

## Writing a New National Anthem by Lisa O'Neill

**Grade levels:** 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

**Materials:** All you need for this exercise are several pieces of paper and something to write with. And, of course, your imagination.

**Summary:** This lesson continues with our writing around the election. The announcement has been made that Joe Biden will be the next President of the United States and Kamala Harris will be the next Vice President—and the first woman, Black, and Indian-American person to hold that office. Following with the reading and writing we've been doing about America the last few weeks, today we are going to read and consider the poem "[A New National Anthem](#)" by poet Ada Limón.

An anthem is defined as: a rousing or uplifting song identified with a particular group, body, or cause. A national anthem is a song identified with a particular country. "The Star-Spangled Banner" was written by Francis Scott Key in 1814 and added to a melody by John Stafford Smith from 1773. It was adopted as the United States national anthem on March 3, 1931.

Today, we're going to consider what *YOU* want your national anthem to say. We're going to look at the national anthem, and Ada Limón's poem and then do some writing!

**Step 1:** Read through the lyrics of our current national anthem and answer the questions after. Also, if there are words you don't know, circle them and ask your teachers!

### The Star-Spangled Banner

**Write notes here:**

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight  
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,  
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep  
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,  
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,  
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?  
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,  
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream,  
'Tis the star-spangled banner - O long may it wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion  
A home and a Country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,

And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand  
Between their lov'd home and the war's desolation!  
Blest with vict'ry and peace may the heav'n rescued land  
Praise the power that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!  
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,  
And this be our motto - "In God is our trust,"  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

**Response Questions:**

**What are the lines that stand out to you most/why?**

**Have you ever heard the other verses here that aren't usually sung before? What do those verses tell us?**

**How is this song trying to portray the United States? What is it trying to say about what the country is and stands for?**

**Do you agree with how the country is represented? How or how not?**

**Are there things missing about the country that should be in an anthem for the United States? Explain.**

**Step 2:** Watch [Whitney Houston singing the national anthem.](#)

**Does watching her version add anything to your understanding of or your feeling about the song? Explain/explore.**

**Step 3:** [Listen to Ada Limón read her poem “An New National Anthem.”](#) Then print out and [read the text of the poem](#). As you read, underline words that stand out to you and write notes next to the poem on the left about what you think she means. Then answer the questions on the following page.

Vocabulary definitions:

\* tenacious = not readily relinquishing a position, principle, or course of action; determined.

\*\*hireling = a person employed to undertake menial work

\*\*\*sustenance = nourishment; food and drink regarded as a source of strength

**Response questions:**

**What is the poet’s opinion of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and how do we know (what are examples of language from her poem that tell us this)?**

**What do you think she means by these lines?**

“And what of the stanzas  
we never sing, the third that mentions ‘no refuge  
could save the hireling and the slave’? Perhaps  
the truth is that every song of this country  
has an unsung third stanza, something brutal  
snaking underneath us as we blindly sing  
the high notes with a beer sloshing in the stands  
hoping our team wins.”

**What does she like about the flag? When does she like it most?**

**She uses many images throughout the poem to contribute to her meaning. What do these images mean to you?**

“something brutal snaking underneath us” =

“until the song in your mouth feels like sustenance” =

“(a song) that sounds like someone’s rough fingers weaving into another’s” =

“(a song) that sounds like a match being lit in an endless cave” =

“the song that says my bones are your bones, and your bones are my bones, and isn’t that enough?” =

**Overall, what do you think she’s trying to say in this poem (there are many possible answers here)?**

**Step 5: LET’S WRITE!** For this prompt, you have a few options. **Choose one!**

- 1) Write a new national anthem for this country. Write a song that communicates what you want this country to stand for. For this writing exercise, you might try rhyming because this is something that is traditionally done in lyrics. If you want, you could first brainstorm all the things you want the country to stand for before you start writing. OR if you have an idea you can begin.
- 2) Write about how you would approach writing a new national anthem. What would be important for you in writing a new anthem? What would you want to include? Whose voices would you want to be represented? What would it mean to redefine the anthem for the country?

