



HARRIET TUBMAN ON THE \$20 BILL: THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

In April 2016, the United States Department of Treasury announced plans to make several changes to American currency. The proposals constitute the most sweeping revisions in almost one hundred years. Among these changes, the \$20 bill, which previously pictured Andrew Jackson on the front, will now feature Harriet Tubman, the former slave and abolitionist. In addition, the \$5 and \$10 bills will be updated to include other women and civil rights leaders. The final redesigns will be unveiled in 2020.

In making this announcement, Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew said: “I have been particularly struck by the many comments and reactions from children for whom Harriet Tubman is not just a historical figure, but a role model for leadership and participation in our democracy.” This decision has not been without controversy and has generated a great deal of public discussion about its potential impact.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about these sweeping changes in U.S. currency, analyze the role of symbols and their impact and articulate their own opinions about the importance of symbols and symbolic gestures in our society.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* lesson “[Should Washington's NFL Team Change Their Name?](#),” [White Supremacists Up in Arms over Tubman on \\$20 Bill](#) and [Hate Symbols Database](#).

Grade Level: grades 6–8

Time: 45 minutes

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

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand what symbols are and reflect on the important symbols in their lives.
- Students will explore the evolution of having Harriet Tubman and other women and civil rights leaders placed on U.S. currency.
- Students will explore the extent to which they think symbols are important and meaningful by writing an argumentative essay.

Compelling Question: Are symbols relevant and powerful?

Material:

- [Symbols](#) (to project on board/smart board)
- [Harriet Tubman \\$20 Bill](#) (to project on board/smart board)
- “Harriet Tubman to appear on \$20 bill, while Alexander Hamilton remains on \$10 bill” (*The Washington Post* Wonkblog, April 20, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/20/u-s-to-keep-hamilton-on-front-of-10-bill-put-portrait-of-harriet-tubman-on-20-bill/, one copy for each student)
- [Argumentative Essay Graphic Organizer](#) (one for each student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s [“Glossary of Education Terms.”](#))

- | | | |
|---------------------|------------|------------------------|
| • abolitionist | • insignia | • recompense |
| • Civil Rights | • irony | • safe house |
| • counterfeiting | • legacy | • Underground Railroad |
| • currency | • logo | • vociferous |
| • descendants | • mascot | |
| • gender inequality | • overhaul | |

SYMBOLS

1. Ask students: *What is a symbol?* Define **symbol** as a person or a concept that expresses, represents, stands for or suggests an idea, quality, belief, action or material object.
Explain that symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. They can be signs, mascots, logos or insignias. They can be positive, negative or neutral.
2. Ask: *What is a symbol that is important to you or that represents something you care about* (sports team, flag, logo, etc.)? Ask: *What does it mean when something is symbolic?* Explain that when something is symbolic, it expresses or represents an idea or quality without using words. As an example, you can mention symbols students might be analyzing in literature or a flag symbolizing a country and the values and history of that country.
3. Use and project the collection of these [Symbols](#) to discuss different symbols and what they evoke emotionally and what they mean. One at a time, project each of the symbols on the board/smart board (hiding the descriptions) and ask students three questions after showing each one: (1) Can you share a word or two that describes the symbol? (2) How do you feel when you see this symbol? (3) What is it symbolizing?

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Project the picture of the [Harriet Tubman \\$20 Bill](#). Ask students: *What is this a picture of? What does it symbolize? Does anyone know why this has been in the news lately? Who is Harriet Tubman?*

2. Give students a short summary of what this image is about.
 - On April 20, 2016, the U.S. Department of Treasury announced several changes to American currency that represents the most sweeping revisions in almost one hundred years. (The last major updates took place in 1929 when all paper money changed to include more standard designs and smaller size to save costs.) Among other changes, the \$20 bill which has Andrew Jackson on the front, will be replaced with Harriet Tubman, the former slave and abolitionist. In addition, the \$5 and \$10 bills will be updated to include other women and civil rights leaders. In making this announcement, Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew said: “I have been particularly struck by the many comments and reactions from children for whom Harriet Tubman is not just a historical figure, but a role model for leadership and participation in our democracy.”
 - These design changes are the culmination of a ten month public comment period (beginning in June 2015) after Secretary Lew made the announcement and asked the American public what historical woman should be placed on the \$10 bill. There was a great deal of input into the decision as well as opinion polls about which women should be placed on the bills.
 - This decision includes some controversy as follows: (1) some have expressed disappointment that while Harriet Tubman will be on the front of the \$20 bill, Andrew Jackson will still be on the back of the bill, (2) racist and white supremacist groups immediately responded online with threats to deface the bills and alleging anti-Semitic conspiracy theories referring specifically to Secretary Lew, and (3) some noted the “irony” in the decision that a black woman who was bought and sold and considered “currency” was being commemorated on the \$20 bill.
 - Explain that Harriet Tubman was born a slave in 1822 in Maryland. She endured the harsh treatment and existence of a field hand, including brutal beatings and whippings. In 1849, Tubman fled slavery to Philadelphia, leaving her husband and family behind in order to escape. Despite a bounty on her head, she returned to the South at least nineteen times in order to lead her family and hundreds of other slaves to freedom through the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. In this way, she became a famous “conductor” of the Underground Railroad during the turbulent 1850s. Tubman also served as a scout, spy and nurse during the Civil War.

OPTIONAL: If you want to teach more about Harriet Tubman, you can show this 3-minute video: [Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad](#) (History)

3. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
 - What do you think about the decision to put Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill?
 - What do you think about the other changes that are going to be made in our currency?
 - Why do you think this is happening and why now?
 - To what extent will the currency changes have an impact on our society and if so, how?
 - What do you think about some of the controversies surrounding this decision?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute a copy of the article “[Harriet Tubman to appear on \\$20 bill, while Alexander Hamilton remains on \\$10 bill](#)” to each student and give them 10–15 minutes to read it silently.

NOTE: If you require reading material for students with different reading levels, you can use [Newsela](#), a website that publishes high-interest news articles daily at five reading levels. Articles about the [Harriet](#)

[Tubman \\$20 bill](#) are available from Newsela at Grade Levels 3, 4, 6, 8 and 12. You have to register (free) to access the articles. Depending on the grade level you teach, you may need to adjust the discussion questions below.

2. After students have read the article, engage them in a discussion by asking:
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - How have different people and groups reacted so far?
 - Why did the U.S. Treasury originally decide to change the \$10 bill and then changed that decision?
 - How did they make the decisions they made with the \$20, \$10 and \$5 bills?
 - Do you think this will make a difference and if so, how?

WRITING ACTIVITY: ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

1. Ask students: *Do you think symbols matter? Are they important?* Ask students to raise their hands if they believe symbols are important. Then have them put their hands down. Then ask students to raise their hands if they think symbols are not important or relevant. Then have them put their hands down. Ask students to briefly share why they believe what they do.
2. Explain to students that they are going to write an argumentative essay that takes one of two positions: "Symbols are important because..." or "Symbols are irrelevant because..."
3. Distribute a copy of the [Argumentative Essay Graphic Organizer](#) to each student. Have them begin to outline their position and the reasons for their position. Explain that they will complete the rest of the organizer and the essay for homework over the next days or weeks. They can use the article shared in class, any of the additional articles cited below and additional research they do on their own. Explain that the overall steps in the process should include:
 - Decide on your position statement.
 - Consider 2–3 reasons for your position.
 - Gather evidence such as examples, statistics, quotes, polls, facts, etc.
 - Organize opinion and evidence using the [Argumentative Essay Graphic Organizer](#).
 - Write your essay and include the following:
 - Description of the issue or controversy and your opinion statement (You may also include the counter-argument)
 - 2–3 reasons for your opinion with supporting evidence (examples, historical information, statistics, polls, quote and facts).
 - Restate your opinion, summarize your reasons and state your call to action or summary position.
4. When students have completed their essays, have them read the essays aloud.

CLOSING

Have students do a go round in which everyone shares one symbol they would like to change and how they would change it.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Do Your Students Know Who Harriet Tubman Is?](#) (*Education Week*, April 21, 2016)
- [Harriet Tubman](#) (History)
- [Harriet Tubman Ousts Andrew Jackson in Change for a \\$20](#) (*The New York Times*, April 20, 2016)
- [Harriet Tubman to Change the Face of U.S. Currency](#) (Diversity Inc., April 21, 2016)
- [“The \\$20 bill goes ghetto”: Racist responses to Harriet Tubman on the \\$20 are out of control](#) (video, Salon, April 22, 2016)
- [“The controversy over Harriet Tubman, Andrew Jackson, and the \\$20 bill, explained”](#) (Vox, April 21, 2016)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
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.
Writing
Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
Speaking and Listening
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.

SYMBOLS



Instagram



Nike



Peace



U.S. Army "Uncle Sam Wants You"



LGBT Pride



“Rosie the Riveter” poster which was designed to boost the morale of women who were encouraged to work during World War II (while men were at war) including making airplanes and ships for the war effort.



Washington Redskins logo—the term “Redskins” is considered to be a slur and derogatory term for Native Americans.

HARRIET TUBMAN \$20 BILL



ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Paragraph 1: INTRODUCTION

Attention-grabbing opening:

Background of Issue:

My position:

(May include counter-argument)

Paragraph 2: Reason #1

Supporting Evidence:

- ✓
- ✓
- ✓

Paragraph 3: Reason #2

Supporting Evidence:

- ✓
- ✓
- ✓

Paragraph 4: Reason #3

Supporting Evidence:

- ✓
- ✓
- ✓

Paragraph 5: CONCLUSION

Restate opinion:

Summarize your three reasons:

State your “call to action” or summary position: