

# Lesson 1: The Power of Names

## Essential Question

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

## Guiding Question

What do names reveal about a person's identity? What do they suggest about our agency and freedom in society?

## Learning Objectives

- Students will reflect on the notion that names can simultaneously project ideas about our identity to others, conceal parts of our identity from others, and represent values and traditions that have influenced our identity.
- Students will recognize that the ability to choose or change one's name represents a level of freedom and agency that has been denied to many oppressed peoples throughout history.

## About This Lesson

The era of Reconstruction that followed the US Civil War spawned debates—and significant violence—over issues that are intensely relevant in the lives of adolescents and particularly important for democracy: power, respect, fairness, equality, and the meaning of freedom, among others. At the heart of all of these issues is the relationship between the individual and society, a relationship worth exploring at the outset of a study of Reconstruction.

This lesson begins with an examination of one of the most basic forms of connection between the individual and society: names. "It is through names that we first place ourselves in the world," writes Ralph Ellison. He goes on to say that as we act in the world around us, our names are simultaneously masks, shields, and containers of values and traditions. In this lesson, students will reflect on these three functions of names and explore the relationship between our names and our identities. They will consider the following questions:

- What do our names reveal about our identities? What do they hide?
- What do names suggest about the degree of freedom and agency we have in society?
- How can names bestow dignity and respect on individuals? How can they also be used to deprive individuals of those qualities?
- To what extent do we choose the names and labels others use for us? What parts of our identities do we choose for ourselves? What parts are chosen for us by others, or by society?

### **Additional Context and Background**

The discussion of names is immediately relevant to the history of the Reconstruction era because, as historian Douglas Egerton explains, shortly after Emancipation, “former slaves had to undertake a task unknown to free-born Americans. They had to adopt a Surname.”<sup>1</sup> As students may have learned in their previous study of American slavery, enslaved people did not officially or legally have surnames (last names); they were grouped by the names of their owners. This fact alone is sufficient to help students consider the dignity and respect that a name provides as a sign of individual identity and personhood.

Students will examine this idea further when they read the testimony of *freedpeople*, as we will refer to formerly enslaved people. After the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, freedpeople needed surnames in order to identify themselves for a variety of fundamental civil procedures such as obtaining a marriage license and, especially, signing an employment contract. But they also recognized the power to choose their names as a symbol of freedom and dignity they had not enjoyed while enslaved. As historian Taylor Branch writes, “Among the most joyous feelings most frequently mentioned by freed or escaped slaves was the freedom to choose a name.”

In this lesson, students will examine the testimony of several freedpeople explaining how they chose their new surnames. They adopted names from various sources; some simply took the last name of their former owners, while others adopted their names from national leaders, occupational skills, and family histories. By observing the variety of sources from which freedpeople adopted their surnames, students will begin to learn about the values, traditions, and aspirations of emancipated people in the 1860s. Students will also reflect on the ways they choose to identify themselves and the ways in which we all “place ourselves into the world.”

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America’s Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 84.

## Notes to the Teacher

### 1. Sharing Identity Charts

In Activity 3 of this lesson, students create an [identity chart](#) for themselves. You can choose whether students will share their identity chart or make this a private journal entry. If you choose to do the former, the outset of this lesson might be a good time to create or revisit a [classroom contract](#) to remind students of the agreed-upon norms and expectations.

### 2. Featured Teaching Strategy

The following teaching strategy is referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with it before teaching this lesson.

- [Identity Charts](#)

## Materials

- **Reading:** Two Names, Two Worlds
- **Reading:** Names and Freedom
- **Reading:** Changing Names

## Activities

### 1. Reflect on Names and Freedom

Begin the unit by explaining to students that by examining the Reconstruction Era that followed the US Civil War, they will deepen their year-long exploration of the concepts of freedom and democracy in US history. Today, they will start by thinking about what is represented by people's names. The 4 million Americans enslaved until 1865 had little control over their own names and the names of their children. After Emancipation, many of the formerly enslaved, or freedpeople, immediately exercised their newfound freedom to adopt new names. Students will learn more about that in this lesson. But first, ask students to take a moment to reflect on their own names. They can respond in their journals to the following prompts:

- What is your name? Who gave it to you? Do you know why?
- How do you feel about your name? Do you think it does a good job of representing who you are? If so, why? If not, what name do you think would better represent you?

After a few minutes of writing time, give students the opportunity to discuss and share parts of their reflection using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy.

## **2. Explore the Connection between Names and Identity**

Read the poem from **Two Names, Two Worlds** as a class. If possible, ask a student or teacher fluent in Spanish to read the poem aloud. After reading the poem together, ask students to read it again individually or in pairs and create an identity chart for Jonathan Rodríguez. Throughout this unit, the lesson plans and activity suggestions will recommend using [identity charts](#) to explore the identities of individuals and groups and to the same format to create working definitions of key concepts.

After students complete identity charts for Jonathan Rodríguez, give them the opportunity to share some of the key words and descriptions they included on the charts. Then debrief the activity by discussing with the class one or more of the following questions:

- What does Jonathan mean by the phrase “two names, two worlds”? What are the two worlds his name represents?
- How does he resolve these two worlds? What does he think is the essence of his identity?
- What parts of Jonathan’s identity are reflected in his name? What parts are hidden?
- What values and traditions are reflected in his name?

## **3. Provide Students with an Opportunity to Reflect on Their Own Identities**

Have each student create an identity chart for themselves. Using the identity chart they created for Jonathan Rodríguez as a model, prompt students to include both the words and phrases they use to describe themselves as well as the attributes and labels others use to define them. Discuss with students the tension that exists in all of our identities between who others say we are and how we define ourselves.

## **4. Explore the Connection between Names and Freedom**

Read **Names and Freedom** together and then divide the class into small groups. Assign each group one of the three individuals—Martin Jackson, Dick Lewis Barnett, or Mollie (Smith) Russell—whose testimony is included in the reading **Changing Names**. Have each small group create an identity chart for the individual they were assigned on a piece of chart paper. Encourage students to think deeply about what the testimonies reveal about each person’s identity. How does the reasoning behind these individuals’ choices for names reveal values and beliefs that can be added to their identity charts?

Time permitting, post the identity charts in the classroom and give each group the chance to share their thinking with the class. If necessary, ask a few volunteers to share a summary of their group discussion with the class.

Then debrief the activity with a discussion centered on one or more of the following questions:

- What were some of the influences that shaped the choices freedpeople made about their names? How did they use their names to represent their identities to others?
- In what ways does a surname, or last name, provide a person with a sense of dignity?
- What do names reveal about the relationship between the individual and society?

Post the identity charts in the classroom and give each group the chance to share their thinking with the class.

## **5. Return to Opening Reflection**

Now that students have deepened their thinking about names and how they relate to both identity and freedom, give them the opportunity to return to their opening journal reflections about their own names. What new thoughts, ideas, and opinions have emerged for them about their own names over the course of this lesson? Give them a few minutes to add to or revise their initial journal entries.