



## James Buchanan | Lesson Plan

How did James Buchanan's presidency impact the United States before the Civil War?

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Students will understand the key events and decisions of James Buchanan's presidency and how they contributed to the increasing tensions that led to the Civil War. They will also understand Buchanan's role as a leader during one of the most critical and divisive times in American history.

### Learning Objectives:

- Identify the key life events of James Buchanan.
- Explain how James Buchanan's policies and decisions contributed to the rising tensions between the North and South before the Civil War.
- Analyze the decisions and actions of James Buchanan during his presidency and evaluate their impact on the increasing tensions leading up to the Civil War.
- Evaluate James Buchanan's leadership skills and decisions, considering why many historians regard him as one of the least successful U.S. presidents.

### Key Vocabulary:

- **Doughface:** A Northern politician who supported Southern pro-slavery policies.
- **Dred Scott v. Sandford:** A landmark Supreme Court case that ruled African-Americans were not entitled to U.S. citizenship rights.
- **Secede:** To leave an organization or government.
- **States' Rights:** The political powers held by individual U.S. states rather than by the federal government.
- **Abolitionist:** A person who wants to stop or abolish slavery.

**Educational Standards:** CCRA.R.7, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.9, CCRA.L.1, CCRA.L.2, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2

**Academic Subject Areas:** History, Biography, U.S. Presidents

### What You'll Need

- Video: *Guess or Mess: James Buchanan* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Guess or Mess: James Buchanan* (Click [Here](#))
- PragerU Kids biographical book: *James Buchanan* (Download [Here](#))
- Large paper or poster board for each group, along with markers

### Lesson Plan: Watch and Complete (45 minutes)

**Introduction to Buchanan:** (5 minutes)



1. Begin with a brief discussion about U.S. presidents who faced significant challenges before the Civil War. Ask students what they think makes a president successful or unsuccessful during challenging times.
2. Display the *James Buchanan* digital book using an electronic device. Briefly highlight Buchanan's significance as the 15th president and his role in the years leading up to the Civil War. Show images from the digital book to give a visual overview of his life and presidency.

**Buchanan History Huddle:** (25 minutes)

1. Read the "Meet James Buchanan" section on page 2 together as a class, with the teacher leading this page to model fluent reading and set the tone for the lesson.
2. After completing the teacher-led reading, explain that students will now explore other key aspects of Buchanan's life in small groups.
3. Split the class into small groups and assign each group a different section of the digital book to explore:
  - Group 1: *Young James, Interesting Facts* (page 3)
  - Group 2: *Early Career, Bachelor for Life* (page 4)
  - Group 3: *A Loyal Jacksonian, Rise to Power* (page 5)
  - Group 4: *1856 Presidential Election, President* (page 6)
  - Group 5: *The Nation Splits Apart* (page 7)
  - Group 6: *Retirement, Legacy* (pages 8-9)
4. Allow time for each group to read their assigned section, taking turns reading aloud. As students read, they should discuss the main ideas.
5. Provide each group with a large piece of paper or a poster board and markers to write down key points, interesting facts, or quotes they find.
6. Allow each group one to two minutes to present their findings to the class. After each presentation, provide time for classmates to ask questions and discuss the content.

**Worksheet Workshop:** (15 minutes)

1. Hand out individual copies of the worksheet to each student. Explain how to fill out each section of the worksheet with these instructions:
2. **Timeline:** Students should select key dates and events mentioned throughout the digital book. The following are recommendations, but the teacher and students can use many other dates mentioned in the book:
  - 1791 - Birth of James Buchanan
  - 1832 - Appointed U.S. Minister to Russia
  - 1857-1861 - Presidency
  - 1868 - Death of James Buchanan
3. **Interesting Quote:** Have students choose a meaningful quote from the book to fill in the quote section on their worksheet.
4. **Interesting Fact:** Ask students to select an interesting fact about James Buchanan that stood out to them and write it in the space provided.

5. **Vocabulary Builder:** Instruct students to choose a word from the Glossary on page 13 that they find interesting and use it in a sentence that conveys its meaning.
6. **Multiple Choice:** Explain that students should complete the multiple-choice section of the worksheet individually. (Note: The multiple-choice section corresponds to the *Guess or Mess* episode about James Buchanan and can also be used to play along while watching. See “Extension Activity” below.)

**Reflection Round-Up:** (10 minutes)

1. Briefly summarize the key points covered about James Buchanan, focusing on his life, presidency, and legacy.
2. **Think-Pair-Share:** Ask students to recall one fact about James Buchanan and share it with a partner. Encourage them to discuss why that fact was significant.
3. Give each student a sticky note or index card and ask them to answer one of these three sample reflection questions:
  - What did you find most interesting about James Buchanan?
  - How do you think his presidency impacted the United States?
  - Can you think of a modern issue that relates to something Buchanan dealt with?
4. **Bonus Activities:** If time allows, allow students to complete the puzzle on page 2 by finding hidden letters throughout the book. They can also explore and engage with the other interactive activities included in the book.

**Extension Activity:** (20 minutes)

*Guess or Mess* Trivia Show: After the lesson, students can participate in the *Guess or Mess* trivia show for James Buchanan—direct students to the multiple-choice section of the worksheet. Students can play along with the contestants to see if they can answer the trivia questions correctly.

**Don't have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (30 minutes)**

Read the *James Buchanan* book together as a class, with students taking turns reading aloud. Then, watch the *Guess or Mess* video and play along with the trivia questions.