

# What Does It Mean to Be a Good Citizen?

**Subject:** Civics / Government

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Time Required:** 30–45 minutes

**Lesson Type:** Scenario analysis, discussion, written justification

**Materials Needed:**

- Student worksheet or notebook
- Whiteboard or projector (optional)

## Lesson Overview

Citizenship is often simplified as “voting” or “following the law,” but in reality it involves a **complex mix of responsibilities, participation, respect for others, and engagement with the community.**

In this lesson, students analyze a series of realistic scenarios involving individuals who demonstrate **some elements of good citizenship, but not others.** Students must decide whether each person should be considered a “good citizen” and, more importantly, **justify their reasoning using civic principles.**

There are no clear-cut answers—only defensible arguments.

## Essential Question

**What responsibilities and behaviors define good citizenship in a democratic society?**

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify multiple dimensions of citizenship (legal, political, social, and ethical)
- Evaluate civic behavior using evidence and reasoning
- Distinguish between personal choices and civic responsibility
- Defend an argument using civic principles rather than opinion alone
- Recognize that citizenship exists on a spectrum, not as a simple label

## Key Civic Concepts

- Civic responsibility
- Political participation
- Rule of law
- Community engagement
- Individual rights vs. social obligations

## Student Directions

For each scenario below:

1. Decide whether the individual demonstrates **good citizenship**, **poor citizenship**, or **mixed citizenship**
2. Explain **why**, using civic principles (not personal approval or disapproval)

There is **no single correct answer**—your grade is based on the **quality of your reasoning**.

# Scenario Analysis

## Scenario 1: Beth

Beth works full time at a local daycare. The pay is modest, but she receives discounted childcare for her two young children. She volunteers regularly at a neighborhood food pantry. Beth is not registered to vote and has never voted in an election.

### Question:

Does Beth demonstrate good citizenship? Why or why not?

## Scenario 2: Mark

Mark is a high school teacher who sponsors an academic club. In his free time, he enjoys gardening and attending hobby conventions related to his personal interests. When a proposed law affecting one of those interests was introduced, Mark helped organize and participate in a peaceful protest at the state capitol.

### Question:

Is Mark acting as a good citizen? Why?

## Scenario 3: Janet

Janet left school at an early age and currently receives government assistance. She follows political issues closely, is registered to vote, and participates in every election. She also attends rallies and supports causes she believes in.

### Question:

Does Janet demonstrate good citizenship? Why or why not?

## Scenario 4: Bill

Bill lives a largely self-sufficient lifestyle on a rural property. He minimizes contact with modern institutions and avoids participation in politics, media, and community events. He follows the law but chooses not to engage with civic life.

### Question:

Can someone be a good citizen while remaining disengaged? Explain.

### **Scenario 5: Suzie**

Suzie is a high school student who earns strong grades. However, she frequently ignores school rules she disagrees with, including dress code and technology policies, and openly challenges authority without using established channels for change.

**Question:**

Is Suzie demonstrating responsible citizenship? Why or why not?

### **Scenario 6: Ray**

Ray works informal jobs for cash and avoids long-term employment. He meets his basic needs and participates in every election, but does not consistently meet his financial obligations to others.

**Question:**

How do personal responsibility and civic participation factor into citizenship?

### **Scenario 7: Barbara**

Barbara owns a small personal-care business. Due to financial strain, she has delayed required tax payments and made questionable cost-cutting decisions that may affect public health regulations.

**Question:**

How does compliance with laws factor into good citizenship, especially during financial hardship?

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## Discussion Questions (Whole Class or Small Group)

- Is voting the most important responsibility of a citizen? Why or why not?
  - Can someone be a “good citizen” without participating politically?
  - Should good intentions matter if laws or responsibilities are ignored?
  - Is citizenship more about **actions**, **beliefs**, or **participation**?
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## Assessment Options

- Written responses to all scenarios
  - Small-group discussion with report-out
  - Exit ticket: “*One quality I now believe is essential to good citizenship*”
  - Short essay: “*Is good citizenship a checklist or a balance?*”
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## Teacher Notes

- Encourage students to avoid labeling people as “good” or “bad”
  - Push students to use **civic principles**, not personal values alone
  - Expect disagreement—and emphasize respectful reasoning
  - This lesson works well as:
    - An introduction to citizenship
    - A bridge to voting, civil disobedience, or rule of law
    - A discussion-based assessment
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## Why This Lesson Works

- Challenges simplistic definitions of citizenship
- Reveals hidden assumptions students hold
- Encourages empathy without excusing behavior
- Promotes higher-order civic reasoning