

AMERICAN CREED
**CITIZEN
POWER**



PHOTO ESSAY

Youth Media Challenge



CONTENTS

Note that you might be led through this slide presentation by your teacher or, you might work through it individually. In either case, **work bravely and honestly.**

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT TO EXPECT

- We invite you to learn about the American Creed Initiative and take inspiration from a photo essay created by a young leader from the initiative.
- This essay is offered as a “mentor text” showing a real-world approach to composing. We invite you to learn from it and then consider what you would like to compose.
- We suggest a few writing and photo activities using this essay. The goal is to help you find a focus and point of view for your own story.
- You will then be supported to take and curate your own photos, and organize those photos with your writing to create a “viewfinder” photo essay.
- Lastly, we invite you to publish your photo essay via the American Creed Youth Media Challenge.



What is a Photo Essay?

Photo essays are a form of storytelling that use images and words.

Photo essays...

- Present a story
- Convey a theme or feeling
- Follow a sequence
- Rely as much or more on images than words to deliver a story



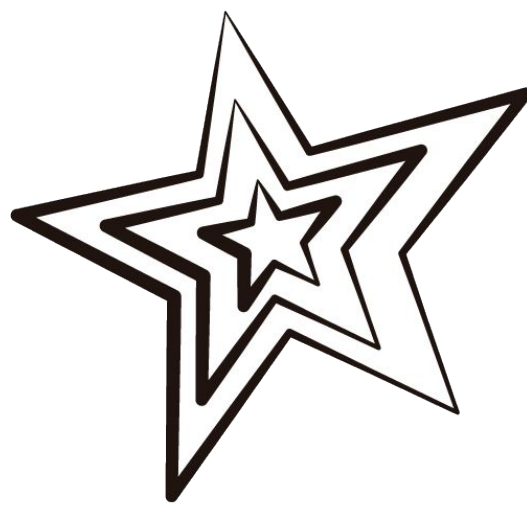
The American Creed “viewfinder” photo essays share a point of view about a community and issue(s) that the author finds important and wants to share with other Americans. They use a voice that is public and directed beyond the immediate community. They make a personal connection between the portrait of a community and the writer’s own ideals and values. Viewfinders raise awareness of an issue in a community, and when appropriate, advocate for action. They mix personal experience with evidence to show why this issue matters to the author and the community.



WHAT IS THE AMERICAN CREED INITIATIVE?

PBS launched the American Creed initiative in 2018 with a documentary that features a mosaic of stories, set in communities around the country, showing people striving to realize their own visions of America's promise, embracing the idea that what unifies America is a set of foundational national ideals. The new PBS American Creed documentary series, releasing in 2026 to mark America's 250th anniversary, explores this idea from young adult perspectives.

AMERICAN CREED



The title “American Creed” comes from a phrase written by Nobel Prize-winning economist Gunnar Myrdal during the U.S. Great Depression in the 1930s. Myrdal defined that creed as the sense that individuals, regardless of their circumstances, deserve fairness, freedom, and the opportunity to realize their potential. He believed that creed, expressed by America’s founding documents, defined the American character. He called the gap between that creed and the reality of American life “an American dilemma.”

Martin Luther King Jr. was among Myrdal's most attentive readers. Dr. King called the ideals expressed in America's founding documents "a promissory note."



[Listen to students respond to the film](#)

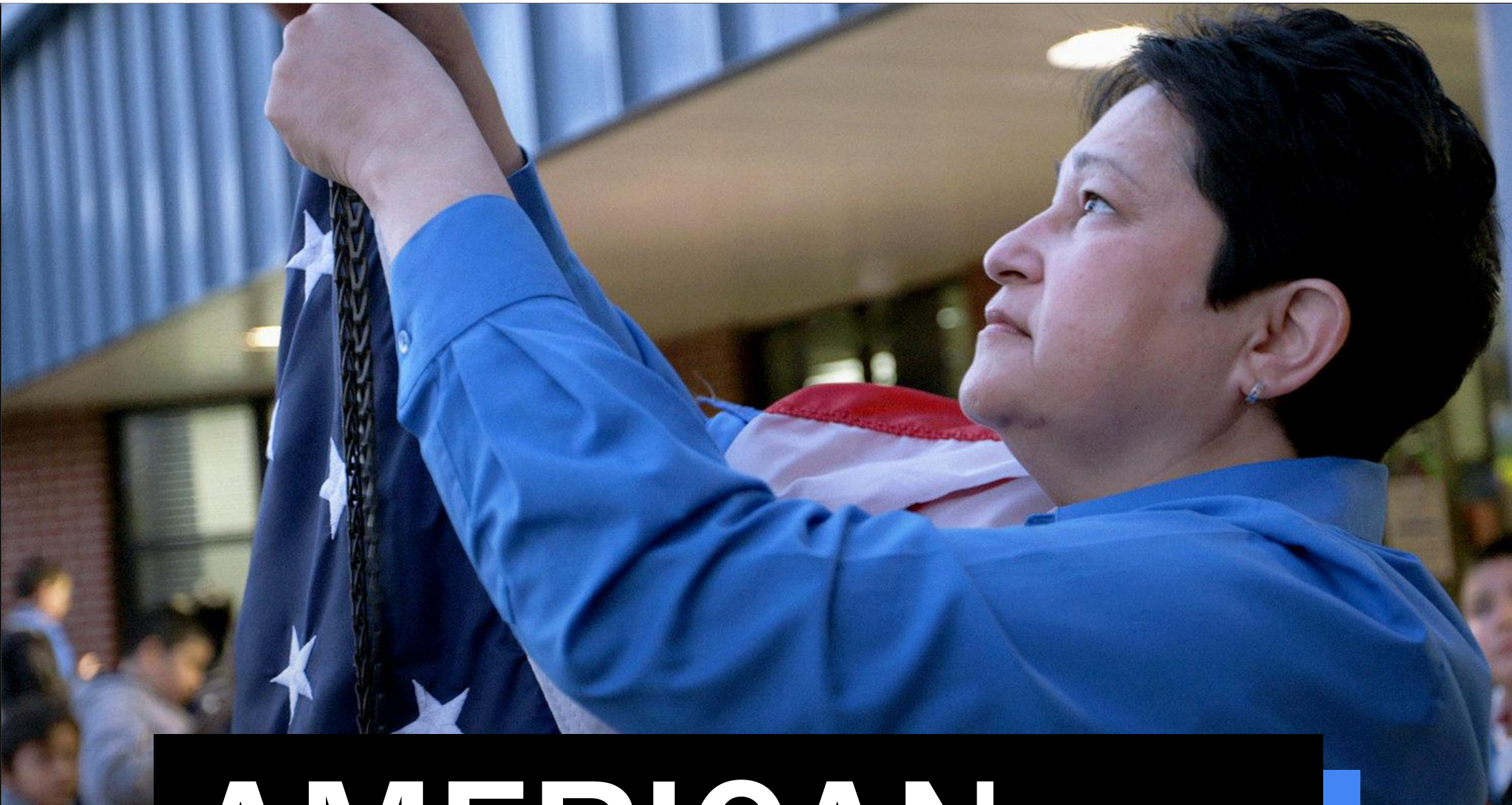
WHAT IDEAS DO YOU CONNECT TO?

As you get started on this project, take a moment to look at American Creed-related words and phrases on the next slide. These terms express ideas that often surface in conversations about what America stands for.

What connections do you make to these words or phrases? How do these ideas relate to what you want for your community? Note the terms that you feel connect to your beliefs and/or experiences.

Hold onto this to come back to later.

Creed
Community
Care
Equality
Freedom
Fairness
Opportunity
Independence
Justice
Responsibility
Security
Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness



AMERICAN CREED TERMS



EXPLORING A MENTOR TEXT



We are going to explore a viewfinder photo essay created by a young adult participant in the American Creed initiative. This composition weaves together photos and text to tell a story. It also shares a point of view about a community issue important to the author and informed by their beliefs about American ideals. We will look at this example in depth in order to inspire you to create a viewfinder of your own.

WRITING TO THINK

Throughout the next few slides, you will be asked to look at the mentor text and then do a series of low-stakes or “thinking” writing/composing activities so that you can explore a range of ideas. The goal is that these ideas will ultimately help you find a focus and provide material for your viewfinder photo essay. There is no right or wrong in this kind of process; just express yourself quickly and see what emerges.

Ready?

Meet

TRINITY

COLÓN

Chicago, Illinois



In this [video](#), you are going to meet Trinity Colón of the American Creed PBS initiative. Start by watching a video introduction to learn about her. As you watch, note things in the video that are interesting and important to you.

Next, read Trinity Colón's viewfinder photo essay: "Slag Valley"

- Read the essay to yourself (you might even try reading it out loud if that is helpful).
- As you read, note things that are interesting and important to you.



[Slag Valley](#)

Then, use her photo essay as a text to guide a set of activities.

TRINITY'S PHOTOS

Focus on the photographs, specifically.

- What do you notice about the photos themselves?
- What do you notice about the order they are presented in?
- What story do the photos tell, and in what ways do they show what's important to Trinity?

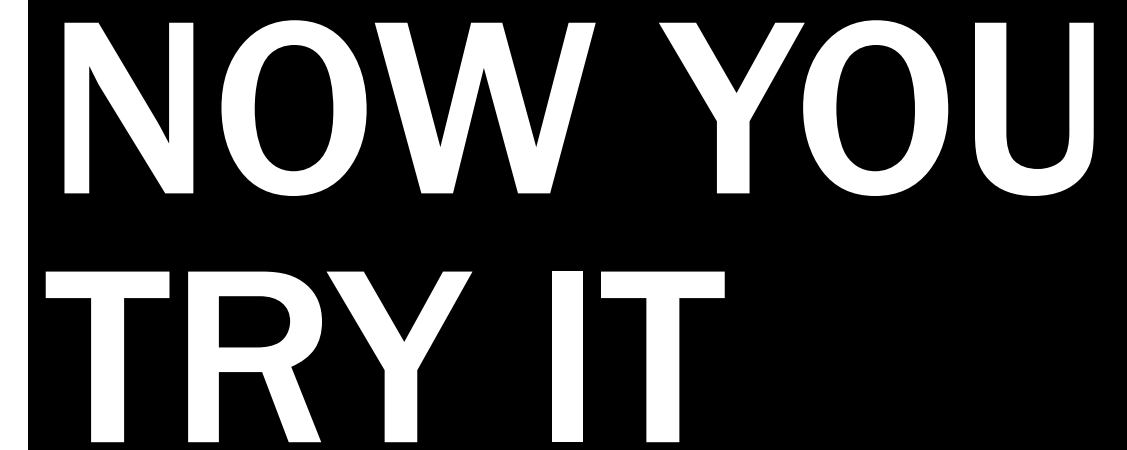


[Slag Valley](#)

You probably have a treasure trove of photos in your pocket (on your phone).

Give yourself 5 minutes to peruse your photos. Like you did with Trinity's photos, notice what jumps out to you about your photographs.

What do they say about who or what you care about?



**NOW YOU
TRY IT**

TRINITY'S CONNECTIONS

Read Trinity's essay again, this time paying attention to the text and photos as a whole.

- Notice that Trinity writes about the place where she lives and the people she lives with.
- How, in images and words, does she convey her connection to her home and to her community?
- What is her point of view? How does her point of view help you understand something about what she values?



[Slag Valley](#)

Use these sentence starters to help you write about a person, place, or thing important to you.

Try answering some free-writing using prompts like these:

- In my family/community...
- Ever since I was young...
- A major concern of my generation...
- Because this is home...
- There's a saying around here...



**NOW YOU
TRY IT**

TRINITY'S COMMUNITY

- Read Colón's viewfinder again.
- What are the community assets (things that are good or helpful) she describes? What are the community challenges?
- How does Colón define her community and his ideals? How does he advocate for her community's future?



[Slag Valley](#)

NOW YOU TRY IT

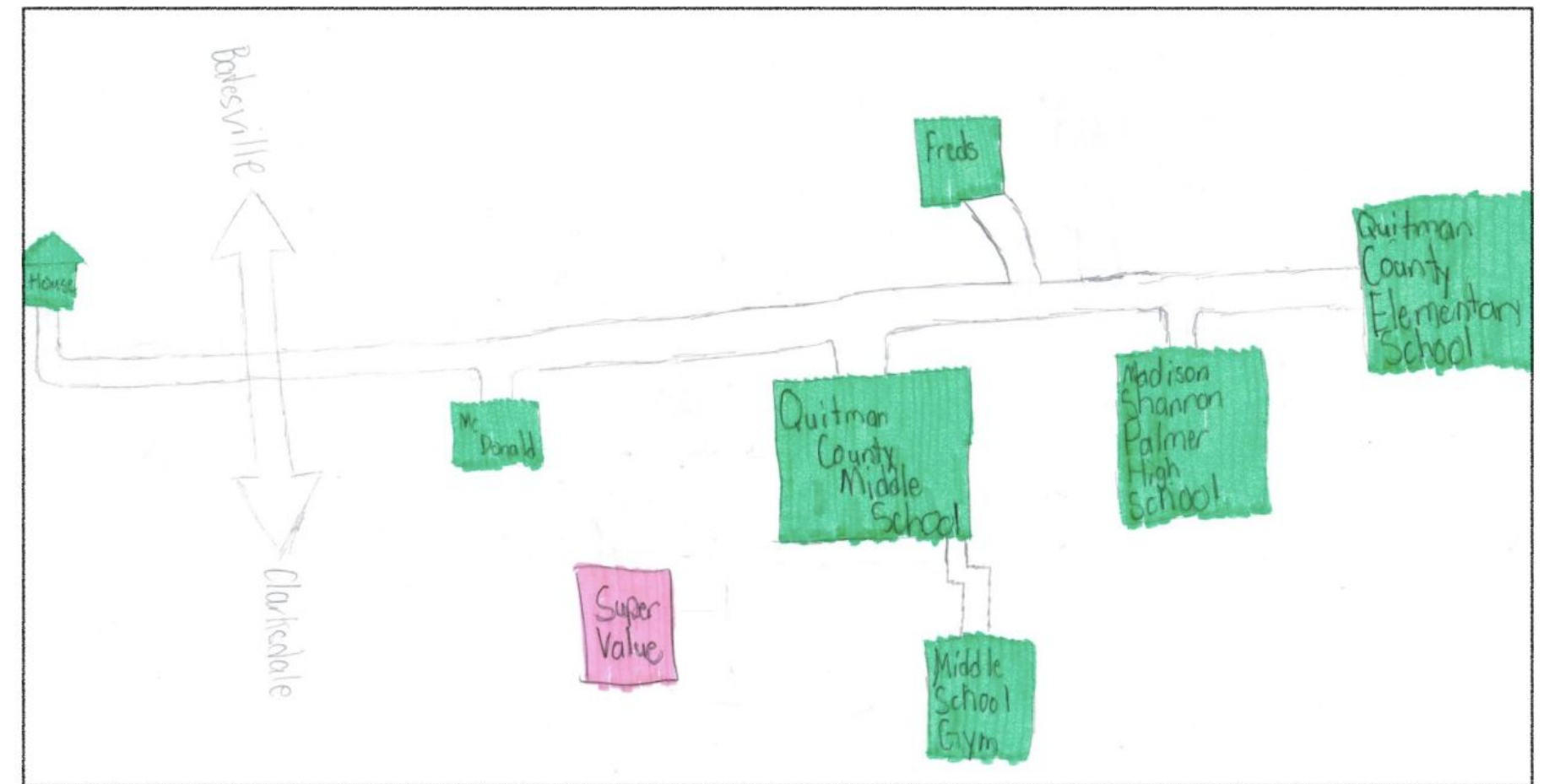
Like Trinity, start to make a list of assets from your own community, and its challenges. One way to help do this is through a process of Community Mapping ...



Community mapping focuses on the list of community assets and challenges you came up with, and makes your list more visible and concrete for you in the form of a map!

START YOUR MAP

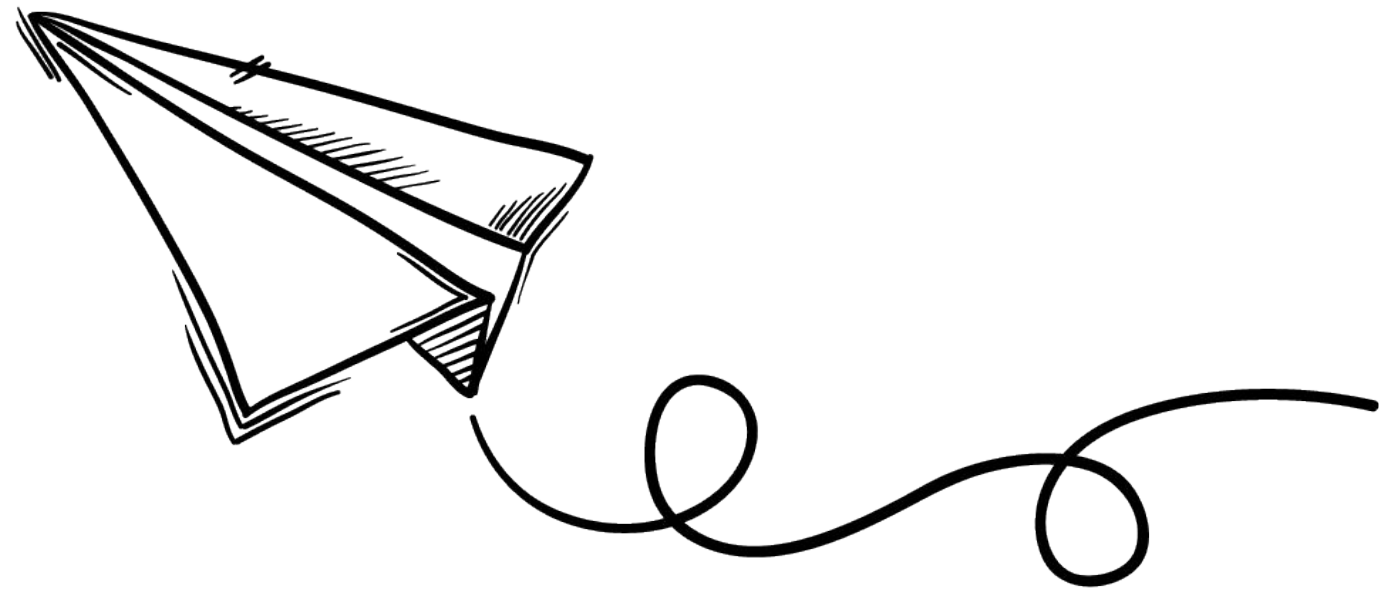
1. Draw a simple picture of your neighborhood, town, or community (could be from above) and focus on those things that are important to you.
2. You might find some ideas from your photos or your writing about home, so take a look back at your notes to see.
3. Color or label places that you care about and that you admire. This could include homes, businesses, parks, libraries, schools, historical sites, environmental sites, places of gathering, etc.



A student's community map of Marks, Mississippi

Student work via The National Writing Project's C3WP Project

QUICK WRITE



From your map, choose one place you admire or care about and write about it in detail.

How would you describe it to someone outside of your community? How does it impact the community?

RETURN TO YOUR MAP

Now, choose one challenge. How does your map help you see that challenge? What does your map tell you about how to address that challenge? What's missing from your map?

Try another quick write about this challenge...



QUICK WRITE

How is this challenge negatively affecting your community?

How might the assets you named before help to overcome the challenge? What other assets are needed?

How could addressing the challenge benefit the community? In what ways could you be part of a solution?

FIND YOUR STORY: FIND YOUR “WHAT”

DO YOU HAVE A FOCUS?

When you look at these things you just did — reviewing the photos on your phone, your quick write about your connections, your community mapping process — does a topic start to emerge?

Is there a person, place, or thing in your community that you would like to compose a photo essay about?



DO YOU HAVE YOUR “WHAT?”

If not, circle back to your map and share it with a peer to get some more input.

If yes, yay! Now that you have your “what,” consider the question “So What?”

Why does this matter to you and to others?

Think about the things/people/places you love:

- What is their value?
- What would the world be like without them?

Consider talking to a peer about these questions, too.

WHO AND YOU

Next, think about the challenge(s) you identified and consider “Now What?” This might be a point of view, or even an action you can take in response to these challenges:

- Who should know/care/do something about those problems?
- What do you/could you do to help solve problems?

Creed

Community

Care

Equality

Freedom

Fairness

Opportunity

Independence

Justice

Responsibility

Security

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of
Happiness

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Return to the American Creed words and phrases you considered earlier.

- What connections do you see between your “What” and these ideas?
- How do these ideas relate to what you want for your community?
- How might these connections impact the story you tell?

“

We envision a future
where society values
care. To get there,
society has to *see* care.”

—Working Assumptions

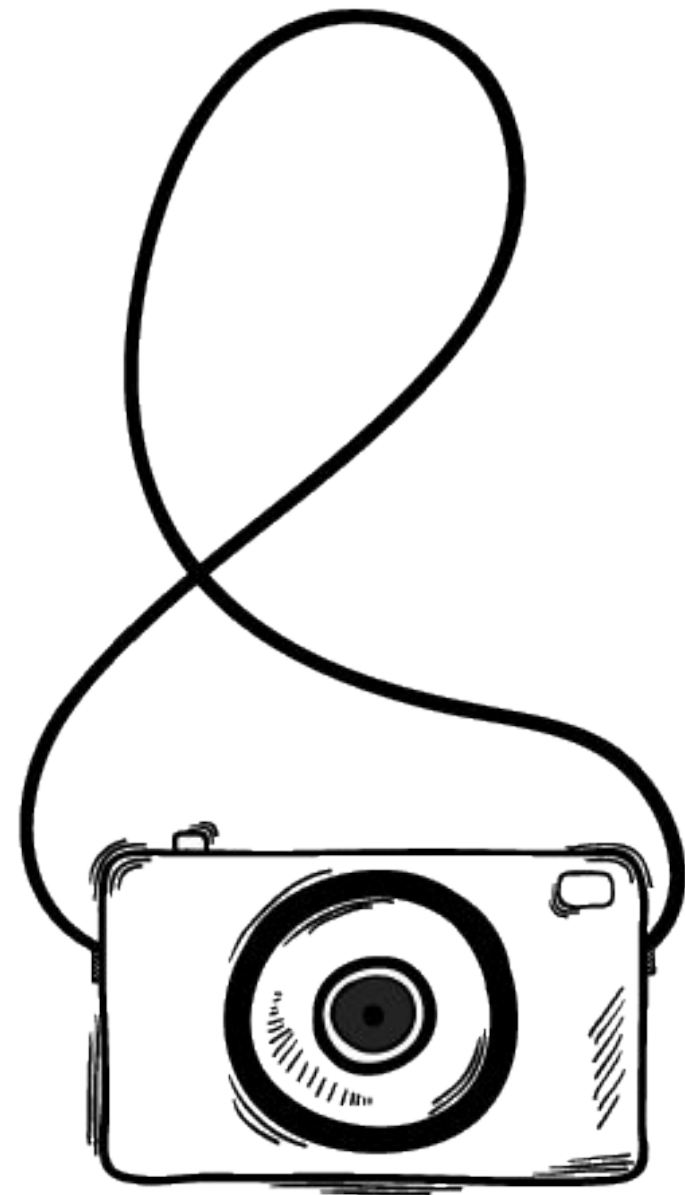


AMERICAN CREED

TAKE YOUR PHOTOS | PHOTO ESSAY

A photograph showing a person wearing a blue cap operating a piece of heavy machinery, likely a dredger or similar equipment, on a boat. The person is seen from the side, looking out over a vast body of water under a clear sky. The machinery is dark and industrial, with various levers and controls visible. The water is a deep blue, and the horizon is visible in the distance.

**FIND YOUR STORY:
TAKE YOUR OWN PHOTOS**



CAPTURE WHAT IS CLOSE

Take many photographs that capture what you would like to share from your community. You'll want to have at least 10 to work with.

Stay close to home with people you know and trust. Even if you know them, ask people for their permission to take and share their photograph before you do.

PHOTO TIP



Tap into more photo tips from the experts at Working Assumptions.

BE DELIBERATE

Many professional photographers say they visualize a shot before taking it. This allows them to work with a specific outcome in mind. Doing this helps you slow down and make a conscious choice about the photograph you are about to take. It can also be helpful to narrate the scene in your head.

AND, BE DECISIVE

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term “The Decisive Moment” to describe the instant when everything in a situation—movement, gesture, expression, composition—comes together to reveal the essence of the scene.

FRAMING

One of the choices you make is about what to keep in the photo and, just as importantly, what to leave out. Do you want to include the subject’s hands? That dog in the background? A slice of sky? Etc.

LIGHTING

You can use light to create mood, meaning, and emphasis in your images.

POINT OF VIEW

Bird's-eye view, worm's-eye view, and kid's-eye view are all ways to mix up your photography approaches.

COMPOSITION

You can make your photographs dynamic and engaging by playing with all of the shapes and lines in an image or considering how elements at the edges or corners of your frame might connect, reinforce, or complement one another.



**FIND YOUR STORY: CREATE A
VIEWFINDER PHOTO ESSAY**

SETTING GOALS

Like Trinity Colón's viewfinder, your photo essay should...

- Share a point of view about a community issue.
- Use a voice that is public and directed beyond the immediate community
- Make a personal connection to ideals and values.
- Raise awareness of an issue and, when appropriate, advocate for action.
- Mix personal experience with evidence to show why this issue matters to the author and the larger community.

START WITH YOUR PHOTOS

Starting to play with and organize your photos can help you see what you captured and in what ways they support (or challenge) the story you want to share.

To see more story possibilities, try these steps a couple of times with at least 5 of your photos:

1. Brainstorm captions
2. Play with the relationships between the photos.
3. Organize your photos with captions.

1

BRAINSTORM CAPTIONS

Brainstorm words and ideas for the captions of your pictures. Don't be concerned with spelling, grammar, or punctuation at this point—just get your ideas and feelings down.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS...

- List things that were happening before, during, or after you took the picture. You can include things happening outside the frame.
- Describe any surprising or fascinating information that the viewer doesn't already know about the scene to provide context.
- Describe things that the photograph cannot capture, such as smells, tastes, sounds, temperature, or bits of conversation.
- List any emotions or feelings that you associate with this image.
- List any ideas about American beliefs that the photos may capture.

2

PLAY WITH RELATIONSHIPS

1. Move your photos around and play with how they relate to each other.
2. Look at them in pairs and triads.
3. What do you notice about the pair of images? What stories do they start to tell together? What arguments do they begin to make and/or what values do they convey?

3

ORGANIZE YOUR PHOTOS

1. Organize the photos you think you would like to use. Describe each one and then write down the caption you might want to use.

Here’s a tip: Use a photo organizer to keep track of your photos and ideas.

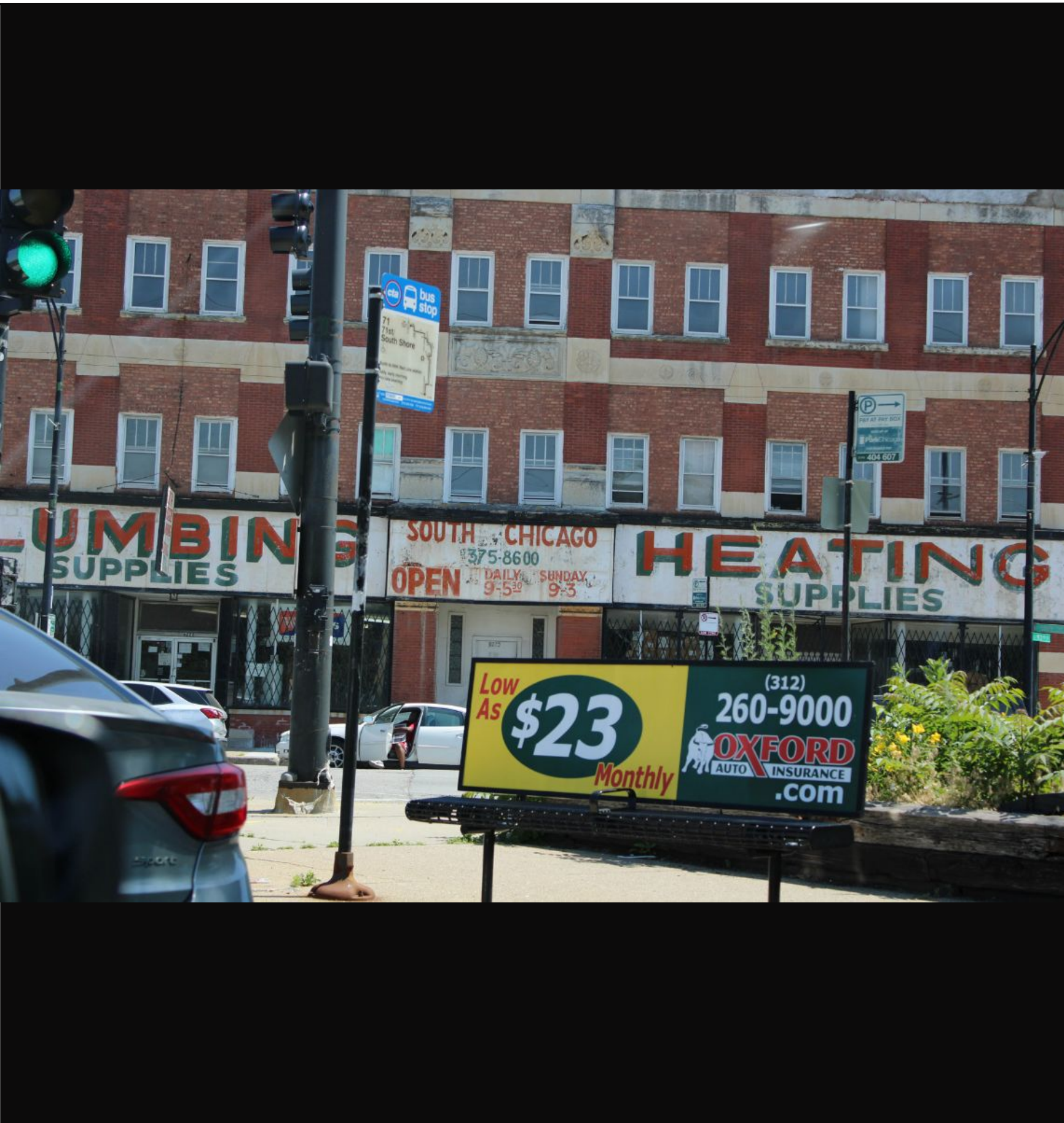
Description of photo	What part of the story does this photo tell?	Draft of caption for photo

Think about the story you want to share. You can use what you already did as an outline or structure.

- What is your “what”?
- What is your “so what?” Why does this matter to you and also to others?
- What is your “now what?” What do you want others to understand, or what action do you propose?

Compose your photos, captions, and supporting text to share this story.

**PUT IT
TOGETHER**



“

I don't need to leave to be somebody. I am somebody because I'm here”

—Trinity Colón

[Slag Valley](#)

Here's a tip: return to Trinity's photo essay to use it as a guide for your own composition process.

PEER INPUT



PEER FEEDBACK

Start your peer feedback process with some agreements:

- Be respectful
- Be specific
- Be helpful
- Participate fully

Once agreed, share your photo essay with a partner. After they view and read it, ask them these questions:

- Are you curious to know or to see more? Did the photo essay catch your attention? Why or why not? What would you like to learn more about?



REVISION

Based on the feedback you got from a peer (or two!), work to revise your photo essay.

You might want to return to the “Find Your Story” writing you did and/or play with the way you have organized your photos and/or brainstorm more captions to support the photos.

Here’s a tip: save your original draft and make this a new draft. That way, you can always return to your original or use it for comparison.

TIME TO SHARE

PREPARE TO SHARE

Share locally

Create a gallery of photographs with captions in a local space where others can view and read them. This can happen in the hallway of a school, in a library space, media center, local cafe or bookshop, etc. Online galleries can also be created using virtual spaces like Padlet or storymap.knightlab.com; QR codes can be created that link people to this virtual space.

By sharing your work with your community, you will contribute to local dialogue about things that are important and meaningful to you and your peers.

Share nationally

Share your photo and caption nationally by publishing it to the American Creed Youth Media Challenge platform at KQED Public Media. (Note that the following slides will walk you through this process.)

By sharing your work, it will contribute to a national dialogue about what motivates us to care for our communities and America as a whole.

Considering sharing nationally?

We welcome you to consider publishing your work via the American Creed Youth Media challenge. By publishing here, your work will be eligible to be shared by PBS stations across the country, contributing to national dialogue about what motivates us to care for our communities and America as a whole.



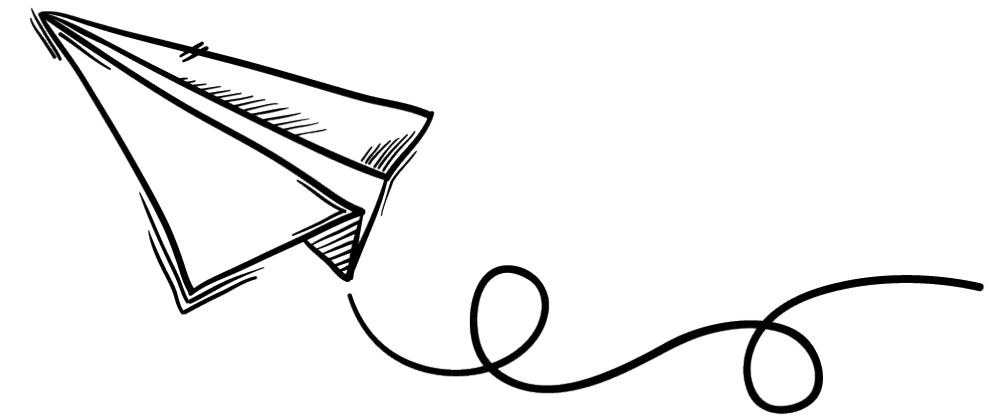
Learn more at <https://youthmedia.kqed.org/americancreed>

PREPARE TO PUBLISH

Get ready to submit your photo essay to the American Creed Youth Media Challenge.

- Ask your teacher for the American Creed Youth Media Challenge submission code.
- Finalize the title of your photo essay. Make the title thematically related and not “schooly;” try to make it uniquely yours.
- Note that the file must be a PDF smaller than 10MB.
- Include up to 3 tags for your project.
- Write a producer’s statement...

WRITE A PRODUCER'S STATEMENT



This will be displayed with your photo essay.

Your reflection doesn't have to be long, but it should answer these questions (and include anything else you want to share):

- Why did you choose your topic?
- What did you learn during this project?
- What do you want people to know about the project and how it relates to your American Creed?

REVIEW THE CHECKLIST



- ☐ Did you ask your teacher for the American Creed Youth Media Challenge submission code?
- ☐ Did you finalize the title of your photo essay? Is it something the public would find interesting?
- ☐ Is the file a PDF and smaller than 10MB?
- ☐ Do you have 3 tags for your project?
- ☐ Do you have your producer's statement ready?

FINAL PROOFREAD



- Since this will be public, you want to make sure it doesn't have any spelling or grammar mistakes.
- Try this: read your writing aloud to yourself. This way, you can find things you missed before.
- Or try this: read sentence by sentence, only backwards! This will help you focus on the line-by-line details.

SUBMIT YOUR PHOTO ESSAY

Start your submission process here:

<https://bit.ly/acsubmit>

AMERICAN CREED



CITIZEN POWER

You did it!

Woot woot!

