**What is an American?**  
  
**Purpose of the Lesson**  
  
In contrast to people in many other nations, to be an American does not mean one is a member of a particular racial, religious, or ethnic group. To be an American is to share certain fundamental ideas, values, and principles with other Americans. What are the ideas that we all share? When you have finished this lesson, you should be able to describe some of the ideas shared by all Americans.

**What important ideas do Americans have in common?**   
  
Let us try to identify some of the important ideas Americans share by examining the following quotations. Working in groups of two or three, read and discuss the following quotations and then, in your own words, write the main idea addressed in each. Use what you have written to answer the questions that follow.

*“Americanism is a matter of mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to his country and to our creed of liberty and democracy.”***PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT**

*“We now have a comfortable dwelling and two acres of ground planted with potatoes, Indian corn, melon, etc. I have 2 hogs, 1 ewe and a lamb; cows in the spring were as high as 33 dollars, but no doubt I shall have one by fall. I am living in God's noble and free soil, neither am I slave to others...I have now been on American soil for two and a half years and I have not been compelled to pay for the privilege of living. Neither is my cap worn out from lifting it in the presence of gentlemen.”*  
**PHILIP TAYLOR, COLONIAL FARMER**

*“Let me be a free man, free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself and I will obey every law, or submit to the penalty.”*  
**CHIEF JOSEPH OF THE NEZ PERCE**

*“America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. Our fate is to become one and yet many.”*  
**RALPH ELLISON**

*“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”*  
**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

*“In view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful.”*  
**JOHN MARSHALL HARLAN**

**Class activity**

Each group should take turns sharing the ideas they have identified. The ideas should be entered on chart paper or a white board. As each idea is listed, write the words *Agree* and *Disagree* next to it and leave space for a tally. See the example below.

**People should be judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin.**  
  
**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Agree                  \_\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree**

After listing all of the ideas the groups have identified, the class should show by a vote of hands which of the ideas they agree or disagree with and tally the results in the spaces provided.  
  
  
Finally, a class discussion should focus on the following questions.

* Which ideas, if any, do you all agree upon?
* On which ideas, if any, are there disagreements? What are the reasons for the disagreements? After discussing the reasons for disagreements, students may change their votes and the resulting tally.
* Do the ideas on which you all agree have anything to do with what it means to be an American? Why or why not?

**Concluding activity**

Suppose that a Detroit news reporter has asked you what it means to be an American. Write your response to the question.