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The Small and the Mighty

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Teacher's Guide written by Laura Reis Mayer

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INTRODUCTION

In her book *The Small and the Mighty*, popular historian and former teacher Sharon McMahon asserts that “I wrote this book because I have long suspected that the best Americans are not always famous. More than twenty years of research has confirmed my intuition. The best Americans are not the critics, they are the doers.” McMahon’s compelling compilation of twelve unsung Americans who changed the course of history is at once a history book, a recipe for hope, and a love letter to America and Americans. In it, she assures readers that “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

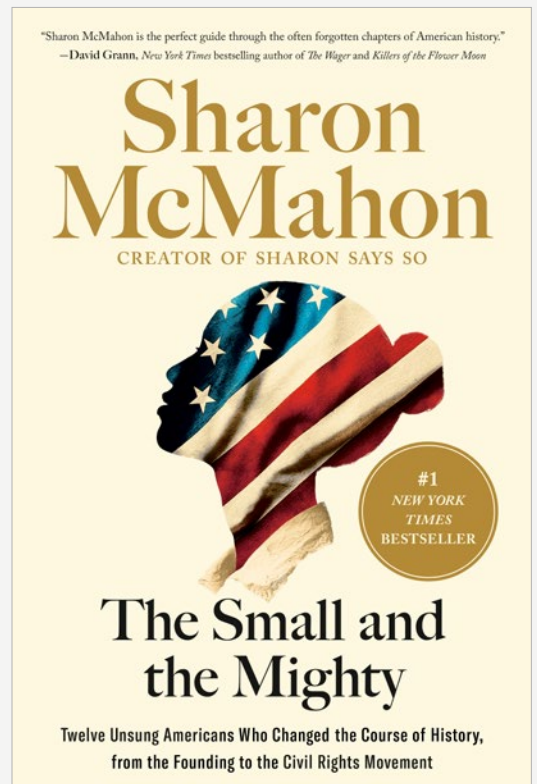
McMahon’s engaging stories can be used as scaffolds to build knowledge in history and politics, and to provide access to texts and topics in civics, social studies, and English classes. Educators can assign the collection in its entirety, or they might ask students to read selections that align with course goals. Likewise, teachers can assign any combination of this guide’s classroom activities, which ask students to read critically, write persuasively, and speak civically.

Whether teachers use *The Small and the Mighty* to illuminate our founding documents, illustrate civil disobedience, or model argumentative rhetoric, McMahon’s text addresses key issues and essential truths while inspiring students to learn from history, to see themselves as change agents, and to take their place as mighty advocates for a more perfect union.

Teacher’s Guide

Includes:

**PRE-READING & DURING-READING
ACTIVITIES, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, TEXT ANALYSIS
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES**



PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

BUILD KNOWLEDGE

Before reading *The Small and the Mighty*, provide equitable access for all students by building their knowledge around literary motifs, founding documents, social movements, and politics.

DIGITAL CIRCLE MAP

Challenge students to consider their current concept of “American heroes” and broaden that thinking with a visual brainstorming tool. Circle maps consist of a circle inside a square and are used to brainstorm and define concepts. A free digital circle map tool can be found at Creately (prhlink.com/circleviewpoints). First, project a circle map onto the white board. Ask students, “If someone asks you to name some American heroes, who comes to mind? Post your answers inside the circle.” Most likely, students will start with famous war heroes, politicians, and perhaps athletes. Next, ask students to expand their thinking over several rounds by adding reference points to the outside frame, one at a time. Sample prompts to add to the frame include “activists,” “scientists,” “community members,” “family,” and “friends.” The idea is to encourage students to expand their concept of “hero” and reflect on the Americans who commit acts of courage without receiving widespread recognition or reward. Students can change the color of their posts with each round, demonstrating how the concept of hero changes as they take time to reflect. Explain that the class will return to the map while reading *The Small and the Mighty*, adding the names of the unsung Americans who changed the course of history.

UNPACKING THE PREAMBLE

Ask students to recall the Preamble to the United States Constitution: Do they remember reading it in elementary school? Did they memorize the Schoolhouse Rock jingle? (You can find it here: prhlink.com/SchoolHouseRock)

Now direct students to read pages 11-12 of the introduction to *The Small and the Mighty*, where McMahon analyzes the Preamble. Students should read the text of the Preamble, then turn and talk with a partner, summarizing its components before reading the author’s own synthesis. Discuss McMahon’s summary, where she states that according to the Preamble, “America at its finest” is “Just. Peaceful. Good. And free” (p. 12).

Next, share an article and accompanying audio clip where McMahon characterizes the Preamble as America’s “mission statement,” and “North Star” (prhlink.com/McMahon5).

Discuss: *Why does the author choose these metaphors?* Challenge students to keep the Preamble and McMahon’s mission statement and North Star comparisons in mind as they reflect on the book, current news, and contemporary American leaders.

PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

EXPLORE BOARD

To build knowledge, interest, and relevance around topics that provide context for *The Small and the Mighty*, provide students with a digital explore board. Explore boards are interactive, digital documents (like Google Docs) that hold a collection of multimedia resources. They build background and interest on content that students are preparing to read, they provide contemporary relevance, and they offer choice as well as a variety of media. Students can work independently or in partners, choosing the topic and media they most want to explore.

After research, students can share their learning with classmates via a collaborative whiteboard tool such as Padlet or Stormboard. Sharing can occur before or during reading. For more on explore boards, as well as sample boards and templates, see ditchthattextbook.com/explore-boards.

Explore board topics for *The Small and the Mighty* might include:

- Civil Rights Movement (timeline):
prhlink.com/CivilRights
- U.S. Department of Education Dismantlement (article):
prhlink.com/DOE
- Japanese American Incarceration (website):
densho.org/learn/introduction
- Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century African American Education Philosophies (crash course video):
prhlink.com/CrashCourse
- Voter Disenfranchisement (article):
prhlink.com/Brookings
- Women's Suffrage (video):
prhlink.com/Suffrage

READING THE TEXT

BIG IDEA #1: ASPIRATION

McMahon sees America's founding documents as mission statements that illuminate our core principles. She believes America already is great, but if we want to make continued progress, we must view our history through a balanced lens, and we must maintain hope that we are capable of change.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What does it mean to be a patriot?
- How have Americans both upheld and fallen short of our ideals?

READING THE TEXT**CLAIM, EVIDENCE, REASONING**

Explore the concept of patriotism with a CER analysis. Play for students the Bookum interview on *The Small and the Mighty* entitled “Sharon McMahon on The American Dream, Values, and Patriotism” (prhlink.com/Bookum). As students watch, ask them to track McMahon’s claims, evidence, and reasoning on a three-column graphic organizer. Afterward, ask partners to exchange their thinking around the author’s main claims before then sharing out with the large group. As a whole class, discuss McMahon’s claim that “A patriot is someone who sees their country with clear eyes and loves it enough to want it to be better.” Ask the group: *How can a balanced view of history, where we see flaws and want to fix them, help, as McMahon says, “reclaim what it means to be a patriot?” How is this view a vision of hope and aspiration?*

As an extension, ask students to read the CNN article “What exactly does it mean to be a patriot? Experts say it’s not easy to define” prhlink.com/CNNPatriot.

Again, applying the CER analysis method, ask students to track the writer’s essential claims, evidence, and reasoning. After reading and note-taking, ask students: *Why is the subtitle of the article “Experts say it’s not easy to define?” According to the article, how has the concept of “patriot” changed? Who does it mostly refer to now? Who does it leave out? How does this article support or extend McMahon’s view?* As students read *The Small and the Mighty*, ask them to track how McMahon’s heroes exemplify her balanced view of history and her definition of Patriotism.

DIDLS POETRY ANALYSIS

In *The Small and the Mighty*, Sharon McMahon highlights the enduring impact of poet and professor Katherine Lee Bates. Bates’s *America the Beautiful* has inspired generations of Americans, who have long revered the song as our most patriotic hymn. In relaying the poet’s words about the appeal of the song, McMahon shares it “is clearly due to the fact that Americans are at heart idealists, with a fundamental faith in human brotherhood” (p. 91). Yet McMahon also portrays Bates as believing “the American idea of democracy was fragile” (p. 78).

Encourage students to dive in and access the complexity of *America the Beautiful* by applying the “DIDLS” poetry analysis method. With this close-reading tool, students use a chart to perform a rhetorical analysis of a poem. They examine diction, imagery, details, language, and syntax in order to determine the speaker’s attitude towards the subject. Provide time for students to apply the “DIDLS” framework independently or with a partner. Afterwards, discuss: *What is Bates’s attitude toward America? How do you know? What specific words and images support this analysis?* Students should notice that diction such as “strife,” “self-control,” and “flaw” appears alongside images of “purple mountain majesties” and “fruited plain,” indicating love for a country the poet knows has its flaws. Discuss: *How does applying the “DIDLS” framework deepen our understanding of Bates’s poem? How does it help us discover nuances?*

READING THE TEXT**CARTOON ANALYSIS**

In her introduction to *The Small and the Mighty*, McMahon says, “America has been just, and it has perpetuated injustice. We have been peaceful, and we have perpetrated acts of violence. We have been—and are—good. And we have done terrible things to people who didn’t deserve them. It has been the land of the free while simultaneously sanctioning oppression” (p. 12). The author expands on this complexity throughout the book, including discussions of enslavement, Japanese American incarceration, Civil Rights protests, and more.

Challenge students to reflect on this duality by analyzing political cartoons. Select a cartoon that aligns with a topic from *The Small and the Mighty*. One example is the discussion of Japanese American World War II propaganda posters in chapter eighteen (prhlink.com/WWIIPoster).

Using the National Archives cartoon analysis protocol, ask students to reflect on the image (prhlink.com/Cartoon), analyzing its text, visuals, historical context, and contemporary connections. Once students have reflected and written about their observations, discuss: *How does this cartoon clarify or extend our understanding of Japanese American Incarceration during World War II? How does it support or extend the discussion in The Small and the Mighty? What questions and challenges emerge as a result of this analysis? How can political cartoons serve to enlighten or inspire?*

BIG IDEA #2: AGENCY

McMahon encourages her readers to believe ordinary people can do the extraordinary, and that by embracing perseverance and hope, we are all capable of doing “the next needed thing.”

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What lessons can we learn from historical figures who challenged injustice?
- What role does self-determination play in shaping the course of social progress?

EXPLAINER VIDEOS

Model for students how accuracy breeds agency. In her book, McMahon asserts that not knowing where to look for accuracy, or worse, intentionally ignoring it, leaves consumers susceptible to misinformation. In an interview with Politico, the author refers to this state as being “confidently wrong,” and describes how her fact-based explainer videos aim to set us straight (prhlink.com/Politico).

She then explains how these Instagram explainers invite listeners to ask questions with their “How Can I Help?” feature, and how they hopefully promote a more lasting impact than a single social media comment. Select a sample explainer video from McMahon’s “Sharon Says So” Instagram

READING THE TEXT

account ([instagram.com/sharonsaysso](https://www.instagram.com/sharonsaysso)) and discuss some of the content that surprised students, affirmed or extended their prior knowledge, or corrected some misinformation.

Using McMahon's videos as exemplars, challenge students to select a historic or political topic they feel confident about or would like to know more about, fact-check themselves using approved reference sources, write a quick explainer script, and record their own video. Common Sense Education provides a list of trustworthy online sites for student research (prhlink.com/HistoryWebsites).

For explainer videos with all the bells and whistles, Canva provides a free online tool (prhlink.com/Canva). When students post their videos on Instagram or Padlet, they can invite classmates to ask questions, similar to McMahon's "How Can I Help" feature. Discuss: *How does providing accurate information online promote a sense of agency?*

ANALYZING ACTIONS AND OUTCOMES

In her chapter "Teenagers and the American South," McMahon shares the story of sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns, an African American student in Prince Edward County, Virginia in the early 1950s. Frustrated that the all-Black school she attended did not have the most basic supplies, Barbara led a student strike, together with her classmates and supporters contacted the NAACP, and initiated a court case that would ultimately join the famed *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Ask students to reflect on the personal and cultural challenges that led Barbara to find her voice even when presented with seemingly monumental challenges. Using the "Analyzing Actions and Outcomes" graphic organizers from Facing History and Ourselves, students can analyze the factors inside and outside Barbara's control, the choices she faced, and the self-determination she exhibited (prhlink.com/FacingHistory).

Then, challenge students to consider a time they had to think about taking or not taking actions that would benefit their own or others' welfare. Using the same "Analyzing Actions and Outcomes" graphic organizer, each student should reflect on the agency they had in that moment and whether or not they would take the same actions again. Afterwards, those students who feel comfortable can share with a partner or the class as a whole. Together, discuss: *What can we learn about agency and action by reflecting on historical examples and our own experience?*

CIRCLE OF VIEWPOINTS

Help students see that the ability to see multiple viewpoints generates the power of perspective, which in turn provides a sense of agency. In her chapter on Inez Milholland, McMahon describes the Gilded Age activist as an agent of change, one that refused to believe all women "needed was a man and a family" (p. 95). After they've read about Inez, ask students to apply the "Circle of Viewpoints" strategy as they watch a video where vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance

READING THE TEXT

describes women without children as “childless cat ladies” who “don’t have a direct stake in our country” (prhlink.com/FoxNews).

In “Circle of Viewpoints,” students brainstorm a list of different perspectives on the issue, choose one perspective to explore, and develop questions from that point of view. For instance, students can adopt the viewpoint of J.D. Vance, of a stay-at-home mother, or of a childless individual. By ensuring all viewpoints are represented (students do not necessarily select the perspective with which they are most comfortable), the class is encouraged to see beyond one perspective and understand that the reasons people come to their points of view, regardless of how agreeable or offensive, are based on varying backgrounds and reasons.

Once students have watched the interview and formulated questions, facilitate a discussion about the topics generated. Ask: *What does Vance mean when he refers to “normal Americans”? Who is he saying deserves a “direct stake” in our country? Are there Americans who do not? How does the interview relate to Inez Milholland and the early nineteenth-century women’s rights movement? How much has changed? How does looking at multiple points of view provide us with power, perspective, and agency?* For more on “Circle of Viewpoints,” see prhlink.com/circleviewpoints.

BIG IDEA #3: ADVOCACY

McMahon defines leaders as those who lift up rather than tear down. By defining ourselves as service leaders who wish to benefit those beyond ourselves, we become agents of change ready to define our role in moving towards progress.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- How have persistence, protest, and civil disobedience shaped American democracy?
- What is one step I can take towards making change in my school, community, or country?

TEXT-TO-TEXT COMPARISON

To reflect on the role of advocacy in America, show students the scene from Disney’s *National Treasure* where the main character says: “Of all the ideas that became the United States, there’s a line here that’s at the heart of all the others.” He then reads from the Declaration of Independence: “When a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government.” (prhlink.com/NationalTreasure).

After students watch the clip, ask: *Do you agree with the speaker when he says that those who have the ability to take action also have the responsibility to take action? What are some current and historic examples of American citizens taking action against wrongs?* Next, read aloud the last page of McMahon’s text,

READING THE TEXT

focusing on the last full paragraph, where the author says, “there will come a moment in your life when you will be asked to choose: will I retreat, or will I move forward with courage?” (p. 281).

Discuss how McMahon’s wording reflects the ideals of the Declaration of Independence as shown in the movie clip. Challenge students to reflect on McMahon’s assertion that “for some of you, that moment is today” (p. 281).

Ask: *What is an abuse, usurpation, issue, or cause that you feel strongly about? If today was your day to move forward with courage, what is “the next needed thing” you could act upon?* Consider your life, your school, your community, and your country. Students might respond in a journal entry, a blog post, a small-group discussion, or a more formal essay.

PERSUASIVE SPEECH

Empower students to see themselves as argumentative writers and speakers. In her chapter on Rebecca Brown Mitchell, Sharon McMahon upholds public speaking and persuasive argumentation as essential tools of advocacy. Invite students to choose an advocacy topic of personal interest and deliver a speech in front of the class. They might choose to discuss current national topics such as immigration or women’s rights issues, or they could focus on an issue of significance at school or in their community. Scaffold student argumentation and speaking skills with low-stakes practice such as impromptu speeches on topics drawn from a hat, or informal responses to persuasive prompts. Daily student prompts aligned to current news topics can be found at prhlink.com/NYTStudentOpinion.

THIN SLIDES

In her chapter on Septima Clark’s work with the NAACP in the 1950s, McMahon explains how manufactured outrage campaigns have damaged our democracy during times such as the Red Scare and the Civil Rights campaign. Challenge students to learn about current examples of perceived injustices and how they are impacting our nation’s culture and politics.

Ask students to choose an example, conduct a quick read of a reputable online source, and create a “thin slide” to share on a collaborative slide deck. Because students, rather than teachers, select the source evidence, thin slides differ from a station rotation activity. With thin slides, students claim a slide and post an image and summary on it before sharing with their classmates. Explanations can be presented aloud or recorded on the slides using Mote or another recording tool.

As an extension, ask students to hyperlink slides with websites, infographics, video, or audio clips. Topics for contemporary moral outrage include book bans, corporate boycotts, DEI or LGBTQ+ issues, and voter fraud. As a class, discuss: *When adversaries of manufactured injustices use their voices to spread moral outrage, how do activists for democracy use their voices to facilitate change?*

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT

The following activities and resources provide opportunities to reflect on the big ideas in *The Small and the Mighty* during research, writing, discussion, and project-based learning.

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCT

Challenge students to produce an in-depth multimedia response to one of the “conversation starter” questions posed throughout this guide. Then, ask students to create their own multimedia response to the question, integrating ideas from McMahon’s text with outside research and their own thinking.

For example, students might choose: *How have persistence, protest, and civil disobedience shaped American democracy?* Their product could focus on an issue highlighted in *The Small and the Mighty*, such as education or voting rights. Or, their product might elevate a contemporary advocacy movement, such as United We Dream or The People’s March. Students should research online resources that bridge McMahon’s book with socio-politics, either historic or contemporary.

Responses reflect individual student choice and interests, and might include:

- A “Ted Talk”-type video, complete with scripted narration aided by cue cards. Students can use cell phones or tablets to record their talks.
- A digital story using iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Digital stories combine narration and still images and are easily created on student laptops.
- An interactive web page combining multiple digital features to tell a story. With Google Sites or Adobe Spark, students can combine text, social graphics, video, and audio.
- An interactive infographic using free software from Canva, Lucid, or Piktochart.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

To promote civic discourse with diverse views, conduct a Socratic seminar based on a close read of *The Small and the Mighty* (prhlink.com/SocraticSeminar).

The seminar might cover the entire text or, to promote the highest levels of critical thinking, it can be conducted on an excerpt or chapter from McMahon’s book. Prior to the seminar, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including participation, active listening, and respect of multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as “I will contribute to the discussion at least one time,” as well as a personal goal, such as “I will mention a classmate’s name and extend on or disagree with his thinking.” Students should record their goals on paper or sticky notes that are visible during the seminar.

During the discussion, take a facilitator’s role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total-class participation in a round-robin response. This question might be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify the text’s main

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT

ideas. Second, move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details. Finally, end with a closing question that promotes personalization. After the seminar, ask students to evaluate their own and classmates' speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently in the next seminar discussion? How did the seminar deepen their understanding of *The Small and the Mighty*?

Example prompts based on chapter fifteen of *The Small and the Mighty* include:

1. What one incident, observation, or fact from McMahon's "William James Edward" chapter stuck with you?
2. On page 160, the author encourages us to "frame conversations not just from the present but from the past as well?" How does she support and explain her reasoning?
3. To what extent does the practice of closing public schools in the 1950s relate to current school voucher efforts and the continued rise of private and charter schools? How do you see such efforts as impacting you, your school, or your community?

TEXT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What values should we respect and expect in our fellow citizens? What attitudes and actions should we challenge?
2. How do our nation's founding documents shape the current landscape of civic rights and responsibilities? What is being upheld? What is being challenged? How do we uphold these founding values while protecting the rights of all?
3. Trace the relationship between education and equity in America. Consider past and present barriers. How have our views of industrial or technical education changed throughout our nation's history?
4. Who has access to voting in America? Who does not? What are the barriers faced, both historically and today? Consider race, gender, and economics. What needs to happen to ensure equity in our voting systems?
5. What can a frank examination of our nation's history tell us about our current political and civic landscape? What lessons can we learn in order to preserve our democracy?
6. Should we hold historical figures accountable for views that were accepted in their time but are problematic today?
7. What is the relationship between politics and social movements, both past and present?
8. Describe the intersection of white supremacy and white Christian identity in America, both historically and in our current sociopolitical landscape.
9. What is the role of network and social media in influencing civic participation and progress? Where should I derive my information in order to be an informed citizen?

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT

10. How do I envision my role moving forward to uphold, protect, and preserve my civic rights and responsibilities? How can I keep America great?

SIGNIFICANT QUOTATIONS

1. "The best Americans are not the critics, they are the doers . . . They are those who know that one becomes great because of who they lift up, not who they put down." (p. 11).
2. "Great Americans are flawed and complicated." (p. 11).
3. "America has been just, and it has perpetuated injustice. We have been peaceful, and we have perpetrated acts of violence. We have been—and are—good. And we have done terrible things to people who didn't deserve them. It has been the land of the free while simultaneously sanctioning oppression." (p. 12).
4. "I leave the convictions of my parents as the heritage—a genuine belief in the power and glory of education." (p. 55).
5. "None of us can do it all. But all of us can do something. And it might as well be the next needed thing." (p. 164)
6. "We have but one hope . . . the hope that change is always possible if we refuse to give up on people!" (p. 245)
7. "What is done in darkness must come to light." (p. 269).
8. "Great Americans live." (p. 279).
9. "We are the ones we've been waiting for." (p. 281).
10. "And it is us, *the small and the mighty*, that make America great. Not again, but always." (p. 281).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used for further background, research, writing, and discussion.

- "How to Be a Youth Activist":
prhlink.com/YouthActivist
- Japanese American Incarceration Education Resources:
prhlink.com/JapaneseAmerican
- Sharon McMahon's website
sharonmcmahon.com
- Sharon Says So
[instagram.com/sharonsaysso](https://www.instagram.com/sharonsaysso)
- "A Time for Justice: America's Civil Rights Movement":
prhlink.com/TimeforJustice
- Women's Rights: Primary Sources and Teaching Activities
docsteach.org/topics/women

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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