



YES-NO-MAYBE: PRESIDENTIAL APOLOGY FOR THE TUSKEGEE STUDY



Bill Clinton makes public apology for Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

[Source: CDC website](#)

Should actions or words heal the injustices of the past?

Rationale: As students study the Tuskegee Experiment, they learn about the deception involved in the study and the history of government agencies in partaking in unethical human experimentation, particularly with Black American populations. In this lesson, students will learn how to take a stance by answering “yes”, “no” or “maybe” to a statement about the injustices involved in the Tuskegee Experiment and explain their stance. This will enable students to further develop the fundamental habits for respectful listening, engaged dialogue, and peer opinion sharing, which are the foundations of democratic action.

Objectives: Students will reflect on their opinions related to the unethical nature of the Tuskegee Experiment and the feelings of betrayal experienced by the participants involved, as well as those of their family members. Also, students will wrestle with whether a formal apology is enough to heal past government endorsed injustices.

Target Grade Levels: 5-8

Standards:

- **NJSLS-SS.6.1.8.Civics CM.1:** Describe why it is important that individuals assume personal and civic responsibilities in a democratic society.
- **NJSLSA.R8:** Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- **NJSLSA.SL1:** 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.

Focal SEL Skill(s): Social Awareness

- Recognize and identify the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the differences among individuals, groups, and others' cultural backgrounds.

Materials & Resources:

- Signs that indicate “Yes”, “No”, and “Maybe” (posted in corners of the room)
- Pencils
- Highlighters
- Notebook
- Computer with audio & projector for teacher
- Chromebooks/laptops for students to use
- Copies of [Yes-No-Maybe Student Resource](#)
- Video recording: [Bill Clinton Apologizes for Tuskegee Experiment](#)
- Copies of the article "[40 Years of Human Experimentation in America](#)" by Ada McVean, McGill University
- Copies of [Yes-No-Maybe Lesson Reflection](#)

Timing: Two, forty-five minute periods

Lesson Procedure:

Part I: Introduction & Free Write (20 minutes)

1. Present the following statements to the students and have them free write, based on their reactions.

- 1988 - President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which offered every Japanese-American interned in the camps during the war a formal apology and \$20,000 in compensation
- 1993 - Congress apologized to the people of Hawaii for the U.S. government's role in the coup of Hawaii's kingdom in 1893
- 2008 - The House of Representatives formally apologized for slavery and the Jim Crow laws that affected millions of Black Americans and their ancestors for nearly 246 years.

(Source: [Smithsonian Magazine - Five Times the United States Officially Apologized](#))

2. Then, state: ***“Today, we are going to examine your views on the government deception involved in the Tuskegee Experiment and whether words or actions are necessary to heal such an injustice, by engaging in activities with your classmates. We will then explore several statements related to the unethical nature of the Tuskegee Experiment and have the opportunity to take a stance on each.”***
3. Explain that students will first engage in free writing related to the following prompts. First, they will record the statements as they are presented below on their worksheet. Then, given a statement, the students will write a few sentences explaining their thoughts. ***“For each statement, write whatever comes to your mind and do not focus on the structure or conventions. The intent is to help you sort out your thinking.”***
 - ***A: The experiment only became unethical in 1940 when penicillin became the recommended treatment for syphilis and the researchers did not offer it to the study participants.***
 - ***B: Extending lifetime health benefits and monetary compensation to the family members of the Tuskegee Experiment patients absolves the government of its unethical conduct.***
 - ***C: President Clinton’s apology for the Tuskegee Experiment absolves the U.S. government for their involvement.***
 - ***D: The intent of an event is irrelevant when the impact is negative.***

Part II: Yes-No-Maybe Round I (25-30 minutes)

1. Tell students: *“Today, we are going to start learning some skills that you will need, now and as you get older, to be effective and involved citizens of your classrooms, your school, your community, and the wider world. It involves thinking about our own opinion on issues and considering others’ opinions as well.”*
2. Designate 3 separate spaces/areas in the room, one for “Yes”, “No”, and “Maybe”.
3. Tell students: *“I am going to read a sentence and when I am done, you will move to the Yes, No, or Maybe spot of the room depending on if you agree or not (Yes=agree, No=disagree, Maybe=not sure). If you agree and move to ‘Yes’, you have to share one reason why you agree. If you move to ‘No’, you have to say why you do not agree. If you pick ‘Maybe,’ you have to share both something you agree with and something you disagree with about the statement. Then, we will have a spokesperson from each of the areas summarize the main points of your discussion with the whole class.”*
 - *A: The experiment only became unethical in 1940 when penicillin became the recommended treatment for syphilis and the researchers did not offer it to the study participants.*
 - *B: Extending lifetime health benefits and monetary compensation to the family members of the Tuskegee Experiment patients absolves the government of its unethical conduct.*
 - *C: President Clinton’s apology for the Tuskegee Experiment absolves the U.S. government for their involvement.*
 - *D: The intent of an event is irrelevant when the impact is negative.*
4. Have students return to their seats and reflect in their journals: “What surprised you about the activity? Did your opinion(s) change at all? If so, how?”

Part III: Reading about the Tuskegee Experiment and Watching the President’s Apology (20 minutes)

1. Have the students read the article ["40 Years of Human Experimentation in America: The Tuskegee Study"](#). As they are reading, encourage students to annotate the article related to the four statements (either display them on the board or have the students refer to them in their notebooks). Students can annotate by assigning a color for each statement or using the letters they are assigned when writing notes in the margin.

2. Then, in your notebook, respond to: “What is the argument the author is trying to make? What evidence does he have to support the argument?”
3. Next, show the students the clip of the [Bill Clinton Apologizes for Tuskegee Experiment](#) and add to their notes, based on the four statements above.

Part IV: Yes-No-Maybe Round II (10-12 minutes)

1. Tell students: *“I will read the same statements from before, and you will move to the Yes, No, or Maybe spot of the room depending on if you agree or not (Yes = agree, No=disagree, Maybe=not sure). We will briefly share out after each YES-NO-MAYBE round. Then, reflect on this experience when you’re back to your seat.”*

Part V: Reflection & Assessment (5 minutes)

1. In your notebook, please respond to each of the following reflection prompts. (If you prefer for students to have a copy of a the worksheet with reflection questions, please refer to the Materials & Resources section.):
 - **Reflection 1:** Did your responses to any of the prompts change during this round? If you did experience changes, explain why that occurred as best as you can.
 - **Reflection 2:** What did you learn from this activity? Please be specific.
2. As a whole class, debrief how their perspectives have changed from the beginning to the end of the activity.

Formative Assessment: The reflection questions in Part IV can be presented as an “exit slip” or in an interactive format, using Jamboard, Pear Deck. You can also have students create a Flipgrid video presenting their answers orally as another alternative.

Lesson Extension: Select one of the instances from the Smithsonian Magazine’s - Five Times the United States Officially Apologized, other than the Tuskegee Experiment. Assume the role of the wronged, who is receiving the apology. Create a [Flipgrid](#) showcasing your response to the apology.