



## Pre-Visit Activity: Background Reading – What to Expect at Ellis Island

Located in New York Bay, **Ellis Island** was America's largest and most active **immigration** station from 1892 to 1924. On average, the inspection process took approximately 3-7 hours. For the majority of **immigrants**, Ellis Island truly was an "Island of Hope" - the first stop on their way to new opportunities and experiences in America. However, for a few, it became the "Island of Tears" - a place where families were separated and individuals were denied entry into the United States.

On a typical day at Ellis Island, immigrants came face to face with inspectors, interpreters, nurses, doctors, social workers, and many others. As a large federal facility employing approximately five hundred people at a time, each Ellis Island employee contributed to the primary function of processing thousands of immigrants a year to make sure that newcomers to the United States were legally and medically fit to enter the country.

### **Read below to learn about three types of work performed on Ellis Island:**

1. The **Immigrant Inspector's** job was to conduct face-to-face interviews with all immigrants in an important proceeding known as immigrant inspection. Every single immigrant that entered the Port of New York was questioned - either on board ship or at Ellis Island itself. Sitting at a high "rostrum desk" in Ellis Island's Registry Room, the inspector first consulted the official list of a ship's passengers called a ***Manifest of Alien Passengers***. This list contained the names and previously recorded personal information about the immigrants.

In questioning the newcomer, the Immigrant Inspector verified the immigrant's answers given by checking answers against what had been originally recorded on the ship's passenger manifest at the port of departure. Since the inspector was only allowed to admit persons who were "clearly and beyond a doubt entitled to enter the United States," he had to be absolutely certain the person he was examining was not a member of one of the classes of persons barred from entering the country under the various U.S. immigration laws. These were people such as contract laborers,



polygamists, paupers, convicted criminals, anarchists or anyone "likely to become a public charge."

2. **Interpreters** translated for immigrants who could not communicate in English. Interpreters not only needed strong linguistic skills in one or more foreign languages, but they also needed to understand the most common dialects in a given language. An interpreter needed to convey the equivalent (or a close equivalent) of the words and meanings expressed by an immigrant and a United States Immigrant Inspector or other Ellis Island worker. Many interpreters at Ellis Island were either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants.

To work for the Bureau of Immigration, applicants for interpreter positions had to take a federal civil service examination that rated their speaking, reading, writing and comprehension for each language. The common languages spoken at Ellis Island included Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, Slovak, German, Yiddish, French, Greek, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian, Romanian, Swedish, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Czech, Spanish, Armenian, Arabic, Dutch, Norwegian and Chinese.

3. **Nurses** were employed by the U.S. Public Health Service and were required to live on the island in separate quarters. They worked under the supervision of the Ellis Island doctors. It was their duty to be certain only healthy immigrants were allowed to enter the United States. Nurses assisted doctors in making quick visual inspections of all ship passengers to determine which passengers may have contracted an illness during the voyage. If upon further inspection, it was determined that a passenger did indeed have a contagious disease, the passenger was placed in the hospital ward located on Ellis Island and given extra care and attention from the staff of nurses.

Source: The National Park Service Ellis Island/Statue of Liberty



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the blanks after you have read the What to Expect At Ellis Island information:

1. What was the purpose of Ellis Island?

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2. Where was it located?

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3. What were the peak years for Ellis Island?

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4. Why was Ellis Island sometimes called "Island of Hope?"

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5. Why was Ellis Island sometimes called "Island of Tears? "

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6. List three types of employees found at Ellis Island:

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7. Why did the Inspector have to conduct interviews with each immigrant?

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8. In your opinion, was the nurses' job necessary? Explain.

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9. Explain why it was important to have interpreters at Ellis Island.

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10. Of the jobs at Ellis Island, which seems the most interesting to you? Explain.

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## Ellis Island Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading

### What to Expect at Ellis Island **KEY**

1. What was the purpose of Ellis Island? Ellis Island served as the primary immigration station for European immigrants from 1892-1924, processing thousands of immigrants a year. The primary purpose was to make sure that new immigrants were legally and medically fit to enter the country.
2. Where was it located? New York Bay- Northeastern United States
3. What were the peak years for Ellis Island? 1892-1924
4. Why was Ellis Island sometimes called "Island of Hope?" Majority of immigrants passed through inspections quickly. This was their first stop on their way to new opportunities for a better life in America.
5. Why was Ellis Island sometimes called "Island of Tears?" a small percentage of immigrant families were separated and individuals were denied entry into the country because of illness or other issues related to the immigration laws, etc.
6. List three types of employees found at Ellis Island:
  - inspector
  - interpreter
  - nurses
7. Why did the Inspector have to conduct interviews with each immigrant? The inspector first consulted the official list of passengers that had previously recorded personal information about the immigrants from their inspection process at the port cities in Europe. This information was then used at Ellis during the interview process to further verify the immigrants' answers and immigration status before allowing them entry into the U.S. America wanted to make sure that immigrants were legal, law-abiding citizens who were healthy and able to work. They did not want people who might become a "public-charge" which meant the government would have to support them.



8. In your opinion, was the nurses' job necessary? Explain.

Yes, the nurses helped screen immigrants for potential medical conditions that could be serious. Again, America wanted to make sure that immigrants were healthy and able to work. They did not want people who might become a "public-charge" which meant the government would have to support them. In addition, this was also a way to make sure that unwanted diseases did not enter and spread throughout the country as well.

9. Explain why it was important to have interpreters at Ellis Island. Many of the interpreters were either immigrants or the children of immigrants, so they understood the process and the cultural barrier that not speaking English presented for the new arrivals. The immigrants were coming from many different countries in Europe and spoke different languages. Many of them could not speak English, so the interpreters were needed in order to convey important information and meaning between the immigrants and inspectors.

10. Of the jobs at Ellis Island, which seems the most interesting to you? Explain.

Though student opinions will vary, suggestions might include:

-nurses: help prevent spread of diseases and also screen for serious medical conditions, treat those who were ill from long journey so that they were able to enter America

-interpreters: many were immigrants themselves and speaking the language was helpful in easing the anxiety of newcomers who didn't understand English, help immigrants overcome culture shock

-inspectors: medical and legal inspectors were needed to verify an immigrant's eligibility to enter the country legally and to make sure that they would not become a burden to the government