

John F. Kennedy and Service

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Module contains:

- Lesson plan which includes 11 identified Shapell Manuscript Foundation resources.
- Teaching strategies including differentiation for diverse learners.
- Ideas for assessment.
- National history standards met by teaching modules.
- AP-style Short-Answer Question.

Introduction: President John F. Kennedy believed strongly in the idea of service. Before he became president, he volunteered for the U.S. Navy during World War II and heroically saved the life of another sailor. As president, Kennedy emphasized the importance of young people engaging in national service. At his inauguration, he implored Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can for your country.” He created a new agency, the Peace Corps, which provided opportunities for young Americans to work on service projects in developing countries. His own public image was also built on the idea of service both as a politician serving the public and, before that, as an officer in the US Navy during World War II. Why was Kennedy so interested in promoting service? Do Kennedy’s ideas about service still apply today? In this module, students will explore Kennedy’s idea of service and then apply what they have learned in their own “ask not” activity to encourage young people today to engage in service.

Lesson Length: One 90 minute period or two 45 minute periods

Level: 8th grade Civics or 7th Grade U.S. History (1865 to Present)

Compelling Question: What does it mean to live a life of service? Why is Kennedy’s emphasis on service to the greater community and world important today?

Description: Students will work in groups to better understand the reasoning behind President John F. Kennedy’s emphasis on service in creating government programs such as the Peace Corps. Students will research different kinds of service in the world today: service in their community, government service, military service, etc. and create a short “Ask Not” video making the case for the value of a particular kind of service.

Materials needed:

- Primary sources (below)
- [Primary source analysis sheets](#): (one per student)
- Device for accessing primary sources (or a printed class copy set)
- Ideas for Service from NationalService.gov <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve>

Activities:

1. Bell ringer: Students examine source "[JFK Handwritten Quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."](#)"
 - Give students time to read the quote and think about what it might mean. Ask if they know who JFK was or if they have ever heard the quote.
 - Teacher models primary source analysis and fills out [sheet](#) with class.
 - As part of the bell ringer, teachers may want to show the video of Kennedy's speech with the "ask not" quote. It can be found at the John F. Kennedy Library website:
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address> (the quote starts at 13:52)
2. Teacher informs the class that they will be learning about service both through sources related to U.S. president John F. Kennedy and thinking through what service means today. The culmination of the lesson will be students creating "Ask Not" videos that urge others to give back to their communities and the world
3. Analyzing the sources:
 - Assign students into groups of three.
 - Give each group a selection of sources, either printed out or through links if students have access to a tablet or laptop. The teacher may give all sources to each group, a selection of sources to each group, or one source to each group depending on students' reading abilities. Tell students that these sources will help answer supporting questions such as:
 - i. What kind of service is referred to in each source (government service, military service, other)?
 - ii. What connections can you make between the historical context of 1961 (the Cold War, Civil Rights Movement) and JFK's ideas about service?
 - iii. What are some connections between the different kinds of service referenced in these sources?
 - Formative assessment: Each student completes a [Primary source analysis sheet](#) on one source. Students may help each other but each student should complete a sheet. These sources and analysis sheets will be used to assist students in writing their speech.
 - (For groups who received multiple documents): each group takes turns sharing the source(s) they analyzed in Step 3 with their group, summarizing what the source is and what it tells us about JFK's idea of service and why it matters today.
4. Creating "Ask Not" videos.
 - Ask students: What does service look like today? Have students write their answers on the white board or SmartBoard. For classes taught online or with 1:1 devices, teachers may have students use a platform such as [menti.com](#) or [padlet](#) to share ideas. For some examples of service ideas have students visit [Nationalservice.gov](#).

- Tell students they will each pick one form of service that they believe is important for young people to be involved in today and make a 3 minute “Ask Not” video encouraging others to engage in and support this service.
- Students can make their videos using personal devices such as cell phones or tablets or by using the camera feature on a laptop or desktop computer.
- Each video should describe the form of service the students want to encourage and explain three ways that the service makes their country or community better. Each video should contain a sentence that reworks or adapts JFK’s “Ask not” quote.
- Extension Idea: Depending on the topics students choose, invite community leaders into the classroom (virtually or in person) to have students present their speeches. Students could vote on which speeches to present and work together to revise them. The community leaders could also review the videos and share their thoughts on possible next steps. Teachers can share this feedback with the class to give them an idea of how the strongest projects were received.

Ideas for differentiation:

- Students can be grouped according to ability with higher performers in groups with middle and lower performers.

Sources:

- [Ensign J.F. Kennedy Requests Sea Duty on a PT Vessel: "Recommendation Approved" June 26, 1942](#)
- [John F. Kennedy to Mrs. McMahon, August 11, 1943, Letter](#), Background: John F. Kennedy served as captain of a PT (patrol torpedo) boat in the Pacific Ocean. In 1943, a Japanese battleship rammed Kennedy's boat and ripped it in two. Two of Kennedy's crew died in the explosion that followed. Kennedy helped his men to safety including towing a badly injured sailor, Patrick McMahon, swimming for four hours with McMahon's life jacket strap in his teeth. Kennedy and his crew eventually made it to an island where they were rescued. Three days after the rescue, Kennedy wrote the following letter to Patrick McMahon's wife letting her know that he was alive.
- [JFK advises a college student on what courses to take for a life in politics, August 2, 1954](#)
- [Excerpt from New Frontier Speech, acceptance speech at Democratic National Convention, July 15, 1960](#) [page 15-16]

"But the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises -- it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them. It appeals to their pride, not their pocketbook -- it holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security.

But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric -- and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me, regardless of party."

- Excerpt from JFK Inaugural address, January 20, 1961:
In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest in the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own

- [Background on the Peace Corps and JFK letter welcoming first volunteers for the Peace Corps, May 22, 1961](#)

Assessment:

	5 points	3 points	1 point
Concept (group)	Video clearly and accurately communicates the importance of a type of service.	Video communicates the importance of a type of service, but has issues with clarity/accuracy	Video's attempt at communicating the importance of a type of service is unclear or inaccurate.
Design (group)	The video is well organized and understandable.	The video lacked some organization and clarity.	Video was not organized and lacked clarity.
Participation (individual)	All group members completed group contract and participation reflection thoroughly and accurately. The student made a substantial contribution to the end product.	Only one person demonstrated an active role.	Minimal participation from any group member.

TOTAL: ____ /15

Applicable standards:

The lesson follows The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) which is defined as “a distinctive approach to creating curriculum and instructional materials that honors teachers’ knowledge and expertise, avoids overprescription, and focuses on the main elements of the instructional design process as envisioned in the [Inquiry Arc of the College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#) (2013)”

	Content	Skill
Virginia DOE Standards of Learning		8th Grade Civics and Economics: CE.1 - The student will demonstrate skills for historical thinking, geographical analysis, economic decision making, and responsible citizenship by (g) taking informed action to address school, community, local, state, national, and global issues; (h) using a decision-making model to analyze and explain the costs and benefits of a specific choice; and (i) applying civic virtue and democratic principles to make collaborative decisions
IB History of the Americas		PERIOD 16: The Cold War and the Americas (1945–1981) - This section focuses on the development and impact of the Cold War on the region. Most of the second half of the 20th century was dominated by the global conflict of the Cold War. Within the Americas, some countries were closely allied to the United States and some took sides reluctantly. Many remained neutral or sought to avoid involvement in Cold War struggles. A few, influenced by the Cuban Revolution, instituted socialist governments. No nation, however, escaped the pressures of the Cold War, which had a significant impact on the domestic and foreign policies of the countries of the region (focus: social and cultural impact of the Cold War on the Americas AND United States’ foreign policies from Kennedy to Carter: the characteristics of, reasons for, and successes and failures of the policies; implications for the region AND Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress)
Common Core	N/A	Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

AP-style Short-Answer Question

Using the excerpt below, answer (a), (b), and (c):

- (a) Briefly describe ONE purpose of the speech in the excerpt.
- (b) Briefly describe ONE immediate historical effect on United States society of the ideas in the excerpt.
- (c) Briefly explain ONE broader historical situation in which the excerpt was written.

[Excerpt from New Frontier Speech, acceptance speech at Democratic National Convention, July 15, 1960](#) [page 15-16]

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