

# 7 IDEAS FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION



The Presidential Inauguration, the ceremony where the new President takes the oath of office and officially starts his or her presidency, always takes place on January 20. It includes the swearing in ceremony where the President-elect and Vice President-elect take the oaths of office. This is followed by the inaugural address, which is a speech made by the new President. The ceremony usually incorporates a few prayers; musical works and poetry readings have also been included on occasion. Other inaugural events often include: a luncheon held by the leadership of the U.S. Congress honoring the new president and vice president, a presidential

procession and an inaugural parade where they make their way from the U.S. Capitol to the White House. There are always many spectators who gather on the National Mall to watch the ceremony (via video screens) and participate in the parade and there are often protest activities as well. There are official and unofficial Inaugural Balls and the newly named President and Vice President attend many of the official balls. There is a tradition that a national prayer service is usually held the day after the inauguration.

Teaching about and reflecting on the inauguration is an opportunity for students to learn more about how government works, engage in various aspects of civics education and think critically about the office and the individual becoming President. Below are some teaching ideas for watching, discussing and analyzing the Presidential inauguration.

**Grade Level:** grades 6–12

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Writing, Language, Speaking and Listening

## 1 INAUGURAL ADDRESS

### Read and analyze past inaugural addresses

1. Prior to the inauguration, read [past presidential inauguration speeches](#) of Presidents throughout history and when available, listen or watch them on [audio or video](#).
2. Have students reflect on some of the past presidential inaugural addresses and help them explore the different speeches' content, tone and perspective.
3. After students have watched or read the current presidential inaugural address, engage them in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
  - What is the President's vision for the country?
  - How did you feel while reading or listening to the speech?
  - What was inspirational about it?
  - What concerns do you have?
  - What topics and issues were covered and what was left out?
  - What was the tone and mood of the speech?
  - What are your hopes and fears for the next four years?
  - What do you think is the most important thing that he said?

### Analyze the most used words from past inaugural addresses

Show students the [most-used words](#) from past inaugural addresses. Have students reflect on those by answering the following questions:

- What do you notice about the words?
- If you look at the words over time, how do they change?
- What do the words tell you about what the President at the time hoped to do and cared most about?
- Are the words mostly positive and inspiring or do they focus more on fear and problems?

### Analyze upcoming inaugural addresses

Have students create their own word clouds that include the words they hope to hear in the upcoming inaugural address. As they listen or read, have them circle the words on their word cloud that are included and take note of the words that are not used. Based on all of this, have students write their own reflections about the speech or make a short video with their thoughts and ideas.

## 2 LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

1. Explain to students that Presidents obviously have a great deal of power—this includes signing and vetoing legislation, assigning cabinet positions, issuing Executive Orders and rules and regulations for federal agencies, commanding the armed forces, nominating all Federal judges, including Supreme Court justices, engaging in international relations, using the bully pulpit to speak to American people, etc. At the same time, in a democracy, it is also the people who have collective power in holding our government, elected officials and the President accountable for the decisions he or she makes. There are a variety of ways citizens keep elected officials accountable; one is to contact them to express support or disagreement with their ideas and policies.
2. Based on their prior knowledge of the President, their policy positions and inaugural address, engage students in writing letters to them. They can use the following questions to construct their letters as well as information from ADL's [Let's Talk about the Presidential Election](#) lesson. The questions include:
  - What did you hear, see and feel during the President's election campaign?
  - What did you hear in their inaugural address that made you hopeful?
  - What did you hear that concerns you?
  - What tone and demeanor do you hope the President takes?
  - What are the most important issues you think should be addressed in their presidency?
3. Have students write, revise (with feedback from classmates) and re-write their letters. When completed, the letters can be sent to the President in a [variety of ways](#) including sending it to them through regular mail: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20500.

## 3 INAUGURAL POETRY

In many inaugurations, Presidents have asked poets to write and recite a poem during the ceremony. The introduction of inaugural poetry began in 1961 when Robert Frost was the first poet invited to be part of the official swearing-in of an American President, John F. Kennedy.

1. Use the [Presidential Inauguration Poems](#) webpage to find all the inaugural poems that have been read since 1961. Choose one or two to read together as a class, comparing and contrasting the poems and reflecting on their form, meaning, tone and significance.
2. Have students work in small groups, each analyzing a different inaugural poem. In addition, you can find videos of inaugural poems such as [Richard Blanco](#) in 2013.
3. Engage students in a discussion about the poetry by asking some or all of the following questions:
  - What was the main message of the poem?
  - Who is the speaker and what is their tone?
  - What connotative words are used?
  - What images does the poet use?

- What figures of speech are used?
- Are there any symbols in the poem and if so, what do they mean?
- How important is the role of sound effects, such as rhyme and rhythm and how do they affect the tone and meaning?
- If you had to state the theme in one single sentence, what would it be?

You can also have the students write their own poems, imagining they are writing and delivering the inaugural poem for a specific President of their choosing.

## 4 NEWS ARTICLES

1. Before the inauguration, engage the students in brainstorming a list of questions that reporters may want to answer in order to write a news article about the inauguration. Some components to consider focusing on include: the inauguration ceremony including the President and Vice-President taking the oath of office, the inaugural address (including specific quotes), the prayers, music, poetry, spectators, protestors and what people are posting on social media.
2. Have students read news articles about past inaugurations to get ideas for their articles such as an [opinion essay](#), an article focusing on the [music of the inauguration](#) or one that includes [journalists' reflections](#).
3. Ask students to consider in advance whether they want to focus on one aspect of the inauguration or the whole event. If students have an opportunity to watch some or all of the inauguration, have them take notes on what is happening, jotting down meaningful quotes, taking note of the atmosphere and mood, and recording unusual happenings.
4. As a culmination, have students write a news story about the inauguration and publish it in the school newspaper, local paper or a class blog where all students publish their different reflections and perspectives. As an alternative, students can create a photo essay where they find available photos, create captions and include music.

## 5 MY OATH

1. Because taking the oath of office is a key part of inauguration, engage students in exploring what it means to take an oath. First, write the oath of the oath of office that the President and Vice-President take on the board/smart board and read aloud:

*I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of the President of the United States, and will hold to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*

Help students understand what the oath means by breaking it down into smaller parts such as:

- I do solemnly swear
- that I will faithfully execute the Office of the President of the United States
- will hold to the best of my ability

- preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States
2. Highlight the “preserve, protect and defend” section. Ask students:
    - In your own life, what is important to you to “preserve, protect and/or defend”?
    - Would you be willing to take an oath (solemn promise) about those things?
  3. Brainstorm a list of things that students are willing to take an oath to preserve, protect and defend. These could include people, principles, ideals, material items, etc.
  4. Have students decide on something that is important to them; it could be something from the list or something else they identify.
  5. Have students create a poster (either paper or electronic) that includes the words of the oath and either a picture they draw or a photo of themselves. You may also want to delve more deeply into the [First Amendment and Our Freedoms](#) because in the oath, the President promises to “preserve, protect and defend” the Constitution.

## 6 ACTIVISM

Over the years, inaugurations have included protests and other ways that people have expressed their dissatisfaction with and resistance to the President who is being inaugurated. The 2017 inauguration’s acts of activism include the [Women’s March on Washington](#), which will take place the day after inauguration. The march invites people to “come together in solidarity to express to the new administration and congress that women’s rights are human rights and our power cannot be ignored.” Other U.S. cities have planned affiliate marches on the same day.

Have students research and learn about acts of protest or other ways people resist an inauguration and Presidency, past and/or present, culminating in an essay or PowerPoint presentation. They can learn about acts of protests and resistances through interviews, articles and social media.

## 7 TEACH-IN

If your whole school wants to focus on the inauguration for the day, you can hold a teach-in on the day of inauguration or the day before, using some of the ideas and resources here to engage students in different activities related to the days’ events. You may want subject-area teachers to focus on a different aspect of the inauguration depending on their subject matter (i.e. English teachers can focus on poetry, social studies teachers can address the historical significance, art teachers can engage students in an art activity, etc.).

This is a good opportunity to get all the teachers involved in their areas of expertise. Also, you can decide whether the school as a whole will watch the inauguration together.

It will be important to consider in advance who your students are and the extent to which watching it may be uncomfortable for them. The election in 2016 raised fears for many students and their families (i.e. immigrants, Muslim-Americans, etc.).

# COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
<b>Reading</b>
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
Standard 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
<b>Writing</b>
Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
Standard 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Standard 6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
Standard 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
<b>Language</b>
Standard 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
Standard 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
<b>Speaking and Listening</b>
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Standard 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.



Standard 5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

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