

# Immigration to the United States



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LEVEL D-1 • Written by Elfrieda H. Hiebert



**These photos at Ellis Island show immigrants to the United States.**

# A Land of Immigrants

Immigrants are people who leave their home country to live in a new country. Except for American Indians, every U.S. citizen has a family member who was once an immigrant to the United States. Some families have lived in this country for hundreds of years and do not think of themselves as immigrants. Others may be either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants.

People come to the United States from many countries. Many immigrants come looking for new opportunities. While some seek better jobs, others seek opportunity to live their lives as they wish. Living as they wish is an opportunity that people may not have in other countries.

## Key Notes:

**Why do immigrants come to the United States?**

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**Travel on ships to  
the United States was  
difficult for immigrants.**

# Getting to the United States

Until about 50 years ago, most immigrants came to the United States in ships. The conditions on those early ship voyages were difficult, especially for the people who were brought from Africa as slaves. Even for immigrants who chose to come to the United States, though, these voyages could be hard.

Between 1900 and 1920, 13 million immigrants arrived in ships from Europe. Many of these people, especially the poor, traveled in very difficult conditions. Many immigrants could only pay to travel on the bottom decks of ships, which were often crowded and windowless. Today, however, most immigrants to the United States arrive by plane.

## Key Notes:

**What was life like for immigrants who traveled to the United States between 1900 and 1920?**

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Some immigrants from China who were kept at Angel Island carved poetry into the dormitory walls.

# Ellis and Angel Islands

After 1886, the Statue of Liberty greeted ships arriving in New York. Immigrants often cheered when they saw the Statue of Liberty. Many of these immigrants passed through Ellis Island.

First, immigrants were given medical checks to be sure they were well. Some people who were ill were sent back to their home country. People who passed their medical check were questioned about their background. Finally, immigrants were told if they could stay in the United States.

Immigrants who arrived on the West Coast were checked at Angel Island in California. Most of these immigrants came from China. Some were kept at Angel Island for as long as two years.

## Key Notes:

**What was the first thing that happened to immigrants on Ellis and Angel Islands?**

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**Immigrants who have passed the requirements become citizens of the U.S. in an official ceremony.**



# Becoming a U.S. Citizen

Most Americans become citizens by being born in the United States. However, every year more than 700,000 immigrants come to this country. Many come because they want to become U.S. citizens.

Before 1906, people were not required to know English to become U.S. citizens. Since then, laws were changed to require those who want to become citizens to speak, read, and write English. This requirement means many new citizens speak more than one language. People who want to become citizens also must pass a test about the history and laws of the United States. Today, only people who know English and pass this test can become U.S. citizens.

## Key Notes:

**What must immigrants know to become U.S. citizens?**

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