges us to reframe U.S. history by marking the year when the first enslaved Africans arrived on Virginia soil as its foundational date.

Award-winning investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones provides an expansive essay on why “black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’” Her essay chronicles a history of policies enacted to profit from and disenfranchise black Americans, and the fight not only to claim black liberation, but also to make liberation possible for all Americans.

This lesson plan is designed to introduce Hannah-Jones’ essay, and *The 1619 Project* as a whole, through discussion questions and guided reading. For extension activities and to delve into the other essays and creative works that compose this special issue, please visit:

- **[Reading guides and the full \*New York Times Magazine\* issue text](#)**
- **[Activities to extend student engagement with \*The 1619 Project\*](#)**

## Warm-up:

1. The signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 is often presented as the foundational event of U.S. history. Referring to the text of the Declaration of Independence, answer the following questions as a class:

- What are the values stated in the Declaration of Independence?
- In what ways can you see those values working in contemporary U.S. society?  
In what ways can you see them failing?
- How has the interpretation of those values changed over time? Who is responsible for creating those changes?

## Introductory Reading and Discussion:

1. Read this excerpt from Nikole Hannah-Jones' essay to identify her central thesis.

**Excerpt from "The Idea of America"**

2. As a class, identify Hannah-Jones' central thesis. Then, discuss the reading using one or both of the following sets of questions.

**Connecting to Content:**

- What do you know about slavery, and where does that information come from?
- What do you know about the contributions of black Americans to U.S. society, and where does that information come from?
- What are the ramifications of slavery in contemporary U.S. life?
- How does the story of the U.S. change if we mark the beginning of U.S. history in 1619 instead of 1776?
- What is national memory? How do we create it? How can we change it?

**Connecting to Structure:**

- Why do you think Nikole Hannah-Jones and other contributors to this issue chose to publish this work in *The New York Times Magazine*, a national news publication?
- What is journalism's role in shaping national memory?
- Skim over the issue's table of contents (**full issue text available here**). You will notice that there are analytical essays, poems, fiction, art, photography, and more included in the same issue. How can each of these forms contribute to the conversation on the legacy of slavery in the U.S.? What is the effect of having all of these forms combined in one magazine?

**In-depth Reading and Discussion:**

Read Nikole Hannah-Jones' essay in full. **While you read**, consider this claim in her essay: "[T]he year 1619 is as foundational to the American story as 1776...black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true 'founding fathers.'"

Use one of the following graphic organizers to guide your reading:

- **Graphic organizer tracking evidence Hannah-Jones' provides for her central thesis**
- **Graphic organizer tracking new information learned and personal responses to the essay**

**After you read**, discuss the following questions as a class:

1. What examples of hypocrisy in the founding of the U.S. does Hannah-Jones supply? What evidence can you see for how “some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy”?
2. Why do you think Hannah-Jones consistently refers to what are commonly known as “plantations,” such as Monticello, by the term “forced-labor camps” instead? Does any other language she uses to describe places, people, or events surprise or stand out to you?
3. What picture does Hannah-Jones paint of major figures in classical U.S. history, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln? Did you learn new information about them from her essay? If so, why do you think this information wasn't included in other resources from which you have learned about U.S. history?
4. What are some examples of progress pushed forward by black Americans during Reconstruction that Hannah-Jones discusses? How have these efforts benefited all Americans?
5. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were all signed into law during Reconstruction. What examples of persisting racial inequalities in the years following Reconstruction does Hannah-Jones mention? What institutions and ideologies made this possible?
6. How does Hannah-Jones expand on this quote from sociologist Glenn Bracey: “Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves”?
7. Consider the following quote from “The Idea of America”:  
“Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, ‘mainstream’ society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to

appropriate the one truly American culture as its own.”

Why do you think Hannah-Jones places the word “mainstream” in quotation marks?

8. “The Idea of America” is bookended by personal stories; it begins with Hannah-Jones’ memory of her father’s attachment to the American flag, and ends with a story about a middle school class assignment. Why do you think the author includes personal anecdotes in her essay? Why do you think she writes in first-person throughout? What effect do these choices have on how you experience the essay?
9. Hannah-Jones writes, “How could this black man [Hannah-Jones’ father], having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner?” What answers does her essay provide?
10. Consider the title of this essay: “The Idea of America.” What other possible titles can you imagine for this essay? Why do you think Hannah-Jones ultimately chose this title?

## Further Exploration:

Continue to explore *The 1619 Project*:

- **Reading Guide: Quotes, Key Terms, and Questions**
- **Activities to Extend Engagement with *The 1619 Project***
- **Call for Contributions: Share Your 1619 Curricula**

## Educator Notes:

Common Core Standards:

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.9**

Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2**

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

### **REPORTING USED IN THIS LESSON**

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# 1. The 1619 Project: Pulitzer Center Education Programming

### **LESSON OUTLINE**

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**Warm-up:** Reevaluating the Declaration of Independence.

**Introductory Reading and Discussion:** Exploring an excerpt from Nikole Hannah-Jones' "The Idea of America" and discussing the themes of *The 1619 Project*.

**In-depth Reading and Discussion:** Reading Hannah-Jones' full essay (lesson includes graphic organizers) and discussing its content and structure.

**Further Exploration:** Continuing your exploration of *The 1619 Project*.

- **Index and Guiding Questions**
- **Activities to Extend Engagement with *The 1619 Project***
- **Call for Contributions: Share Your *1619* Curricula**