

Small Acts, Strong Communities

Freedom 250

Overview

In this 60-minute lesson, students learn how volunteering and community service are important parts of life in the United States and how people “give back” to strengthen their communities. Then students plan action to practice giving back in their own community.

Goals

As a result of this lesson, **students** will be able to:

- learn and use key vocabulary (e.g., *volunteer*, *community service*, *impact*)
- summarize a short informational text and identify main ideas/supporting details
- understand the importance of volunteering and community service
- use collaboration and critical thinking skills to plan a service event for their class

As a result of this lesson, **teachers** will be able to:

- guide students to explore the legacy of volunteering in the U.S.
- help students consider the connections between service and strong community ties

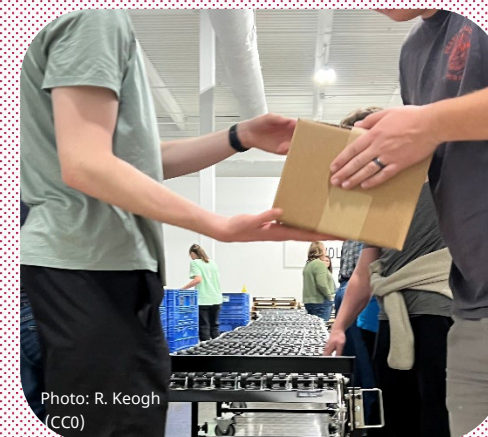
Lesson Materials

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Paper and pencils or pens
- Chalkboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers

PROVIDED WITH THIS LESSON

- Community Service History Cards
- The Spirit of Volunteerism in the U.S. Today - Reading
- Small Acts Service Challenge Log
- Key Vocabulary Glossary



Preparation

1. This lesson introduces the tradition of volunteering and “giving back” in the United States and invites students to plan service in their own communities. Consider how volunteering is viewed in your local context and what forms of informal or formal service are most common for young people. You may wish to prepare a few local examples of community help—such as neighborhood support, school projects, or other community projects—to connect the U.S. examples to students’ real lives. Adapt the service challenge so that it reflects realistic needs, cultural expectations, and safety considerations in your community.
2. Review the **Procedures** and **Lesson Materials** sections, then determine the formats you will use for the Lesson Materials.
 - Many items can be photocopied, enlarged, or projected onto the board or a wall. More suggestions for formatting and sharing these materials are in the Procedures steps and notes.
 - After selecting the formats for the activities, prepare the required number of materials to suit your class size, considering how many groups or individuals will participate in each lesson stage.
 - If using printed versions of Items A, B, and C, cut up the materials and group them as needed.
3. Read the **Skills and Language Topics** and **Key Vocabulary** lists below. Review the glossary ([Lesson Materials – Item D](#)) to see how Key Vocabulary terms are used in this lesson. Will you need to activate prior knowledge, pre-teach, or otherwise provide scaffolding (support) for your students beyond the suggestions in the Procedures section? See the **Variations and Extensions** section for ideas.

Skills and Language Topics

- Reading for main ideas and details
- Summarizing
- Teamwork: communicating and collaborating to plan service action

Key Vocabulary

- *community service*
- *disaster*
- *donate*
- *impact*
- *need*
- *volunteer*
- *volunteerism*



Procedures		
TIME	STEPS	NOTES
5 min	<p>1. Warm up: “What counts as service?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain that students will do a movement activity to share their opinions about service. Read each statement below and ask students to step to one side of the room if they agree and the other side if they disagree. Invite a few students from each side to briefly explain their choice. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Volunteering must be organized by a group.” “Volunteering is common in my community.” “I have participated in a group community service project.” “I have helped someone out when I saw they needed my help.” After considering the statements, have students share with a partner about a time they helped someone, either formally or informally. 	<p>Think-Pair-Share</p> <p><i>Remind students that informal service—such as helping family at home, tutoring a younger student, or spending time with an elderly neighbor—is valuable and strengthens communities. Explain that formal volunteering is usually organized by a group, while informal service happens in everyday life when we notice a need and choose to help.</i></p>
20 min	<p>2. U.S. Community Service History Cards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain that students will read about real examples of community service in American history and then teach their classmates what they learned. If needed, briefly review the key words <i>volunteer</i>, <i>community service</i>, and <i>impact</i> before starting. Divide students into groups and give each group one Community Service History Card. Ask students to read the card together and discuss three questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What need existed? What did people do about it? What impact did it have on the community then or now? After groups discuss, ask students to stand up and find a partner from a different group. Each student should summarize their Community Service History Card and explain what it shows about the value of community service in the U.S. Partners listen to each other, then students find a new partner and repeat the retell with someone else. 	<p>Small group + pair discussion</p> <p><u>Lesson Materials – Item A</u></p> <p><i>Encourage students to speak in their own words, not read from the card. You can model one short example to show how to retell the main ideas.</i></p>

20 min	<p>3. Reading: The Spirit of Volunteerism in the U.S. Today</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind students that helping others and serving the community are long-standing values in the United States. Explain that the class will now connect the historical examples they learned about to the ways Americans volunteer and serve today. Give each student the short reading about volunteerism in the U.S. today. Ask students to read the text and <u>underline</u> important details about why people volunteer and how service helps communities. After reading, invite students to turn to a partner and share a short summary of the key ideas. Write several sentence starters on the board to support speaking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In the United States, people volunteer by... ” “Volunteer work helps communities because... ” “One example of service from the reading is...” When pairs finish sharing, bring the class back together and discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do some people in the U.S. do to help their community? What might happen in our community if we planned a service project where each of us found simple ways to help others? 	<p>Reading for details + pair discussion and whole group reflection</p> <p>Lesson Materials – Item B</p> <p><i>Encourage students to use their own words and personal opinions, not only repeat sentences from the text. Praise any connections they make to service in their own country or community.</i></p>
15 min	<p>4. Project Planning: Local “Small Acts Service Challenge” Action Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize that small, everyday actions count as real service. Explain that students will plan simple ways to serve people in their own community. Invite them to participate in a Small Acts Service Challenge during the next week or two (determine length and dates according to the needs of your class). Tell students they will record their service time on a class tracker so everyone can celebrate the good they do together. As a class, set a shared goal for total service hours (for example: 15 students × 2 hours × 2 weeks = 60 hours of service). Ask students to brainstorm informal ways they can help others and write their ideas on the board. After the class creates a list, invite each student to choose several ideas and make a simple plan for when and how they will serve. Ideas to help students begin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutor or help younger siblings or classmates with homework Practice English with younger students Write thank-you notes to school staff or community helpers Help more at home with family tasks Visit or talk with an elderly neighbor 	<p>Whole group discussion</p> <p>Lesson Materials – Item C</p>

Variations and Extensions

VARIATIONS

1. General Differentiation and Scaffolding

- Based on students' levels and prior knowledge, teachers can choose to cover the lesson content over two or more class sessions. This approach will allow teachers to provide additional instruction, review, and support as appropriate.

2. Variations for Step 2: U.S. Community Service History Cards

- Teachers can ask student groups to put the U.S. Community Service History Cards in timeline order. Teach additional vocabulary and grammar structures, such as time clauses, as needed. Use this activity to emphasize the long history and importance of service in the United States.
- Teachers can create mixed-level groups for the U.S. Community Service History Cards activity or the reading activity so students can assist each other.

EXTENSIONS

1. Track Student Service Time

- Ask students to keep a simple log of their service time using the Small Acts Service Challenge Log ([Lesson Materials - Item C](#)). Create a visible class chart in the classroom where students can add their hours each lesson so they can see progress toward the class goal and encourage one another.
- Teach additional vocabulary and grammatical structures to describe charts.

2. Celebrate Success!

- At the end of the Small Acts Service Challenge, invite students to share one short story (about 30 seconds) using the sentence frame:
"I served by... I learned... I felt..."
- Lead a discussion or journaling activity using these questions:
 - What impact did you have on others?
 - What was harder than you expected while helping others in your community?
 - What will you do in the future to keep helping others?
 - What might happen if our whole school or community joined the next project?
- Focus your celebration on effort and kindness rather than the number of hours students served. Encourage students to notice how service made them feel and how it helped strengthen relationships.

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Small Acts, Strong Communities – Lesson Materials

Freedom 250

A. Community Service History Cards

Volunteer Firefighters in Philadelphia are Organized (1736)

In the 1730s, fires were very dangerous in cities. One day, a fire started near the river in Philadelphia and burned many buildings and homes. Benjamin Franklin wrote that the town needed help from organized citizens. In 1736, he helped start the Union Fire Company. The group was made of volunteers, not paid workers. When there was a fire, neighbors came quickly to help. They brought buckets of water and simple tools to stop the fire. They helped protect the whole community, not only their own friends. **People volunteering together can strengthen communities!**



Image: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (CC0)

The American Red Cross is Established (1881)

In the 1800s, many people needed help after disasters like fires and floods. Clara Barton wanted to help people in hard times. In 1881, she helped start the American Red Cross in the United States. Today the Red Cross works with volunteers across the country. Volunteers give their time to help families in an emergency. They can help in shelters, give food and water, and share important supplies. The Red Cross also helps communities prepare before disasters happen.



Photo: National Park Service (Public Domain)

Many people volunteer because they want to help strangers in need.

Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts Complete Service Projects (1910)

In the early 1900s, scouting groups for young people started in the United States. Scouts learn skills like teamwork, planning, and helping others. Today, many scout groups do community service as part of their activities. They may clean up parks, help at food drives, or visit older neighbors. Older scouts often organize and complete a bigger service project to help school or community group. These projects teach youth how to lead and serve at the same time.

Even young people can make a difference in their community!



Photo: R. Keogh (CC0)

Habitat for Humanity Builds Homes (1976)

In 1976, Habitat for Humanity began in the United States. The goal was to help families have a safe, simple home. Today, volunteers help build or repair houses in many communities. People often work on weekends and learn basic building skills. Volunteers also work with the family that will live in the home. They paint, hammer, carry materials, and clean the work area. Local businesses may donate supplies, and neighbors may donate time.

The project brings people together to help a family in a practical way.



Little Free Library and Sharing Books (2009)

In 2009, the first Little Free Library began in the United States and continues to be a popular idea today. It is a small box of books, often in a neighborhood or near a school. The idea is simple: "take a book, leave a book." People volunteer to build the box and take care of it. Neighbors donate books and keep the box clean and safe. This helps people who do not have many books at home. It can also help students practice reading and learn new words. **A small action can support learning in the whole community!**



Photo: R. Keogh (CC0)

The Peace Corps Begins (1961)

In 1961, the Peace Corps began in the United States. The program matched people with opportunities to volunteer in other countries for a period of time teaching, supporting health projects, or helping with farming and water. The volunteers also shared about life in the U.S. through daily friendships and teamwork. When they returned home, many continued serving in their own communities.

The program reflects how Americans have chosen to serve through structured volunteer programs.



Photo: R. Keogh (CC0)

B. The Spirit of Volunteerism in the U.S. Today - Reading

Instructions: Read the text below and underline important details about why people in the United States volunteer and how service helps communities.

Volunteerism is an important part of life in the United States. For many years, Americans have helped their communities by giving their time, skills, and care to others. People **volunteer** through schools, nonprofits, faith groups, workplaces, and neighborhood organizations. This tradition shows the American belief that strong communities are built when people help one another.

People in the U.S. **volunteer** in many different ways. Some help at food banks, clean parks, or support elderly neighbors.

Others tutor students, coach sports teams, or respond during emergencies. Many Americans **volunteer** alone, with friends, or with their families. They often share their experiences through stories and photos on social media and encourage others to serve in their own communities. Young people are also an important part of this tradition. Teens can help their communities by giving their time and talents in small ways, such as helping an elderly neighbor, assisting a teacher with classroom cleanup, tutoring a younger student, caring for animals, or helping at a community event.

The goal of **volunteerism** in the United States is long-term community support, not just one-time help. Service brings people together and builds trust within communities. As one American leader said, through service, people strengthen the bonds that connect them and show that generosity and community care are lasting American values.



Photo: R. Keogh (CC0)

After reading, turn to a partner and share a short summary of main ideas using these sentence starters:

- In the United States, people volunteer by...
- Volunteer work helps communities because...
- One example of service from the reading is...

C. Small Acts Service Challenge Log



Record each time you help someone in your community. Small acts of service matter!

Small Acts Service Challenge

Time Spent	Activity	Who Benefitted



Record each time you help someone in your community. Small acts of service matter!

Small Acts Service Challenge

Time Spent	Activity	Who Benefitted

D. Key Vocabulary Glossary

Definitions below illustrate how Key Vocabulary terms are used in the context of this lesson.

community service <i>n.</i> work helping people in the local community without being paid
disaster <i>n.</i> an unexpected event that causes a lot of damage
donate <i>v.</i> to give money, food, clothes, or other needs to people or organizations
impact <i>n.</i> the effect that something has on somebody or something
need <i>n.</i> the state of not having enough food, money or support
volunteer <i>n.</i> a person who does a job or helps others without being paid for it
volunteerism <i>n.</i> working as a volunteer doing community service