

Educator Guide: The Battle Over Gun Control

Produced in collaboration with the [National Writing Project](http://www.nwp.org/) as part of the Newsroom to Classroom initiative.

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Gun control is among the most divisive issues in American politics today. For many, it boils down to a basic debate over priorities: the constitutional right to bear arms and protect oneself vs. an effort to reduce violence. The U.S. has the highest gun ownership rate in the world and the highest gun violence rate of any wealthy nation. It also has some of the loosest gun control laws. The issue took center stage in December, when a lone gunman entered an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., killing 20 children and six adults in one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history. Yet, months down the line, the issue remains highly controversial: an attempt to enact moderate new gun control measures this spring was voted down in the Senate, due in part to the powerful political influence of gun rights groups like the National Rifle Association.



Courtesy of Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

A list of relevant ELA and Social Studies anchor standards addressed by this topic.

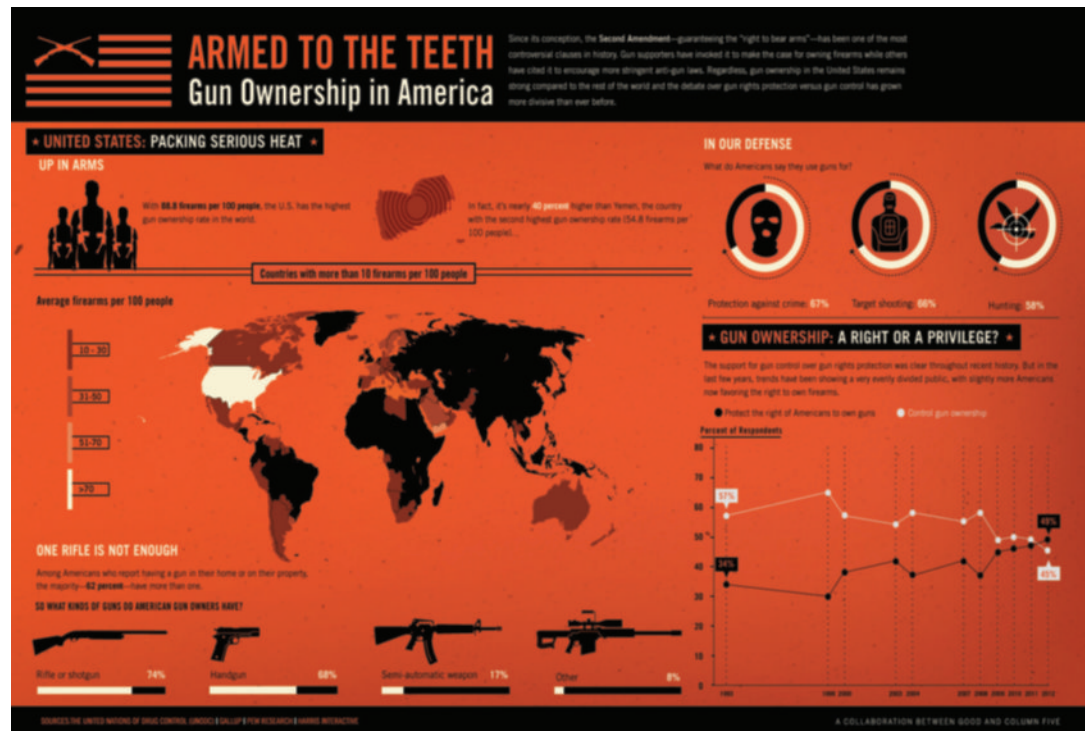
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.7 Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

Key points on the gun control issue, summarized from posts on [The Lowdown](#) blog.

- Interpreting the intent of the framers of the Constitution is at the heart of the gun control debate. The Second Amendment states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Gun rights advocates argue this clearly guarantees the universal right to bear arms. Gun control advocates, however, say it is a conditional right that should be strictly regulated in the interest of public safety.
- In 2010, there were roughly 31,670 gun-related deaths in the U.S. Close to 11,100 were homicides (35%) and about 19,400 (61%) were suicides.
- In the last 30 years, there have been at least 62 mass shootings in 30 states. 25 have occurred since 2006.
- The National Rifle Association was created after the Civil War, in part, to improve American marksmanship skills. It was not until the 1970s that it began to actively oppose most gun control attempts as attacks on civil liberties. Currently, the NRA has more than 4 million members.
- At various points since the 1930s, Congress has enacted a variety of gun control regulations, including licensing, restrictions on certain types of firearms and prohibiting convicted felons from owning guns. In 1972, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms was created to enforce these laws.
- One of the biggest loopholes in federal gun control laws is background check provision: only licensed gun dealers are currently required to conduct instant background checks. However, the checks aren't required at gun shows and other private sales, where about 40 percent of guns are purchased.

- Gun control laws vary widely from state to state. Some states have much stricter rules in place than their neighbors do, and many buyers travel to states with looser regulations to acquire firearms.
- In 2010, seven out of 10 states with the strictest regulations also had that lowest gun homicide rates. However, certain states with loose gun regulations - like Maine - also have among the lowest gun homicide rates in the country.



Good Magazine

- A number of mass shootings in public settings, including schools and movie theatres, have historically revived the gun control debate. A 1989 school shooting in Stockton, Calif. spurred the state to pass the strictest set of gun laws in the country. It included legislation restricting the sale and use of assault rifles.
- Last December's mass shooting in Newtown, Conn., one of the deadliest in U.S. history, prompted President Obama to call for federal legislation prohibiting the sale of certain semiautomatic rifles and high-capacity magazines, and requiring background checks for all gun buyers. Nearly four months later, after intense lobbying by gun rights groups, the Senate voted on a more moderate piece of legislation. It was narrowly defeated, preserving the status quo.

MULTIMEDIA TEACHING RESOURCES

A list of topical multimedia resources featured on *The Lowdown*:



- [Gun Control in America: The History, The Issues and One Controversial Cartoon](#): Includes an interactive timeline of events, an Associated Press interactive fact sheet and a satirical cartoon.
- [Geography of Gun Homicides](#): A state-by-state look at gun homicides in 2010. Includes interactive map.
- [The Loose Laws and Loopholes of Federal Gun Regulations](#): Includes videos.
- [Are States With Tough Gun Laws Actually Safer?](#): A side-by-side comparison of state gun laws and corresponding gun crime rates. Includes interactive chart, videos, and maps.
- [U.S. Gun Homicides: Visualizing the Numbers](#): Key statistics on the high rate of gun deaths in the U.S. Includes interactive charts, videos and maps.
- [America's Mass Shooting Dilemma](#): A history of mass shootings. Includes interactive map and link to [timeline](#).
- [The United States of Firearms](#): America's Love of the Gun: Gun ownership stats. Includes maps and an infographic.
- [How Come No One's Talking About Gun Control This Election?](#): A look at the 2012 presidential election, and the lack of discussion of an issue that would soon thereafter take center stage. Includes an interactive map of state gun sales.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Are rules and guidelines that were created over 200 years ago still applicable today?
- When a greater number of people in our society own guns, are we a safer or more at risk?
- Should the federal government be able to dictate gun laws in individual states?
- How accurate is this statement: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

FOCUS QUESTIONS (USE THE LOWDOWN)

- Which states have the highest and lowest gun homicide rates?
- How do gun laws differ in states like California and Arizona?
- Where is it legal for adults to carry concealed weapons?
- What does the federal background check loophole refer to?
- How do gun ownership rates in America compare to other nations?
- Which states have the strictest/loosest gun laws?
- On what grounds did the U.S. Supreme Court strike down Washington D.C.'s handgun ban?



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

PRO/CON SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

The [Common Core](#) places special emphasis on argumentative writing: “The ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards, with opinion writing - a basic form of argument - extending down into the earliest grades.”

The following is a list of key pro and con positions on a variety of gun control issues. Pose these positions to small groups of students and ask each group to argue the pro stance or con stance. Allow them to research the issue using content from *The Lowdown*, and respond through classroom debate, via a web-based class discussion website or in a persuasive essay.



Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

- **Statement 1: More guns lead to more violence.**

Pro: Regions with higher gun ownership rates have a greater prevalence of gun homicides.

Con: In recent years overall gun violence in the U.S. has decreased even as gun ownership has increased.

- **Statement 2: Gun ownership is an individual right guaranteed by the Second Amendment.**

Pro: It is spelled out clearly and literally in the Second Amendment that “the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

Con: The Second Amendment was written by the founders over 200 years ago, during a very different period of time (it states, for instance, that “a well regulated militia [is] necessary to the security of a free state”). It is therefore ridiculous to continue interpreting it literally.

- **Statement 3: Carrying a concealed weapon increases your safety.**

Pro: Criminals will be less likely to attack if they think someone is armed. And carrying a firearm allows people to directly protect themselves without having to rely on the help of others.

Con: Numerous studies show that more guns lead to more crimes as well as more unintended gun injuries.

Additional pro/con resources:

Procon.org's [Concealed Gun arguments](#)

[EBSCO Host's gun control resources](#)

INTERPRETING CHARTS AND INFOGRAPHICS

Suggestions for informational writing and understanding.

A. Infographic Analysis: [Armed to the Teeth](#)

Select one section of this infographic to analyze. What conclusion can you draw from the information in that section? What question can you ask after considering the information? Collect this information on a shared document. Use the questions as a way to generate research questions. Have students find their own infographics on the web and assess them for credibility, bias, and craft.

B. Chart Analysis: [Geography of U.S. Gun Homicide](#)

The chart states that California has the highest number of gun related homicides, but the strictest gun control laws. What are the possible reasons for this? Why do you think the graph differentiates between “firearm murders as a % of all murders” and “firearm murders per 100,000 population”?

CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS

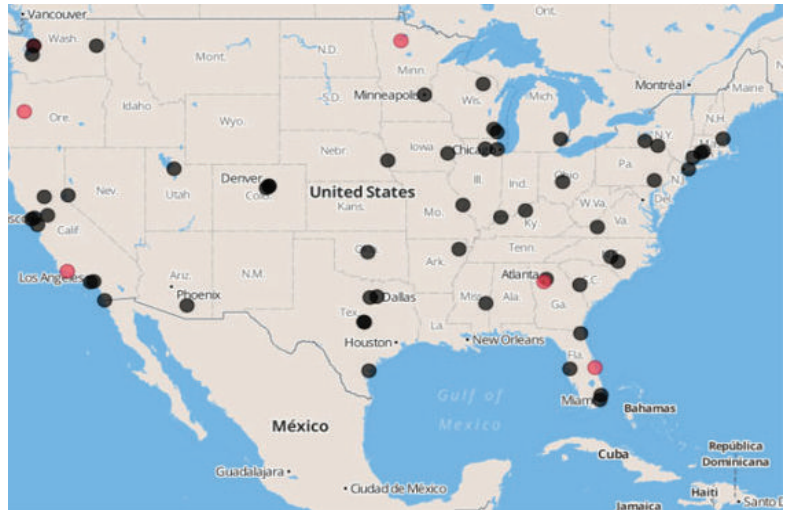
A. Write and perform a spoken word poem from the perspective of someone who has experienced gun violence.

B. Choose one issue within the gun control debate and write a one-act play that illustrates the complexity of this issue.

C. Write a story or poem from the point of view of a firearm used during a historical or current event (i.e. the American Revolution, WWII, a gang drive-by shooting).

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- **Argumentative Writing:** After reading the article, [Lawmakers Debate Guns in Schools Proposals](#) address the following prompt. Why do some people think that arming school staff with guns will make students safer? Do you agree with them? To strengthen your argument use your observations and experiences, or information from any of your reading.
- **Collaborative research:** Writing Standard 6 of the Common Core states that students should “use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.” Have students create artifacts of their collaborations using social bookmarking sites like [Diigo](#) or [Delicious](#) or through the curation of collections on [Gooru Learning](#). To see how one classroom teacher set this up, [visit the following entry on Chris Sloan’s website](#).
- **Creating Infographics:** Once students have explored the issue, allow them to pick one aspect of the issue to present visually. They can use free online programs to create their own infographic to present data. Use [Kathy Schrock’s Infographic Guide](#) for help! To see how a classroom teacher sets this up, visit [Kirsten Spall’s Infographic Assignment website](#).
- **RSA Video:** Have students use a whiteboard, markers, and cell phones to make their own RSA video to present one side of the gun control debate. See the [Natomas Charter School Technology blog](#) to see one teacher’s experience with this genre or Paul Bogush’s feature article on the National Writing Project’s [website](#).
- **Letter to an Elected Official:** Practice argumentative writing skills by having students draft letters to their elected officials articulating their point of view on the issue. Here’s a link to [a description of the lesson plan](#) and [accompanying resources](#).



Mass shooting map (Mother Jones)

BROADER CONNECTIONS

Suggestions for using this topic to connect with other teachers and students

- Have students respond to the [KQED Do Now](#) activity or have them respond to other students by including links to articles that either support or disprove their arguments.
- [Use Google Hangout](#) to debate the issue with students in other schools. It allows video conferencing, document sharing, and chatting with multiple users.
- Have your class develop a poll to gauge what students in your district think about the idea of staff members carrying concealed weapons.
- Share with your colleagues! [Learn how this activity inspired a science teacher](#) to use Twitter to transform his students into citizen scientists!

Suggestions for using Twitter in the classroom

- Check in with your administration team before going ahead. Be transparent.
- Check in with your Technology Coordinator to make sure that Twitter isn’t blocked. We ran into this and got it unlocked after explaining the assignment. Students also figured out that they could work around the school’s filter by using their personal devices.
- Think about asking your students to create a school Twitter account. That way, their personal tweets do not show up on your feed! It is a great opportunity to discuss audience with your classes!
- Caution students about posting content on controversial issues, and the possibility of strong reactions.