



About the USA – Virtual Classroom Newsletter for English Teachers

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Back to School

As students and teachers go back to school, we are reminded about the importance of education as an election issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. Find out more here about education in the United States, as well as the positions held by Senators McCain and Obama on this crucial topic.

Links USA.gov: [Back to School](#) * Facts for Features: [Back to School](#)
Scholastic: [Back-to-School Resources for Teachers](#)
NYT: Interactive: First Day of School, a Day of Firsts/ [Article](#)

The Presidential Candidates on Education

John McCain says he will provide more funding to recruit better teachers and pay bonuses to teachers who agree to work in troubled schools. He also wants more federal funds to support development of online courses. He believes that students should have the option of switching public schools in order to receive the best education and that "all federal financial support must be predicated on providing parents the ability to move their children, and the dollars associated with them, from failing schools."

Barack Obama says, if elected, he would improve funding for the No Child Left Behind program. He also says he would "make math and science education a national priority" and increase recruitment of teachers in these subjects. In order to better recruit teachers, Obama proposes providing four-year scholarships to those in college who will teach for at least four years after graduation. He pledges to implement a \$4,000 tax credit for those attending college. [Source: America.gov](#)

Links America.gov: [Candidates on the Issues - Education](#)
National Journal: Education - [Class President](#)
CNN ElectionCenter2008: [Education](#)

2008 State of the United States' Youth Report

Teens are feeling the weight of the world now more than ever, according to a new report issued in early August. In their own words, the State Of Our Nation's Youth is confident, ambitious, and optimistic. The generation of high school students reflected in this year's survey face many challenges. These teenagers are worried about the country's future and apprehensive about the economy and the war in Iraq. They face ever increasing pressure about their grades and getting into college. There is growing evidence that adult problems are creeping into their lives. Yet despite these anxieties, what emerges here is a portrait of a generation who believe in themselves and their abilities. Their pessimism about the country's future is matched by optimism for their own futures.

[Press Release](#) | [Summary of the Study](#) | [Complete Report](#)

Findings: The Internet

- ❖ Students spend an average of 13.3 hours online each week keeping up with friends and entertaining themselves, and just 4.5 hours each week online for homework.
- ❖ Half (46%) of teens report that their parents have rules for how they use the Internet; 72% of students say their parents know a great deal or fair amount about how they spend their time online.
- ❖ Three in ten (30%) students say online bullying is now a bigger problem than bullying that happens in school hallways and bathrooms; 16% of students say they have been a victim of online bullying.



© AP Image taken from America.gov: [Education](#)

Compulsory School Age

- [Kindergarten Entrance Age](#): 50-state overview
- [Compulsory School Age Requirements](#)

Documents

- [Brown vs Board of Education \(1954\)](#)
- [The Federal Role in Education](#)
- [The Nation's Report Card](#)
- [No Child Left Behind](#)

Statistics

- [White House Social \(Education\) Statistics](#)
- [National Center for Education Statistics](#)
- [Digest of Education Statistics](#)
- [Bureau of Labor: Education and Employment](#)

Web sites

- [Map of U.S. Education System](#)
- [Department of Education by State](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education / AskERIC](#)
- [Bureau of International Information Programs](#)

STATE OF OUR NATION'S YOUTH

Highlights from the survey include:

- ❖ Presidential Election: 75% of teens say the election outcome will make a substantial difference in the direction of the U.S. Students' biggest concerns are the economy and jobs (34%), and the war in Iraq (31%).
- ❖ Global Warming: 72% of teens believe global warming is an urgent or serious problem. However the majority (58%) of teens do not consider themselves *environmentalists*.
- ❖ 70% of today's high school students plan to attend a four year college or university sometime after completing high school. 23% of students plans to pursue some other type of training after high school, with 10% saying they are planning for a two-year college, 7% for a community college, and 6% for a vocational or technical school. Just 4% of teenagers have no plans for continuing their education after high school.



Republican Presidential Nominee John McCain and his Vice Presidential Nominee Sarah Palin - Democratic Vice Presidential Nominee Joe Biden and Presidential Nominee Barack Obama (© AP)

Teaching Resources

- [NYT Learning Network: Election 2008](#)
- [Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speeches, past and present](#)
- [PBS Vote 2008: The Conventions Lesson Plan](#)
- Common Craft: [Electing a U.S. President in Plain English](#). Short and simple guide to understanding the U.S. election process.

America.gov: [Photo Gallery: National Political Conventions](#) - Once a small gathering of leaders at a saloon, the political convention has evolved into a major event, but the purpose has remained the same: to nominate presidential candidates and lay out goals and priorities.

Related America.gov Articles

- [Frequently Asked Questions on Political Conventions](#)
- [Democratic Delegates Turn Westward for National Convention / Republican Convention Delegates to Experience Two Cities](#)
- [National Conventions Show Appreciation to Host Cities](#)

Study Question for Your Students

- How do politicians use language to connect with voters and achieve goals? Consider the message, the author, and the audience.

Polling Sources

- [2008 Harris Polls](#)
- [Zogby International](#)
- [The Gallup Organization](#)
- [Pew Research Center for the People and the Press](#)
- [Polling Report](#)
- [CBS News Polls](#)
- [Los Angeles Times Poll](#)
- [The Washington Post/ABC News Polls](#)
- [ABC News Polling Unit](#)
- [Rasmussen Reports](#)

Poll Averages: [RealClearPolitics Polls](#)

History of Women's Suffrage: [19th Amend.](#) (Scholastic.com/Grolier's Encyclopedia Americana): The 19th Amendment (1920) to the Constitution of the United States provides men and women with equal voting rights. The amendment states that the right of citizens to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Although this equality was implied in the 14th Amendment (1868), most of the states continued to restrict or prohibit women's suffrage.

Links

- Library of Congress: Timeline [One Hundred Years Toward Suffrage](#), a feature of the American Memory collection [Votes for Women, 1848-1921](#)
- PBS Kids: [Women and the Vote](#)

ELECTIONS 2008

Conventions

From August 25 to 28, Democrats took over Denver, Colorado, to formally nominate Barack Obama as their candidate for president. Republicans did the same for John McCain in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, from September 1 to 4. For more information, see the parties' official Web sites: [Democratic National Convention](#) and [Republican National Convention](#).

Did you know? [Process of Selecting Vice President Evolved over Centuries](#) (America.gov, July 11) - America's earliest running mates were often competitors rather than partners: Imagine if in the 2008 elections, Americans selected a Democratic president and a Republican vice president. It could be difficult for the White House to present a unified message and political battles could slow progress. The Founders learned this after watching the process unfold.

Polls - Presidential Race Remains Close

Public opinion polling is ever-present in American life. Estimates indicate that, for the 2008 election cycle, more than 500 state and national polls are surveying the U.S. public about the presidential race.

Experts Ponder Why U.S. Presidential Contest Remains Tight - Several factors explain why the 2008 U.S. campaign for president remains close, political experts tell America.gov. Conventional wisdom says Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, should be running well ahead of John McCain, the Republican nominee, because of polls showing Democrats in general far ahead of Republicans nationally and because Republican President George Bush has low favorability ratings with the American electorate. But Scott de Marchi, a political science professor at Duke University in North Carolina, said the race seems tight "for a couple of reasons, mostly unrelated to the campaigns" the two candidates are waging. McCain, said de Marchi, has "better name recognition at present -- he's been a fixture of [American] political life for some time, and he has a very compelling story" that includes having been a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. In addition, Obama "had a much rougher ride" in the Democratic primaries than McCain confronted in the Republican primaries, "especially in terms of negative attacks" from Obama's opponent, Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton. (*America.gov, August 15, 2008*) [More](#)

Poll Tracker

Gallup: Obama Gains Among White Males, Palin Hasn't Helped McCain on Women: Although John McCain still has a double-digit lead among white male voters, Barack Obama has closed the gap by eight points, according to Gallup's analysis of August's poll tracking data. [Gallup Daily: Obama 49%, McCain 43%](#) among registered voters (Sept. 3)

Zogby International: The latest nationwide survey, begun Friday afternoon after the McCain announcement of Palin as running mate and completed mid-afternoon Sunday, shows McCain/Palin at 47%, compared to 45% support for Obama/Biden. The race is a dead heat. (Aug. 30)

19th Amendment

On Aug. 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing women the right to vote, was declared in effect. Both, Michelle Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton used their speeches at the Democratic National Convention to point to the historic declaration.

Lesson Plan: National Archives' Digital Classroom *Teaching With Documents* Lesson Plan: [Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment](#)

Polls: How will Female Voters Vote? Pew Research Center for the People & the Press: [Should Women Worry Obama?](#) (July 17): Whether female voters, who largely favored Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, will give broad support to Barack Obama this fall remains a key to the outcome of the election. The latest survey from the Pew Research Center finds that Obama is, in fact, performing quite well among this key voting bloc, largely as the result of his substantial lead among politically independent and younger women.

Literature: Classic American Novels

To Kill a Mockingbird

To Kill a Mockingbird, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a small-town lawyer in the American South who defends a man unjustly accused of rape, is one of the all-time classic American novels. It is "the rare American novel that can be discovered with excitement in adolescence and reread into adulthood without fear of disappointment. Lee tells two deftly paired stories set in a small Southern town: one focused on lawyer Atticus Finch's defense of an unjustly accused man, the other on his bright, bratty daughter's gradual discovery of her own goodness. For many young people this novel becomes their first big read, the grown-up story that all later books will be measured against." The Big Read [website on the novel](#) offers a wealth of information and teaching material.

[The Big Read](#) (National Endowment for the Arts) encourages communities to read and discuss novels; it provides teacher guides, discussion questions, and other information on classic American novels.

Lesson Plan: To Kill a Mockingbird - Students gain a sense of the living history that surrounds the novel. Through studying primary source materials from American Memory and other online resources, students may better grasp how historical events and human forces have shaped relationships between black and white, and rich and poor cultures of the U.S. This unit guides students on a journey through the Depression Era in the 1930s. Activities familiarize the students with Southern experiences through the study of the novel and African American experiences through the examination of primary sources. (LoC: The Learning Page)

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Among the prevalent themes of the novel is the loss of innocence in war: Each of the characters in For Whom the Bell Tolls loses his or her psychological or physical innocence to the war. Some endure tangible traumas: Joaquin loses both his parents and is forced to grow up quickly, while Maria loses her physical innocence when she is raped by a group of Fascist soldiers. On top of these tangible, physical costs of the war come many psychological costs. Robert Jordan initially came to Spain with idealism about the Republican cause and believed confidently that he was joining the good side. But after fighting in the war, Robert Jordan becomes cynical about the Republican cause and loses much of his initial idealism. [More](#) from SparkNotes

Quote

- The machinery had been in motion much too long for it to be stopped suddenly now. There is a great inertia about all military operations of any size. But once this inertia has been overcome and underway they are almost as hard to arrest as to initiate." (Although Jordan sends word to Golz that the fascists know about the Republican insurrection, it will be almost impossible to stop blowing up the bridge. It has been planned for ages and now, with ineptitude rampant among the ranks, it is nearly impossible to bring things to a halt.)

Suggested Essay Topic

- The novel ends with Robert Jordan near death but still alive, feeling his "heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest." What is the effect of this ending? How would the novel be different if it ended after his death? Which ending do you prefer?

Study Question

- Robert Jordan, a foreigner in Spain, fights for a cause that he claims not to believe in. What does he believe in? What is he fighting for?

"The hardest thing in the world is to write straight honest prose on human beings. First you have to know the subject; then you have to know how to write. Both take a lifetime to learn, and anybody is cheating who takes politics as a way out. All the outs are too easy, and the thing itself is too hard to do." - Ernest Hemingway



© American Rhetoric: [Movie Speech - "To Kill a Mockingbird"](#) (1962). Atticus Finch delivers his Closing Argument at the Trial of Tom Robinson

"[...] before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience."

- Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird

Links

- [Literary criticism: Harper Lee](#) literaryhistory.com
- [Harper Lee profile](#) Books and Writers
- ["Harper Lee Wrote Only One, But What a Book it Was"](#) (Christian Science Monitor, June 13, 2006)
- [Harper Lee: To Kill a Mocking Bird](#) eNotes

Presidential Candidates: Favorite Book

LA Times: [Barack Obama and John McCain Share a Favorite Author](#) - "Barack Obama and John McCain may differ on everything from U.S. policy in Iraq to how many town hall debates they should schedule but -- who would have thought? -- they share reading tastes. McCain long has pinpointed Ernest Hemingway's 1940 novel "**For Whom the Bell Tolls**" as his favorite book (for more on the Republican nominee's favorite things, [see this profile](#)). Obama, in an [interview with Rolling Stone](#) published in June, named "For Whom the Bell Tolls" as one of the three books that have inspired him.



Hemingway, second from right, on the Ebro Front during the Spanish Civil War April, 1938. © Hemingway Collection/ JFK Library, Boston

Links

- [The Ernest Hemingway Foundation](#) - established in 1965 by Mary Hemingway, Ernest's widow.
- [The Hemingway Review](#) - scholarly journal by The Hemingway Society and the University of Idaho.
- SparkNotes: [For Whom the Bell Tolls](#)
- BookRags: [For Whom the Bell Tolls](#)
- [The New York Times Book Review: Ernest Hemingway](#): Hemingway's dispatches from Spain during the Spanish Civil War that were published in the NYT in 1937 and several interviews with him conducted between 1937 and 1954.

Links

- Newseum: [9/11 Gallery](#)
- The Port Authority of NY & NJ: [World Trade Center Rebuilding](#)
- USA.gov: [9/11 Commemorations & Information](#)



Article & Lesson Plan: Every English student in the world probably knows a little about New York City; the activities in this lesson are designed to give your students the opportunity to gain more detailed information about the city. The lesson is also designed to give students an opportunity to practice an important reading skill: scanning for specific information. Article: [New York](#) (PDF 3.2MB)
Lesson Plan: [Exploring New York City](#) (PDF 459K)

Hispanic Heritage Month: Sept. 15 - Oct. 15

Chicago Tribune: [Exploring Race](#) - Community leaders, politicians, and commentators have called for a national dialogue about race in the United States. The Chicago Tribune has started to address the subject through this website, which provides access to investigative articles, online forums, and videos. Visitors can read articles that look at the effectiveness of racial profiling, the portrayal of the different races in the media, race-based organizations, and white privilege. Visitors are encouraged to submit their own comments on the articles as well.

Webchat Station

Upcoming AskAmerica Webchats

[Studium, Praktika, Sommerjobs, High School & AuPair Aufenthalt in den USA](#)

September 8, 2008, 15:00

[Ramadan in America: Through the Lens of A Filmmaker](#)

September 9, 2008, 13:30

[ENTER](#). No registration is needed.

In Focus: September 11 Remembered

This year's 9/11 memorial event will be the fourth Ambassador Timken has cohosted during his time as U.S. Ambassador in Germany. It will be held in conjunction with Berlin's Jewish community at the synagogue on Oranienburger Street. The first, in 2005, was held at the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche. In 2006, the American Church in Kreuzberg played host. Last year the embassy partnered with the Muslim Academy and Berlin's Commission for Integration and Migration. The embassy is grateful to each and every organization that has helped the Embassy memorialize the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Humans from many nations (including Germans) and many religions died that day. Each year, the event has been ecumenical. In all of the embassy's 9/11 commemorative events the central quality is inclusiveness. The importance of bringing people together is one of the most important lessons to be drawn from the tragedy of September 11, 2001.

New York City

In the span of just a few centuries, what is now New York City went from a verdant wilderness on the edge of the known world to a sprawling megalopolis that commands international attention. Still, with all its size and frenetic energy, New Yorkers remain stubbornly sentimental about the city they call home. Painters, writers, and filmmakers have tried to capture its essence and appeal. But nothing compares to actually being there, walking the streets, and soaking in the unique, syncopated rhythm of the city. Source: [English Teaching Forum, Issue 1 \(2008\)](#)

Poll: Hispanic Voter Attitudes

PEW Hispanic Center (July 24, 2008): 2008 National Survey of Latinos: [Hispanic Voter Attitudes](#): Hispanic registered voters support Democrat Barack Obama for president over Republican John McCain by 66% to 23%, according to a nationwide survey of 2,015 Latinos conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of the Pew Research Center, from June 9 through July 13, 2008.

The presumptive Democratic nominee's strong showing in this survey represents a sharp reversal in his fortunes from the primaries, when Obama lost the Latino vote to Hillary Rodham Clinton by a nearly two-to-one ratio, giving rise to speculation in some quarters that Hispanics were disinclined to vote for a black candidate.

TeacherLingo

is a growing teacher community that connects teachers and educators from every level to share ideas, ask questions, learn from each other, or even vent about the school day. This site creates a comprehensive blog community for educators. *TeacherLingo* features blog articles on hot-button issues, teaching ideas, book reviews, and lesson plans. The site allows users to sign up for an account, create their own blogs, and connect their blogs to others in this community. The site provides comprehensive links to teacher/educator blog groups at all teaching levels. There are also directories of blog groups for those in specialized teaching areas such as ESL. The site contains lesson plans.



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About the USA is a digital collection of background resources on American society, culture, and political processes. In addition to featuring selected websites, it provides access to documents in full text format (E-Texts) on topics ranging from the history of German-American relations, government and politics to travel, holidays and sports.

This newsletter is produced by the Information Resource Centers/U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany.

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