

# MUHAMMAD ALI

## ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

### OBJECTIVE

Students will research and analyze how sports legend Muhammad Ali was an advocate for social change, then write an evidence-based essay.

### TIME

50–60 minutes  
(with additional time for writing assignment)

### MATERIALS

- The film *What's My Name: Muhammad Ali* at [hbo.com/classrooms/whats-my-name-muhammad-ali](http://hbo.com/classrooms/whats-my-name-muhammad-ali)
- Advocate for Change activity sheet

### STANDARDS

#### C3 Framework

(Civics and Social Studies)

Grades 7–8

D1.1.6–8

D2.Civ.2.6–8

D2.Civ.10.6–8

D2.Civ.14.6–8

D2.His.1.6–8

D2.His.4.6–8

D4.7.6–8

Grades 9–12

D1.1.9–12

D2.Civ.2.9–12

D2.Civ.10.9–12

D2.Civ.14.9–12

D2.His.1.9–12

D2.His.4.9–12

D4.7.9–12

#### CCSS ELA-Literacy

W.7.1

W.7.2

W.9–10.1

W.9–10.2

W.11–12.1

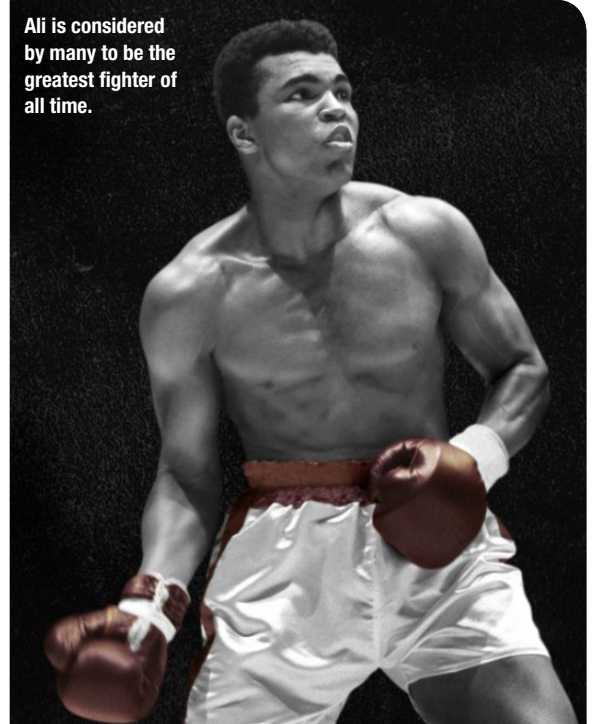
W.11–12.2

### LESSON INSTRUCTIONS

1. Hook students by asking them to think of sports figures who advocate for social change (e.g., Colin Kaepernick and the “take a knee” movement, or LeBron James and education advocacy). Ask: *Why do you think athletes are in a unique position to speak out on social issues?* (They have a media platform, they’re public figures with a following, etc.)
2. Ask students what they know about Muhammad Ali. (To pique interest, you might want to share one of the film clips from the activity sheet.\*) Have small groups research one or more of these timeline facts:
  - **1942** Born Cassius Clay, in Louisville, KY.
  - **1960** Wins gold medal in Rome Olympics.
  - **1964** Wins first heavyweight title.
  - **1964** Announces conversion to Islam and changes his name to Muhammad Ali.
  - **1967** Refuses induction into the U.S. Army. Banned from boxing and stripped of his title.
  - **1970** Reinstated into boxing.
  - **1971** Loses first professional fight to Joe Frazier.
  - **1979** Announces retirement, but returns a year later.
  - **1984** Diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.
  - **1996** Lights opening torch at the Atlanta Olympics.
  - **2016** Dies at age 74.
3. Have students present their research findings in class.
4. Tell students they will now watch historical videos about key moments when Ali advocated for social change. Distribute activity sheet, then show segments from the film *What's My Name*: “Muhammad Ali Talks About Race,” “Muhammad Ali Rejects Being Drafted,” and “The Legacy of Muhammad Ali.”

**\*Classroom Caution** *What's My Name* contains occasional scenes of violence, swearing, and racial epithets. Educators are advised to screen all content before showing to students.

Ali is considered by many to be the greatest fighter of all time.



5. Have groups discuss questions on activity sheet.

### ESSAY WRITING PROMPTS

Assign or have students choose one of the following writing prompts and write an evidence-based essay.

- Explain how Ali put his principles and values into practice. How do these compare with your values?
- Discuss Ali’s outlook on race. What steps should people take to respect others’ points of view?
- Write an essay on another aspect of Ali’s life.
- What current social issue would you advocate to change, and why? What actions would you take?

### For Advanced Students

- Compare and contrast public opinion about Ali’s refusal to serve in the military with how the public might react if he refused to serve today.
- Why did Ali opt out of military service? Explore his religious and ethical reasons for not serving.
- How would Ali respond to a current event today? (Use what you know about Ali’s perspectives.)

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See “The Greatest” in action! Watch these film clips from *What’s My Name: Muhammad Ali* to learn about Ali’s accomplishments and hear his views on civil rights and social justice.



Cassius Clay at the 1960 Rome Olympics



### MUHAMMAD ALI REFUSES THE DRAFT

**52:46–55:07** (from Part 1 of the film) Muhammad Ali refuses to be inducted into the U.S. military for religious reasons. Although he is stripped of his championship title, he holds true to his convictions.

#### DISCUSS

- Describe the controversy surrounding Ali’s decision to refuse being drafted into the Army. Do you think losing his boxing title was a fair punishment? Explain why or why not.
- Ali declined to be inducted into the military based on his religious convictions. Describe the conflict he faced between following the law and following his beliefs. Do you think the decision he made was justified? Explain why or why not.

### MUHAMMAD ALI TALKS ABOUT RACE

**7:50–12:12** (from Part 1 of the film) Cassius Clay (Ali’s original name) wins a gold medal at the 1960 Summer Olympic Games in Rome, but he returns home to find that he’s still a second-class citizen in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky.

**37:00–39:15** (from Part 2 of the film) Years later, Muhammad Ali speaks about the difficulties that African Americans were facing in the second half of the 20th century.

#### DISCUSS

- Summarize Clay’s thoughts on how he prepares for a boxing match and on winning an Olympic gold medal.
- Describe how surprised Clay was when he returned home as an Olympic champion and still faced discrimination in a Louisville restaurant.
- How did Ali use humor to let the world know that he didn’t want to be president of the United States?
- Describe Ali’s views on the problems African Americans faced during the 1960s and ’70s. How does his description compare with what they face today?



With young fans on a visit to India in 1990

### THE LEGACY OF MUHAMMAD ALI

**1:07:44–1:11:28** (from Part 2 of the film) Muhammad Ali retires from boxing and spends his life helping others. Parkinson’s disease slows him down but does not break his spirit.

#### DISCUSS

- Summarize Ali’s belief that all things in life have a purpose.
- What does Ali’s praise for his former opponents tell you about his character?
- What do the photos of Ali with political leaders tell you about his influence?
- Ali said he wanted to do whatever he could to help other people. Give examples of how he did that.