



# CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

## **Making a Difference: What Is a Citizen & What Can Citizens Do?**

### LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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**Grade Level:** 5, 6, 7, 8

**Subjects:**

- Social Studies: U.S. Government, Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Writing.

**Duration:** Two class sessions plus 2-3 weeks for the assignment.

**Description:** This lesson gives students an overview of different kinds of citizen participation, and requires students to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of those methods. Students are given the opportunity for active participation and then asked to share their experiences with classmates.

**Goals:**

Illinois Learning Standards

1. *Social Science:* 14C, 14D; 18B; and
2. *Language Arts:* 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A.

**Objectives:**

1. Explore the definition of “citizen,” and form ideas of what makes a good citizen;
2. Identify various methods of civic participation and evaluate their effectiveness;
3. Participate in the community by choosing and doing two or three methods of participation;
4. Practice narrative writing by keeping a journal of citizenship experiences.

**Materials:**

1. “Methods of Participation” Handout - Chart (one per student);
2. Pens and paper;
3. Chalkboard/Overhead; and
4. Butcher Paper/Marker (for posting classroom definition of Good Citizenship).

**Instruction and Activities:**

***Day 1***

1. Ask students: What is a citizen? Have the students write down their own definitions of “citizen.” Ask students to volunteer to share their definitions. Now read the formal definitions of “citizen” and “alien” listed below, and go through the other lecture points.

**Lecture Points** (write these points on an overhead)

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- A *citizen* of the U.S. is anyone who is born in the United States or anyone whose parents are citizens of the United States. People who are not citizens by birth, but who are legal residents (living legally in the U.S.), can go through a formal process to become U.S. citizens;
  - An *alien* is a person residing in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen;
  - Only citizens have the right to vote in elections and to be elected to public office. So, for example, someone born in Canada could not run for U.S. Congress or Senate unless he or she was or became a citizen of the United States;
  - The U.S. government protects everyone's basic rights, even if not a citizen, as listed under the Bill of Rights; and
  - Different countries have different definitions of who is a citizen within their borders.
2. It is likely that students were including some normative elements in their initial definitions. Now ask students to write down what they consider to be qualities of a *good* citizen. Have each student share what he or she wrote with the class. From these ideas, develop a classroom definition of "good citizenship" to post in the room.

### ***Day 2***

1. Read the class definition of good citizenship. Tell the students that one of the most important rights of being a citizen in a democracy is the right to participate in our government and affect decisions that impact our lives.
2. Ask students to brainstorm the same and different ways that citizens and non-citizens can participate in government.
3. The attached chart lists ways that all members of the public can participate. Divide the students into small discussion groups. Each group should discuss and list the advantages and disadvantages of each form of participation. For example, which forms of participation seem most important in protecting our basic rights? Which are least important? Which methods seem most effective? Least effective?

**Assignment:** Students should brainstorm issues that interest them. Pick one or more issues related to the students' communities, and ask students to choose two or three methods of participation. Give students a certain period of time (2-3 weeks) to complete the activities. (Some of the activities will not apply). Students should keep a journal of their experiences in which they detail what they did, how they felt about the experience, and whether or not they will do it again or participate in other ways. Students will be writing in the narrative style.

#### Sources Consulted:

[www.civnet.org](http://www.civnet.org)

"We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution" Middle School Grades  
[http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=wtp\\_ms28\\_sb](http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=wtp_ms28_sb)

## METHODS OF PARTICIPATION

CIVIC ACTIVITY	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Looking for information affecting public life in newspapers, magazines, and reference materials and judging if it's true or not		
Voting in school or classroom elections		
Running for office or holding public office		
Participating in a discussion about a political issue		
Trying to convince someone to vote a certain way		
Drafting a petition or signing a petition for a cause		

Wearing a button with a political message or putting a sticker with a political message on your bike or car		
Giving money to a political party or candidate		
Writing a letter to your local representative about an issue that concerns you		
Campaigning for a candidate		
Writing a letter to the editor of your school paper or local newspaper about an issue that you feel strongly about		
Attending a school board, village board, or local county board meeting		

Volunteering at a community center		
Making a public comment at a board meeting		
Organizing an after-school group to meet and discuss issues that you feel are important to you and your classmates		
Serving the country through military or other service (like volunteering)		
Disobeying laws and accepting the consequences to show that a law or policy is unjust		
Joining an interest group		

Serving as a juror		
Participating in a protest march or boycott		

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Activities that I can and will participate in:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.