

# **International Trade: Does the United States Need the World?**

## **Lesson Overview**

### **Essential Question:**

*Does the United States need the rest of the world to function economically?*

Many Americans assume the United States could be economically self-sufficient if it chose to be. In this lesson, students examine real-world U.S. import and export data to explore the realities of international trade, specialization, and global interdependence.

By analyzing what the United States sells to the world and what it buys in return, students evaluate whether economic independence is realistic—or even desirable.

## **Grade Level**

- 8–12
- Best suited for:
  - Civics
  - Government
  - Economics
  - World History
  - AP Government / AP Economics

## **Estimated Time**

- One 50–90 minute class period  
*(Can be extended into a writing or debate activity)*

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- Identify major U.S. imports and exports
- Analyze patterns in trade data
- Explain why nations specialize in certain goods
- Evaluate arguments for and against economic self-sufficiency
- Support conclusions using real-world evidence

# **Top U.S. Exports and Imports (Current Examples)**

## **us Major U.S. Exports**

- **Oil Drilling & Gas Extraction**  
Crude oil and natural gas (\$177B+)
- **Aircraft, Engines, & Parts Manufacturing**  
Commercial and defense aerospace (\$144B+)
- **Petroleum Refining**  
Gasoline, diesel, and jet fuel (\$118B+)
- **Industrial Machinery**  
Computers, boilers, and factory equipment
- **Pharmaceuticals & Biotechnology**  
Vaccines, blood products, and medications (\$92B+)
- **Electrical Equipment & Electronics**  
Computer chips and telecommunications equipment
- **Motor Vehicles & Parts**  
Passenger cars and automotive components
- **Medical Equipment**  
Precision instruments and medical tools
- **Plastics & Polymer Materials**  
Plastic sheets and resins
- **Agricultural Products**  
Soybeans and other food products

## **Major U.S. Imports**

- **Machinery, Nuclear Reactors, and Boilers (\$531B+)**  
Computers, hardware, and industrial machinery
- **Electrical Machinery and Equipment (\$485B+)**  
Smartphones, semiconductors, and household electronics
- **Vehicles, Parts, and Accessories (\$391B+)**  
Automobiles and automotive components
- **Mineral Fuels, Oil, and Distillation Products (\$251B+)**  
Crude oil, petroleum, and gasoline
- **Pharmaceutical Products (\$212B+)**  
Vaccines, medicines, and specialized drugs
- **Medical and Technical Apparatus (\$118B+)**  
Optical, surgical, and medical tools
- **Gems and Precious Metals (~\$90B)**  
Jewelry, diamonds, and gold
- **Plastics and Plastic Articles (~\$72B)**  
Packaging and manufacturing materials
- **Furniture, Bedding, and Lighting (~\$69B)**  
Mattresses, furniture, and lamps
- **Organic Chemicals**  
Specialized chemical products

# Lesson Structure

## 1 Opening Question (Whole Class)

Ask students:

**Could the United States survive economically without the rest of the world?**

- Quick poll or show of hands
- Brief discussion
- Encourage students to explain *why* they think yes or no

Do **not** correct answers yet.

## 2 Data Exploration: Imports vs. Exports

Provide students with the import/export lists.

As a class, clarify:

- What exports are (goods we sell)
- What imports are (goods we buy)

Students work individually or in pairs to:

- Highlight similarities
- Circle surprising items
- Note repeated categories (oil, machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals)

## 3 Guided Analysis Questions (Small Groups or Pairs)

Students discuss and record responses to the following:

### Question 1

**Generally, what is the difference between what we import and what we export?**

Encourage students to consider:

- Raw materials vs. finished goods
- High-tech vs. consumer goods
- Specialization

### Question 2

**Can we make the things we import?**

- If **yes**, why don't we?
- If **no**, why can't we?

Push students to think about:

- Cost of labor
- Access to resources
- Technology
- Environmental regulations
- Efficiency and specialization

### Question 3

**Some items appear on both the import and export lists. Why do you think this happens?**

Guide students toward:

- Different types or qualities of products
- Global supply chains
- Parts vs. finished products
- Regional specialization

### **Class Discussion & Synthesis**

Bring the class back together.

As students share, highlight:

- Interdependence
- Trade-offs
- Why “self-sufficiency” is more complicated than it sounds

Optional board activity:

- T-chart: *Benefits of Trade vs. Costs of Trade*

### **Written Response (Assessment)**

**Prompt:**

*Based on the import and export data and today’s discussion, does the United States need the rest of the world economically? Defend your answer using evidence from the trade lists and class discussion.*

**Suggested Requirements:**

- Clear claim
- At least two examples from the data
- Explanation of reasoning

## **Assessment Options**

### **Formative**

- Participation in group discussion
- Completion of analysis questions
- Exit ticket: *One reason trade is necessary*

### **Summative**

- Written response
- Short essay
- Debate or presentation
- Portfolio / scrapbook reflection

## **Differentiation & Extensions**

### **Extensions**

- Compare U.S. trade to another country
- Research one imported product's supply chain
- Debate: *Should the U.S. bring manufacturing back home?*
- Analyze tariffs and trade wars

### **Differentiation**

- Sentence starters
- Reduced data sets
- Guided notes
- Visual organizers