

## The President's Pledge: Investigating the Oath of Office

Topic: Presidential Inauguration

Grades 4 – 6

Social Studies, English Language Arts

Time Required: 2 class periods

Overview:

Provided for in the US Constitution, the oath of office is a key component of a presidential inauguration and symbolizes a peaceful transition of power. This lesson, which introduces students to the president's official pledge, begins with examining an artifact, the top hat Kennedy wore on January 20, 1961. Students research and analyze archival photographs to gather evidence about the object and Kennedy's inauguration. After analyzing a photograph of his swearing-in ceremony, students work together to define, discuss, and write about the meaning and significance of the oath of office.

As a Civics lesson, the material can be used in a unit on the electoral process, to demonstrate the inauguration as the peaceful transfer of power. It can also serve to reinforce knowledge about the Constitution and highlight important elements of a democratic government. As an English Language Arts lesson, the assessment can be used as a persuasive writing assignment.

Essential questions: What is a presidential inauguration and why is it important? Why does the president have to take an oath of office?

Content Goals:

- The inauguration is a ceremony that marks the beginning of a new presidential term. It represents a peaceful transfer of power from one president to the next.
- To officially become President of the United States, one makes a promise called an oath of office.
- By taking the oath of office, the new president promises to perform the responsibilities of the office and uphold the Constitution of the United States, affirming that s/he is not above the laws that govern the United States.

Objectives:

Student will:

- Observe, analyze, and interpret primary source material.
- Describe what happens at a presidential inauguration.
- Define the oath of office and discuss its significance.

#### Related Standards:

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4)
- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7)
- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics, or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1)
- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1)

#### Additional Standards:

##### *National Council of Social Studies*

##### VI. Power, Authority, and Governance

- g. distinguish among local, state, and national government and identify representative leaders at these levels such as mayor, governor, and president.

##### *National History Standards*

Standard 3; Historical Analysis and Interpretation – Analyze illustrations in historical stories

##### *National Civics Standards*

III. – (K – 4) How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?

II. – (5 – 8) What are the foundations of the American political system?

A. What is the American idea of constitutional government?

### **Historical Background and Context**

When George Washington took the oath of office on April 30, 1789 in front of New York's Federal Hall, the Inaugural ceremony was new, unfamiliar, and untested. There have been more than 45 inaugural ceremonies since that first experimental event and all have included a key element — the oath of office. It is the only element of the Inauguration required by the *United States Constitution*. However, by the time John F. Kennedy took the oath of office on January 20, 1961, the presidential Inauguration had become a full day (and night) of events that demonstrates the peaceful transfer of power and celebrates the start of a new presidential term. Inauguration day now includes a morning worship service, a procession to the Capitol, the swearing-in of the vice-president, the swearing-in of the president, an Inaugural Address, the departure of the outgoing president, the Inaugural luncheon, the Inaugural parade, and the Inaugural ball. The choices made for each element of the day set the tone of the new administration.

Much has been written about the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy. He is the youngest-elected president to take the oath of office, the only Catholic, and one of the last to wear a top hat to the special ceremony. At his swearing-in, Kennedy's hat and overcoat lay on a heap on his seat as he stood in 20 degree temperatures before Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren who administered the oath of office. James Browning, Clerk of the Supreme Court, held the large Fitzgerald family Bible brought from Ireland about a hundred years earlier. The new president, hatless and coatless, projected both youth and vigor, and delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

Just as the presidents before and after him, Kennedy spoke the words as required by the Constitution (Article II, Section 1):

*I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*

Information about Kennedy's Hat:

Although John F. Kennedy usually avoided wearing hats, he decided to follow a decades-old tradition of including a top hat in his Inauguration attire. Despite the bitter cold, the hat spent most of the day in his hand or on an empty seat. Did he actually wear the hat that day? Challenging students to find the answer to this question puts them in the role of historian as they search through archival photographs to find images of Kennedy wearing the hat.

The hat Kennedy wore (for moments) that day, was made of beaver fur with a felt band and silk rim, and is part of a special centenary year exhibit entitled *JFK 100: Milestones and Mementos*.

For historical background on Kennedy's Inauguration, including his Inaugural Address see the lesson, ["Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You."](#)

Materials:

Access to John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website, [jfklibrary.org](http://jfklibrary.org). (If you do not have access to the internet, provide printed copies of the photographs described in the lesson, including captions on back or below the photograph.)

- Photograph of Chief Justice Earl Warren administering the Oath of Office to John F. Kennedy (PX 65-108-SC578830).
- Photograph of the top hat worn by John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961.

List of vocabulary words: swear, affirm, faithfully, execute, preserve, protect, defend, Constitution

Prior knowledge:

Prepared by the Department of Education and Public Programs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

Students should have a basic understanding of the Constitution and the responsibilities of the President of the United States.

Procedure:

**Teacher tip:** The top hat that JFK wore on Inauguration day serves as an engaging “hook” to generate interest in presidential inaugurations and the oath of office.

### Part I: Investigating the Evidence

1. Project the photograph of the top hat and solicit observations and questions. Explain that the hat is part of a special exhibit entitled *JFK 100: Milestones and Mementos* that honors the hundredth anniversary of JFK’s birth. Suggested questions: *Why do you think the hat was selected to be in the exhibit? What milestone, or important event, might it represent? What makes it a memento, an object with special meaning? What evidence would provide information about the hat?*
2. Direct students to the [Media Gallery](#) at [jfklibrary.org](http://jfklibrary.org) to find evidence that reveals who wore the hat, when it was worn, and why it was important.

**Teacher tip:** There are two galleries that show JFK wearing the hat: [JFK Wears a Hat](#) and the [Inauguration](#).

Photographs with the top hat in the [JFK Wears a Hat](#) media gallery:

- Cat Watched Inauguration of President Kennedy <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/sC23vvmCpEei38AjQCUyfg.aspx>
- President-elect John F. Kennedy and President Dwight D Eisenhower at the White House <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHP-KN-17136.aspx>

Photographs of the top hat in [The Inauguration](#) media gallery:

- President-elect John F. Kennedy and President Dwight D Eisenhower at the White House <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHP-KN-17136.aspx> (also in JFK Wears a Hat)]
- Inaugural Parade for President Kennedy, Marching Band <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHP-AR6280-U.aspx>
- Inaugural Parade for President Kennedy, Motorcade <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHP-KN-C28421.aspx>
- President Kennedy Arrive at White House <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHP-AR6280-1O.aspx>

3. Discuss the findings with whole group:

*Who wore the hat? (John F. Kennedy) When was it worn? (January 20, 1961) What makes the hat important? (He wore it on the day he became President.) Which media*

*galleries provided the evidence?* (Inauguration and JFK Wears a Hat.) Discuss the following: *What is an inauguration? What happens that day?*

4. Have students work in small groups to look more closely at all of the photographs in the Inauguration media gallery to learn more about what happened that day. Demonstrate how to examine a photograph and list the event it shows (Ex. [\*Photo AR6280-U\*](#) shows the inaugural parade). Challenge students to make a list of events based on the photographs. Ask them to take notes on the photograph that shows when John F. Kennedy officially became President.

You can also view the U.S. Information Agency video (17 minutes), [The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy, 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States](#). The film provides a narrated, visual summary of the day, including the visit with Eisenhower at the White House, the procession to the Capitol, the swearing-in ceremony, five minutes of excerpts from the Inaugural address, the parade, balls, and the first day in office including the swearing-in of the Cabinet.

Invite students to notice when the hat appears during the film. Ask them to identify the moment when John F. Kennedy officially became President.

5. Create a class list of events from the day based on what students learned from the photographs and/or film. Make sure that “Oath of Office” or “Swearing-in” is listed. Ask each group which image they think depicts the moment when John F. Kennedy officially became President. Circle the “Oath of Office” on the list. Project photo [PX 65-108 SC578830](#).
6. Analyze the photograph together:
  - *What kind of photograph is this?* (event, family, aerial, action, posed, candid) [Event].
  - *What people do you see?* [Starting from left front row: Jacqueline Kennedy, departing President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren is administering the oath of office, John F. Kennedy, the new Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, the departing Vice-President Richard Nixon who lost the presidential race to Kennedy.]
  - *What objects do you see?* [podium, presidential seal, microphone, bible]
  - *Where was it taken?* [in front of the Capitol building in Washington, DC]
  - *When was it taken?* [January 20, 1961]
  - *Who took the photograph and why do you think it was taken?* [United States Army Signal Corps took the photograph because it was an historic event and marked the beginning of a new presidency.]
  - *What action is taking place?* [John F. Kennedy is raising his hand and so is Chief Justice Earl Warren.] You can discuss whether he is wearing the hat and why they think he isn't.

- *What is happening in the photograph?* [John F. Kennedy is taking the oath of office.]
- *What is an oath?* [An important promise to which you pledge to keep.]

Discuss the following: What is John F. Kennedy doing? [making a promise, making pledge]

Project the oath of office under the photograph: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Explain that they will work together to look closely at the text of the oath of office to determine what the new president is pledging to do.

## Part II: Analyzing the Oath of Office

1. Have students work together to become experts on one phrase in the text. Suggested phrases:
  - I do solemnly swear (or affirm)
  - that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States
  - and will to the best of my ability
  - preserve, protect, and defend
  - the Constitution of the United States.

Encourage students to use a dictionary or thesaurus to define the words. They will be asked to act out the phrase and then explain it in their own words.

2. Bring groups together and have each "perform" their phrase and explain what it means. Do a shared writing exercise to rewrite the oath in words suggested by students.
3. Whole class discussion:
  - a. *What is the new president promising to do?* [carry out the responsibilities of president, make sure we are following the Constitution.]
  - b. *Why does the new president take the oath of office?* [demonstrate a commitment that s/he will do her job and respect the principles of the government of the United States. The Constitution requires that the new president take the oath (Article II Section 1).]
  - c. *Why does s/he have to promise to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution?* [The president is not above the Constitution. S/he must follow the guidelines in the Constitution such as respecting the separation of powers and protecting individual rights.]

- d. *What if the person did not have to pledge to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution?* [The President might abuse his/her power. The Constitution ensures that there is a balance of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branch. It also protects individual rights. Without the Constitution, the President might try to take away individual rights or overpower the legislative and judicial branches.]

#### Assessment:

Have students complete this written assignment as if they are members of the Inaugural Committee, the group that plans the presidential inauguration:

You are a member of the Inaugural Committee, the groups that plans the presidential inauguration. One member of the committee does not want to include the oath of office in the ceremony because it is only spoken words that are hard to understand and seems old-fashioned. Write a response to convince this person that the committee must keep the oath of office as part of the Inauguration ceremony.

[Possible arguments: The Constitution requires the oath of office. The oath requires the new president to abide by the Constitution which limits his/her powers. The oath ensures a peaceful transfer of power. If there was no oath, the new president is not bound to follow the Constitution.]

#### Accommodations:

- Teacher works with one of the small groups to explain the meaning of the oath.
- Provide student-generated list of reasons why the oath of office is an essential element of the day. Students can use this list for their writing assignment.
- Permit students to present their argument orally and teacher records reasons.
- Assign vocabulary words prior to the lesson. Check for understanding before lesson.

#### Extensions:

1. Hold an Inaugural Committee meeting and present some of the arguments for keeping the oath of office in the ceremony.
2. Have each student rewrite the oath of office. Organize peer reviews of the rewrites (without names of the authors) and have students select the best one.
3. Set up a podium and stage a “swearing- in” ceremony.
4. Review what students have learned about the Constitution, listing important elements of the document, including the First Amendment. Create a mural around the words, “and to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Have students illustrate the concepts they believe are most important to “preserve, protect, and defend.”

5. Have students research the top hat. Can they locate additional images of JFK wearing the hat that day? Can they discover information about the hat? Did he enjoy wearing it? Who made it? Did he ever wear it again? Did anyone else?
6. Generate a list of questions about past inaugurations. Have students research the information.

#### Additional Resources

##### Books

Hossell, Karen Price, *John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Speech*. Heinemann-Raintree: 2005, 48 pages.

In addition to dense text written for upper elementary and middle-school students, this account describes in detail JFK's inaugural ceremony. It breaks down the speech into sections and gives a detailed explanation with photographs to explain each excerpt. It also includes historical context leading up to the 1960 election and major events of Kennedy's presidency.

##### Websites

<http://www.jfklibrary.org>

Access President Kennedy's inaugural address by selecting "Historic Speeches" under "JFK." (To find more of his speeches, select "Research Aids" under "Research.")

- Inauguration of John F. Kennedy, 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, a 17-minute film including White House meeting with Eisenhower, procession, swearing in, speech excerpts, luncheon, and parade.
  - <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/USG-01-12.aspx>
- Relevant media galleries with photographs:
  - JFK Wears a Hat:  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/Media-Gallery/JFK-Wears-a-Hat.aspx>
  - Inauguration:  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/Media-Gallery/Inauguration.aspx>
- See several related lesson plans under [Campaign, Election, Inauguration](#)

<http://time.com/3875353/jfk-inauguration-life-photos-january-1961/>

Photographs of January 20, 1961 taken for *Life* magazine (many of which show him wearing or holding the hat. Many of the photographs were not published in the original magazine.)



[http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=333](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=333)

“Presidential Inaugurations: I Do Solemnly Swear” guides you through a series of lessons that introduce students to presidential inaugurations using primary source material.

<https://www.inaugural.senate.gov/>

The website of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies includes videos, charts, and narratives on all aspects of the inaugural ceremony. A student-friendly chart listing the date and location of every inauguration has links to each president with information on who administered the oath of office, what bible was used, the length of the inaugural address, attire, weather, and other interesting facts.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/pihtml/pihome.html>

From the American Memory collection at the Library of Congress, “I Do Solemnly Swear” provides a guide to photographs and documents from inaugurations throughout history, oath of office information, and interesting facts about these ceremonies.

<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/teaching-inauguration>

From Teaching Tolerance, *Teaching the Inauguration* provides practical classroom suggestions for guiding students to look at the Inauguration through a critical literacy lens.



Prepared by the Department of Education and Public Programs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum



Inauguration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States. Chief Justice Earl Warren administers the Oath of Office to President John F. Kennedy during ceremonies at the Capitol, 20 January 1961. United States Army Signal Corps photograph in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. PX 65-108-SC578830