

Teacher's Guide for My Guide to the U.S.A.

My Guide to the U.S.A. is a 56-page, supplemental social studies resource that enables you to enhance, expand, and reinforce your social studies curriculum, while helping your students to:

- learn and remember more social studies information,
- further develop as writers through “writing across the curriculum,”
- create an authentic assessment that documents progress over time.

How can it do all this?

My Guide to the U.S.A. is a supplemental response book, but it is also an evolving project that can serve as an anchor for your social studies program. By using your social studies textbook, the school library, and the Internet as resources, and by taking advantage of guest speakers and field trips, your students can make *My Guide to the U.S.A.* a repository for relevant information that the students have truly learned and can now express. Ultimately, this collection of experiences and information, stated in each student's own voice, will evolve into a personal social studies reference and resource for that student.

As a writing tool, *My Guide to the U.S.A.* shares some similarities with journal writing, in that:

- it helps students develop as writers by allowing them to respond in their own voice,
- it develops pride of authorship,
- it allows for student-generated ideas,
- it keeps work together and so helps students monitor progress,
- it becomes a personal resource for acquired knowledge.

However, unlike traditional journal writing, which uses creative, divergent thinking, *My Guide to the U.S.A.*'s unique format provides a template for developing the more focused convergent thinking necessary for expository writing.

What's in *My Guide to the U.S.A.*

- The first section is a two-page overview, where students can draw or paste the American flag, work with a map of their country, and compile key facts about the U.S.A.
- After the overview, the book is organized into three sections: History, Regions, and Government. Within each section, there are a series of two-page units, in which the left-hand page can be used for drawing, as well as compiling ideas, vocabulary words, and notes, while the right-hand page provides blank lines to be used for a brief essay or other written response. While most of the two-page units have a specific title that corresponds to one of the topics usually covered as part of the social studies curriculum, some unit titles have been left blank so that you or your students can decide on the topic. This is especially true in regard to regions, for which different textbooks have various names and groupings
- *My Guide to the U.S.A.* also provides opportunities for each student to personalize his or her book, to help create a sense of pride and “ownership.” The student's name should be written prominently on the front cover, and there is space for a dedication on the inside front cover, as well as an About the Author page at the end of the book.

Planning to Use *My Guide to the U.S.A.*

My Guide to the U.S.A. is a classroom tool that helps students formulate social studies concepts and skills through writing activities. To do all this and integrate the book into your current social studies teaching, some initial planning will be needed. Here's a plan for proceeding:

- Begin by reviewing your social studies curriculum (text and teacher's guide, teacher-generated materials, etc.) to determine where *My Guide to the U.S.A.* can address key concepts and/or state standards. Jot down the *My Guide to the U.S.A.*

topic page number beside the concept. Any blank formatted pages are useful for incorporating additional issues of importance. Although the book may be used in sequential order, its open-ended format also allows you to use the pages as they best fit your yearly curriculum.

- Once you have determined where *My Guide to the U.S.A.* topics intersect your curriculum, brainstorm interesting and grade appropriate activities that personalize the content and make it relevant to your students' lives. (Keep in mind that even in fourth or fifth grade, hands-on activities are always more memorable and tend to be much more efficient at stimulating language development than study based on text and two-dimensional images.)
- Next, create a lesson plan for each topic. Think about involving other school personnel and community professionals, incorporating field trips, applying technology, and using community-wide library resources for teaching the topic concepts and skills.
- Decide on a writing activity that will culminate the topic study. (A list of ideas for writing activities follows this overview.) Remember that it is possible to design different writing activities for the same topic based on individual student's writing competencies. Using the topic "The Land, Water and Resources in Our Region" as an example, here's how a teacher could teach to individual writing abilities based on a single classroom learning activity, whether the activity is a field trip to a nearby land formation, a class project of constructing a relief map of the school grounds, a pictorial study of major recreational areas in your state, or a map study:
 - struggling writers may be asked to draw a picture of the land formation being studied and then write three facts about it,
 - average writers may be asked to write a commercial enticing tourists to visit the site,
 - advanced writers may be asked to write similes or metaphors about the site.
- Be sure to identify the specific writing skills inherent in each writing activity. *My Guide to the U.S.A.* is an excellent format for teaching convergent thinking and beginning expository writing. However, since writing skills develop somewhat sequentially, it is important not to present writing activities that are overwhelming and far beyond a student's capabilities. As a general rule, teaching one new writing skill within a topic study is manageable, provided the student has demonstrated some competency with previously taught skills. Of course, students may be exposed to other new skills in group work—and through class presentations and discussions—without being held accountable for their mastery.

Knowing where each student is as a developing writer, and then matching that knowledge to activities at his or her own cognitive level, will help you develop appropriate and successful activities for all students. The open-ended format of *My Guide to the U.S.A.* also encourages teachers to develop—and students to respond to—progressively more comprehensive and complex writing activities.

Written Responses

The following is a list of ideas for incorporating social studies concepts and skills into writing responses that appear on the right-hand side of the two-page units within *My Guide to the U.S.A.*. Many of these ideas could be used for more than one topic:

- List important facts
- Compile research
- Brainstorm a list of questions for future individual or group work
- Describe a drawing on an accompanying page
- Have individual students respond in writing to photos or pictures you provide
- Write a vocabulary (or other) word vertically and have the students write topic descriptors for each letter
- Write sentences using the topic vocabulary
- Write a review of an activity or event
- Create a timeline
- Write a newspaper ad or TV/radio commercial
- Create a cover for a travel brochure or poster, and write a text for it
- Write a biography

- Create a diary entry (be sure that all historical fiction is accurate)
- Write a recommendation
- Write letters that inform, persuade, or prompt action
- Create a newspaper article (These can be combined into a class newspaper.)
- Write a poem
- List suggestions for solving a problem
- Create a graph or chart and explain it
- Interview someone and write a summary of the interview
- Write descriptions using similes or metaphors
- Using an overhead projector or chart paper, you can teach students how to develop advance organizers such as word webs. Display the web and then have the students write a paragraph from it.

These are only a few ideas. You can probably think of others, and because student interest is a powerful motivator, don't forget to elicit your students' suggestions for response ideas.

Introducing *My Guide to the U.S.A.*

As with all new materials for classroom use, explicit instructions on how to care for and use *My Guide to the U.S.A.* will reap immediate benefits for the teacher and students. Students who are comfortable with a new classroom "tool" readily take ownership of it, which invariably increases their productivity and allows the teacher more time to concentrate on the content of the students' responses.

Students tend to get distracted from routine instructions when they have something new in their own hands, so you may find it helpful to introduce the guide in two stages. During the first stage, the teacher is holding the only copy of *My Guide to the U.S.A.* and the students are grouped directly in front of her or him. This allows the teacher to cover key points that may affect the use of the book and the outcome of the students' work. During the second stage, the students are seated at their desks and each has a copy of *My Guide to the U.S.A.*.

The following are key points to cover when introducing *My Guide to the U.S.A.*:

First Stage – Whole group seated with the teacher:

- Discuss with the students the cover and what should be written on the blank line (student's name).
- Ask the students how to care for a book that will be used all year. They usually come up with the major concerns - treat it carefully, don't tear it, don't stuff it in a desk, don't get it wet, etc. Be sure to cover any points that they do not generate spontaneously.
- Discuss with the students writing and drawing tools that may be used in the book. The students will be working on the front and back of all pages. It is a good idea to decide if you are going to allow them to use colored markers, which usually bleed through paper. Although most students prefer coloring with markers, they also do not like to work on pages dotted with ink or color from previous work, nor do they like to have completed work ruined by ink or color soaking through from current work. One solution is to declare that only pencils, crayons, and colored pencils will be used in *My Guide to the U.S.A.*—markers are not an option. This will ensure that no one ends up with ruined work.
- Point out the dedication page (inside the front cover) and About the Author (p. 56). Remind the students about authorship. The students should understand that these two pages are as important as all the others in the book. Tell the students that they will leave the pages blank until you have given them additional time to think about what they want to write. Of course, these can be done separately and at any time of the year. However, quality responses will be encouraged if you give the students examples of other authors' dedication pages and give them reminders for a couple of days before you ask them to complete each page.

Second Stage – Each student is seated at his or her own desk with a copy of *My Guide to the U.S.A.*:

- Instruct the students to write their own name (in pencil) on the blank line on the cover.
- Ask the students to look through the Guide and discuss what they discover (Table of Contents, the United States Overview, topic headings within the sections, and blank pages.) Ask guiding questions, if necessary. Remind them how to use a Table of Contents and practice using the page numbers.

- Explain that the topic pages will be used as they learn about the topics in class.
- Note that the blank pages will be used for special topics that the class and/or teacher decide are important.
- Ask if there are any other questions and/or comments before they put the book away and tell the students when they will next use the book.

Initial Use of *My Guide to the U.S.A.*

- As earlier noted, the overview and topic pages can be presented and used in any order. Before beginning the first page in the book, remind the students about using pencils, crayons, and colored pencils only. Whether you allow students to draw and then write, or write and then draw, be sure to allow time for both by giving them reminders when it is time to switch.
- Each topic may be developed over several days. For example, you may want to add vocabulary words as they are encountered in daily study. Some writing activities, such as designing, drawing, and writing about a travel brochure picture, dictate that the students draw before they write. On the other hand, if students are writing letters, you may have them write their first draft in *My Guide to the U.S.A.* and let them choose a relevant picture(s) to glue in the picture box.
- As you study a specific social studies concept, encourage students to think about related issues and add them to a class list of topics. You can have the students vote on a topic for everyone to write about, or allow students to choose their own.
- If the students will be working with a new writing format when writing on one of the book's topics, be sure to provide prior instruction and modeling and ample guidance as they write. Knowing how to structure responses will enable the students to focus their thinking on the content and activities that culminate in their writing.

Conclusion

The process of studying one's social environment begins soon after birth and continues throughout life, as we mature and respond to an increasingly larger sense of community. But too often, social studies remains a content area subject that is confined to a particular time of the school day, with little relation to other subjects or activities. It may be included as part a "thematic unit," but nonetheless have little to do with other subjects or have meaningful relevance to students' lives.

To help children comprehend the complexity of our society and, more importantly, their ability and responsibility to protect, support, and improve it, social studies as a subject area must come out of the schedule and into the lives of the students. In addition to helping students formulate social studies concepts and develop other academic skills, *My Guide to the U.S.A.* has the added benefit of encouraging teachers and students to take an active approach to the learning of social responsibility.

The importance of learning social responsibility cannot be overstated at a time when ubiquitous Internet access can make virtually all aspects of the human condition, as well as our actions upon it and their impact, global knowledge almost instantly. Implicit in this knowledge is responsibility, because what we do—either carelessly or thoughtfully—impacts others. Armed with knowledge about the social systems in which we live, we can solve problems effectively and make informed decisions when dealing with others and their systems.

Through our schools' social studies curriculum and the use of learning tools such as *My Guide to the U.S.A.*, we can ensure that students learn a continuum of social concepts and skills that develop social responsibility at all levels—personal, community, state, national, and global.

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My Guide to the U.S.A., Item #773

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