



OBAMA

IN PURSUIT OF A
MORE PERFECT UNION

INTRODUCTION

Six lesson plans support the integration of the three-part documentary **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** into high school and university classrooms. They offer educators an engaging and relevant resource for students taking African American History, English Language Arts/Rhetoric, Government, Civics, and U.S. History courses. The lessons can also be easily adapted for out-of-school workshops, such as youth empowerment and leadership development.

While each lesson can be effective on its own, the materials follow an intentional scope and sequence based on the central themes of the documentary project. If used sequentially, the Venn diagrams will be part of a culminating exercise in Lesson Six.

The lessons expand upon the documentary's title and include activities, curated film clips, interview threads, and primary source documents. Students dig deeper into Barack Obama's personal story, community organizing work, run for elected office, and two terms as the 44th and first Black president of the United States. However, the materials are not a comprehensive survey of his life. Rather, students analyze multiple viewpoints on the former president from scholars, friends, and colleagues — some loyal supporters, others informed critics. Throughout, students apply historical analysis and perspective-taking as they analyze and document the relationship between Obama's personal and political life, investigate the broad cultural context of America and American history, examine the intersections between the two, and begin to imagine their own contributions to the ongoing work of democracy.

Suggested teaching and facilitation strategies for organizing group work, discussions, and independent research are provided. These ideas can be directly followed but we encourage adapting them to what you know is most effective and appropriate for your students, learning objectives, and content needs.



LENGTH: As noted, each lesson plan as written may take approximately two 50-minute class periods. You may also consider assigning elements of the lessons, such as viewing episodes or excerpts, as homework to preserve instructional time. If possible, consider creating a two-week unit to cover all the material in an engaging and comprehensive way.



STANDARDS: Each lesson meets multiple Common Core State Standards in Literacy, History/Social Studies and English/Language Arts. As Common Core remains a state-led effort, consult your [state guidelines](#) for the most current framework.

Skills and content in each of the six Obama lessons fulfill all four Dimensions outlined in [C3 Framework--College, Career, and Civic Life](#). This resource can be useful in aligning your lessons to standards.

HOW TO BEGIN

Creating Inclusive Space for Student Engagement

Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union focuses on some of the most challenging and important issues our nation struggles with, such as race, racism, and economic inequality. These topics can evoke strong emotions and reactions, which can support constructive conversations about the future of our nation if raised in a respectful environment.

Every person, educator, and student alike, will see the film and lessons through a lens that is influenced by their own identity and background. For example, the history of civil rights in America may feel like an interesting or inspiring part of history, and for others that history may be a reminder of violent struggles and traumatic memories.

In recognition of these differences, it will be helpful to revisit classroom norms or agreements about respectful classroom engagement. If such agreements are not already in place, consider developing some for this unit. Resources from [Learning for Justice](#) and [Educating for American Democracy](#) offer ideas on how to create a classroom space for inclusive and constructive learning.

Part of this work is coming to a shared understanding of the usage and definition of terms used in these lessons. **Obama: In Pursuit of a Perfect Union** uses words that may have different meanings to different people. It will be helpful in any classroom for everyone to understand the terms in the same way as norms may vary according to regions and communities. Consider beginning with a dictionary definition or terminology from a resource like the [Conscious Style Guide](#). This framing will deepen understanding and support a respectful learning environment.

The following words are used throughout the lessons and are defined here for clarity:

Backlash: Resistance to President Obama’s agenda or policies that is based on racist, as opposed to political, ideology.

Black: “Black,” where it refers to the race of people, is capitalized in accordance with the recommendations of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). NABJ also recommends that any other color used to appropriately describe race be capitalized, including White and Brown.

Identity: According to Merriam-Webster, the distinguishing character or personality of an individual, and/or the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others.

Race: Used broadly to refer to the social constructs pervasive in the United States that are based on perceived shared physical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, etc., and that are part of our cultural discourse.

Racism: Actions, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions held by an individual, group, or institution that discriminate and exclude based on social constructs of race.

White Supremacy: The system of social hierarchy, expressed through cultural, political, and systemic policies and practices, that values White people and Whiteness over all other races.

DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING

There are several ways the lesson plans provide opportunities for assessment



THE MORE PERFECT UNION VENN DIAGRAM: NOTE TAKING FOR SPEECH

At the end of each lesson, students will be asked to collect their ideas and analysis using The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram. Students will rely on this resource, among others, to complete their final assignment.



VISION OF A MORE PERFECT UNION SPEECHWRITING

At the end of this study of Barack Obama, students will write a speech, two or three minutes in length, expressing their vision of a more perfect union. This speech will offer students the opportunity to share their point of view developed by viewing excerpts from the film, examining the interview threads, and reviewing the notes they collected in their Venn diagram. This assignment is explained in more depth in Lesson Six. The speeches can be presented in many creative ways.

In school

- > Students can record their speech and upload it to a shared online classroom space to allow small groups to assemble and watch assigned speeches.
- > Students can deliver their speech live in front of the class.
- > Host a “state-of-the-union” assembly for multiple classes or grades for students to present their speech. This could be a school-wide event organized around a commemorative holiday such as President’s Day, or around a local or national election to bring awareness to civic engagement.

In community

- > Students can submit recordings of their speeches to community radio programs or podcasts that report on the topics that they chose.
- > Students can reach out to local nonprofit organizations or local governments working on the topics they chose.
- > Class members can post the speeches to a social media account made for this assignment and tweet them to President Obama or other relevant policy makers.

WHO'S WHO: A GLOSSARY OF INTERVIEWS

A complete biography of each interviewee conducted for **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** can be found on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation](#) website's Interview Archive. The titles below are the same as the ones used in the film, and an identifier of the context in which the individual knew Obama.



Genevieve Ahearne
Friend from New York
City



Elizabeth Alexander
Author and friend



Loretta Augustine-Herron
Community organizer



David Axelrod
Political consultant



Phil Boerner
College classmate



Carol Moseley Braun
US Senator, Illinois



Charlamagne Tha God
Radio host, *The
Breakfast Club*



Ta-Nehisi Coates
Author and journalist



Jelani Cobb
Author and journalist



Michael Eric Dyson
Author and professor



Joella Edwards
Classmate, Punahou
School



Jon Favreau
Speechwriter



Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Professor



Austan Goolsbee
Economist



Sherrilyn Ifill
President, NAACP Legal
Defense Fund



Jesse Jackson
Civil rights activist



Valerie Jarrett
Political advisor



Broderick Johnson
Advisor



Jerry Kellman
Community organizer



Keegan-Michael Key
Actor



John Lewis
US Representative,
Georgia



Alvin Love
Pastor, Lilydale Baptist
Church



Reggie Love
Political aide



Ken Mack
Classmate, Harvard Law
School



DeRay McKesson
Activist



David Maraniss
Author and journalist,
The Washington Post



Judd Miner
Attorney



Marty Nesbitt
Friend



Michele Norris
Journalist



Anthony Peterson
Classmate, Punahou
School



David Remnick
Editor, *The New Yorker*



Bobby Rush
US Representative,
Illinois



Al Sharpton
President, National
Action Network



Shirley Sherrod
Georgia Director, Rural
Development, USDA



Laura Washington
Journalist



Cornel West
Professor and activist



Jeremiah Wright
Pastor, Trinity United
Church of Christ



Zariff
Barber, Hyde Park Hair
Salon