



# A Land of Refuge or Refusal? Perspectives on the Refugee Experience in the United States

## Overview

In this immigration lesson plan, students analyze key ideas in an academic article that provides background on the refugee experience in the United States, including examples of welcoming and exclusionary responses, as well as the impacts of these disparate reactions. After analyzing the author's claims and evidence, students then apply one of those claims to the current refugee crisis in order to answer the question: how is America a land of refuge, refusal, or both?

This lesson encourages critical thinking from students in a very public discussion, both in the United States and abroad, about the worldwide refugee crisis. In recent years, the United States has welcomed 70,000 refugees per year. The President has indicated he intends to admit 85,000 refugees in Fiscal Year 2016, including 10,000 from Syria. This increase has been criticized by some who believe the United States should do much more to protect those fleeing dire situations and by some who fear that welcoming Syrian refugees may compromise our national security. In considering the appropriate U.S. response to the refugee crisis, it is important to remember the central role of refugees in the American experience.

Adaptations are made for English Language Learners and readers at multiple levels.

## Objectives

Students will be able to...

- understand a visual argument of juxtaposition and draw inferences from it
- analyze the development of key ideas over the course of an academic text and provide a summary of the text
- apply an author's key idea to a current event in order to reflect in writing on the essential question

## Essential Question

With regard to the refugee experience in the United States, how is America a land of refuge, refusal, or both?

## Key Terms

[juxtaposition](#) — an act or instance of placing close together or side by side, especially for comparison or contrast

[persecution](#) — the act of pursuing with harassing or oppressive treatment, especially because of religious or political beliefs, ethnic or racial origin, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

[refuge](#) — shelter or protection from danger, trouble, etc.

[refugee](#) — is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin.

## Common Core Standards

### High School

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1](#)  
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1](#)  
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- [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.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2](#)  
Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1](#)  
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1](#)  
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

## C3Framework

- [D2.His.5.9-12](#). Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.

## Grades

- 9-12 (adapt as appropriate)

## Texts & Materials

- Image of [German Steamer MS St. Louis in 1939](#) carrying 937 mostly Jewish refugees bound for Cuba (Photo Courtesy: U.S. Department of State)
- Image of [Syrian Refugees](#) aboard a plastic dinghy (Photo Courtesy: Ben White/ CAFOD, October 2015)

- Haines, David M. “[Learning from Our Past: The Refugee Experience in the United States](#)” (adapted student version). Please click [here](#) for the full version.
- [Refugee Experience Reading Chart](#)
- Refugee Experience Reading Chart ([adapted](#) version for students as appropriate)

## Lesson Preparation

- Juxtapose an image of the [German Steamer MS St. Louis in 1939](#) carrying 937 mostly Jewish refugees bound for Cuba who were denied entry with an image of [Syrian Refugees](#) aboard a plastic dinghy on a presentation slide (or use the [Student Handout](#)).
- Prepare copies of “[Learning from Our Past](#)” and “[Refugee Experience Reading Chart](#).”

## Lesson Procedure

*Setting the Lesson: Comparing Now & Then*

1. As students enter, display the image of the [German Steamer MS St. Louis in 1939](#) next to an image of [Syrian Refugees](#) aboard a plastic dinghy. Without giving them context, have students write their initial impressions and what they think the individual images are about and how they might be related.

After a brief discussion, provide students with historical context for the *MS. St. Louis*. If you are looking for a refresher, we recommend reading this brief article “[Voyage of the St. Louis](#)” (U.S. Holocaust Museum).

Ask students: What statement is made when we put these images side by side? Introduce students to the key term juxtaposition and allow them time to answer the question.

*Identify Key Ideas and Analyze Their Development*

(Depending on your class, this next step may take more than one day of instruction)

3. With the idea of comparing past and present in mind, pass out “[Learning from Our Past: The Refugee Experience in the United States](#)” (adapted student version) and the [Reading Chart](#). Provide those students who may need extra assistance with an [adapted version](#). Explain to students that as we think about refugees now, it’s important to remember our history and relationship with refugees so we can learn from our past.

a) Model a completion of reading Section 1 of the article as they follow along. Demonstrate to students thinking through vocabulary in context, talking through your choices in marking the text and transferring key ideas and evidence onto the tracking chart.

For the second half of Section 1, alert students that they should be ready to contribute their thoughts on what should be underlined or annotated in a given paragraph, or thoughts on decoding a vocab

word from its context.

Finish reading Section 1 with students identifying the key idea: “America is a land of refuge because many early immigrants were fleeing persecution even if they were not classified as refugees” and evidence to support.

b) For the first half of Section 2, continue to read aloud, but call on students to do most of the responding. If students are showing they're ready to move on more independently, have them complete the second half of section 2 in groups. If not, continue as a whole group.

Finish reading Section 2 with students identifying the key idea: “America is a land of refusal because it has a history of turning away those seeking refuge” and evidence to support.

c) For Section 3, allow students to work in groups or independently to annotate the final section of the speech. Circulate to support students, but they should be able to complete this section independently. Students should be able to identify the key idea: “The refusal and dismissal of refugees throughout U.S. history has affected American values and the image of the U.S. abroad.”

d) With time remaining, have a brief class discussion about the key ideas presented by the author. Have students respond either as a freewrite to wrap-up or orally how they think America is a land of refuge, refusal, or both?

#### *Apply and Extend an Author's Key Idea to Another Context*

4. Apply one of Haines's key ideas about the refugee experience in America's past to the present. You could present a few articles for students to choose from or have students research and select their own. You can also use a current event site for students like [newsela.com](http://newsela.com) to select an article.

Based on the information presented in the article, ask students how is America a land of refusal, refuge, or both? Have students respond to this question briefly in writing. If they cannot find enough information to answer that question, encourage them to continue researching.

In groups, have students share what they learned from their articles and their respective answers to the essential question as a mini-discussion. Then as a class, discuss these examples and address the essential question. Extend the discussion by asking students if they think America has learned from mistakes in its past? How are these historical and present situations different and similar?

As a culminating task, have students write an answer to the essential question using claim and evidence from the Haines text as well as citing a modern example — either their own or a classmate's.

## Extensions

- [How Can Teachers Address the Plight of Refugees in the Classroom?](#) (American Immigration Council Education Blog) This blog post identifies ways teachers can talk about the refugee crisis in the classroom as well ways to expand upon this lesson.
- [An Overview of Refugee Law & Policy](#) (American Immigration Council) The United States passed its first official refugee legislation to address the plight of displaced Europeans following World War II. Learn about the definition of a refugee, the process, (which after vetting by several agencies can take 18-24 months), and resettlement.

## Teaching References

- [Author's Purpose: Analyzing & Adapting Texts](#) (Teaching Channel Video) This video of a lesson on author's purpose by the 2014 Teacher of the Year Sean McComb demonstrates some of the modeling and close-reading skills practiced in this lesson.

## About Us

The American Immigration Council is a non-profit, non-partisan, organization based in Washington D.C. Our legal, education, policy and exchange programs work to strengthen America by honoring our immigrant history and shaping how Americans think and act towards immigration now and in the future. We strive to promote a better understanding of immigrants and immigration by providing free educational resources that inspire thoughtful dialogue, creative teaching and critical thinking.

## Tell Us How You Use This Lesson in Your Classroom

We'd love to know how you have adapted this lesson or any feedback you want to share with us. Please send us a message at [teacher@immcouncil.org](mailto:teacher@immcouncil.org).

Please note that as a teacher, you are eligible for community grants, books for your classroom, professional development, leadership opportunities, and more!

We welcome contributing book reviews and guest blog posts from educators. Stay connected by following our blog, Immigration In and Out of the Classroom, and our twitter [@ThnkImmigration](#)

## Student Handout



[German Steamer MS St. Louis in 1939](#) (Photo Courtesy: U.S. Department of State)



[Syrian Refugees](#) aboard a plastic dinghy (Photo Courtesy: Ben White/ CAFOD, October 2015)