

COMING TO AMERICA

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

English Language Arts B.4.1 – Create or produce writing to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

- Write expressive pieces in response to reading, viewing, and life experiences (narratives, reflections, and letters) employing descriptive detail and a personal voice.

For many immigrants, just the process of getting to America was an enormous undertaking. Travel was expensive, so families saved long and hard to be able to buy a ticket. Sometimes, families would come in waves, meaning that someone – the father or older children – would leave first. After settling themselves in America and finding a job, they would save as much money as they could, sending it back home so that the rest of the family could come and join them.

Immigrants usually traveled in the steerage of the ship. The steerage was located in the deepest part of the ship, where it was dark and foul-smelling because there was no fresh air. In the steerage, immigrants slept in narrow bunks stacked three high. There were no showers or even a table off which to eat. Instead, food was served from huge kettles. Each family was issued a dinner pail out of which everyone ate.

Close your eyes and imagine that you are traveling to your new home in America in the ship's steerage. Though it is the middle of the day, you are stuck in the dark hold of the ship because it is raining outside. Feel the motion of the ship as it crashes over the waves. It is dark and you cannot see to play. With all of the other immigrant passengers also stuck down there with you, there is little room to move around. Smell the stench of more than one hundred people who haven't bathed in weeks crowded around you. There is also the strong odor of the chamber pots, your "indoor bathrooms." Babies are screaming, hungry and restless. Next to you, someone coughs a rattling cough – he has become ill during the journey.

Write a journal entry describing a scene in the steerage. Use your five senses – sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound – to explain your experience of the journey. Using descriptive words, write a letter to a friend back home telling him or her what it is like to be on the ship.