

# bio. CLASSROOM

## BIO: Barack Obama Classroom Guide



### **Introduction**

*Biography: Barack Obama* traces the life and career of the 44th President of the United States. When he gave an electrifying speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama's political star was clearly on the rise. Over the course of the next four years, Americans became more and more familiar with the U.S. Senator from Illinois as he achieved prominence in the 2008 Presidential election. This one-hour program tells Obama's story, from his birth in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4th, 1961 through his election as President. Along the way, students will learn about Obama's multicultural family history, his educational background, and the approach to leadership that has helped him achieve political success in the U.S. and worldwide.

Through interviews with President Obama's close advisors, friends, and political associates, viewers gain new perspectives on his background and leadership style. Throughout his political career, Obama has spoken about his uniquely American story; this program provides personal insights into how his family, education, and other experiences have shaped his dedication to public service. *Biography: Barack Obama* gives students a compelling visual companion and narrative through which to learn more about Obama as a man and a leader, and to reflect upon the significance of his Presidency in the United States and throughout the world.

### **Objectives and Curriculum Links**

This biography of Barack Obama is appropriate for middle school through college-age students. It is appropriate for history, social studies, current events, American culture, journalism and government courses.

## Vocabulary

Using a dictionary ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)) or an encyclopedia, students may want to define or explain the significance of the following terms from this program:

- Advocate
- Apartheid
- Charisma
- Constituents
- Creed
- Disparate
- Epicenter
- Incumbent
- Lucrative
- Rigorous
- Unequivocal
- Unprecedented

## Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Barack Obama's mother, Anne, shaped his values from an early age? Who or what were some other early influences on his life?
2. What was Obama's family background and history? Why do you think his multiple ethnicities caused him some confusion when he was young? Is this an experience many Americans share? Discuss.
3. Why did Obama feel the study of law would help him better address some of the problems he saw while working as a community organizer in South Chicago?
4. How did Obama's trip to Kenya in 1988 help understand the connection he had with his father?
5. Why was Obama's election as president of the Harvard Law Review a significant event in his life? How do you think his election to this role influenced his career decisions?
6. What hard political lessons did Obama learn as a state senator and during his campaign for Congress in 2000? Why do you think he decided to continue to pursue a career in politics despite the challenges he faced?
7. Political commentator Cokie Roberts observed that in politics "You're better off being lucky than smart and Barack Obama seemed to be both." How did Obama's run for the U.S. Senate and his speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention seem to prove this?
8. What were some of the reasons Obama felt the time was right to run for President in the 2008 election? What were some of the arguments people made for and against this decision? What were the risks?
9. What are some specific examples of how Obama was able to build a successful presidential campaign? What role did his campaign's use of new technology play in his success?
10. How, in different ways, did the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries prove pivotal in Obama's quest to obtain the Democratic Party's presidential nomination?
11. In your view, what did Barack Obama bring to the presidential campaign that overshadowed his opponents? What do you think will be his key political achievements and challenges as President?

## Primary Source Analysis

Barack Obama was officially sworn in as 44th President of the United States on January 20th, 2009 in Washington, D.C. In his inaugural address, Obama outlined his understanding of the most important tasks facing the nation in the context of its history and current political realities. The excerpt below is one section of Obama's speech.

Students should read this portion of the speech carefully, either on their own or out loud. Then, they can have a discussion of this passage in small or large groups.

"Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends -- hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism -- these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility -- a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task." - President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address [excerpt], January 20th, 2009

1. What do you think Obama means when he calls certain values "the quiet force of progress"? Which of these values do you think are most important, and why?
2. President Obama noted that Americans faced a "new era of responsibility." Why do you think his words and vision have connected with so many Americans during this era?
3. Obama was elected in 2008; how do you think people will explain this time period 100 years from now? How do you think this time period is similar to or different from other eras in American history?

### **Extended Activities**

#### **1. The Power of Words**

President Obama, like many influential leaders, has been praised for his effective speeches and writings. Online or at the library, ask students to locate a passage from one of his books or speeches that they find meaningful. Then, ask students to write a short 1-2 page paper describing this passage, the context in which it was written, and why they think it is a significant selection from Obama's words or writings.

#### **2. Dear Mr. President**

This documentary describes the connection many Americans feel to President Obama and the priorities he has set for the United States. Ask students to imagine they were able to interview President Obama. What are five key questions they would ask him, and why? Have students write up these questions and an explanation in a short paper. Alternately, ask students to write a letter to Obama or another world leader describing an issue of importance to them.

#### **3. A Call to Serve**

Stemming from his personal commitment to service, President Obama has asked all Americans who are able to contribute to our civic culture through service and volunteering. The website [www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov) has been established to allow Americans to search for volunteer opportunities and share information about the work they are doing. Ask students to visit this site and start by reading the Fact Statement about the effort. Then, ask students to choose an organization or issue that is important to them. Students can explore volunteer opportunities in their area and get involved. For a one-class activity, ask students to write an op-ed about an issue of their choice, or to design a poster or PSA based on this issue.

### **Websites**

**History.com on Barack Obama in the context of African American history:**

<http://www.history.com/content/blackhistory>

**Biography.com on Barack Obama**

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Barack-Obama-12782369?part=1>

**The official White House site:**

<http://www.whitehouse.gov>

**Barack Obama on MySpace:**

<http://www.myspace.com/barackobama>

### **Books**

Edwards, Roberta. Barack Obama: an American Story (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2008)

Obama, Barack. Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance (New York: Random House, 1995)

Obama, Barack. The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream (New York: Random House, 2006)

Obama, Barack. Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise (Three Rivers Press, Random House, 2008)