

Your Guide to U.S. Naturalization

Understanding the N-400 Process, the Civics Exam, and the U.S. Passport

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Congratulations on taking this important step toward U.S. citizenship. This guide walks you through the N-400 application process, explains what to expect at your naturalization interview—including the civics exam—and clarifies an important point that surprises many clients: becoming a U.S. citizen and receiving a U.S. passport are two separate steps. We hope this answers your most common questions and helps you feel prepared and confident.

PART 1 — THE N-400 APPLICATION

What is the N-400?

Form N-400 is the Application for Naturalization—the official form you submit to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to become a U.S. citizen. Filing the N-400 is the first step in the process; it does not mean you are already a citizen.

Who can apply?

Most applicants must meet the following basic requirements:

- Be a lawful permanent resident (green card holder) for at least 5 years (or 3 years if married to and living with a U.S. citizen)
- Have continuous residence in the United States during that period
- Have been physically present in the U.S. for at least half of the required period
- Be able to read, write, and speak basic English
- Have good moral character
- Be willing to take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States

What happens after I file?

After USCIS receives your N-400, the general timeline looks like this:

1. Biometrics appointment – USCIS collects your fingerprints and photo.
2. Interview & Civics Exam – You attend an in-person interview at a USCIS field office (see Part 2).
3. Decision – USCIS approves, continues, or denies your application.
4. Oath Ceremony – If approved, you take the Oath of Allegiance and receive your Naturalization Certificate.

PART 2 — THE NATURALIZATION INTERVIEW & CIVICS EXAM

When does the interview take place?

The interview is scheduled by USCIS after your biometrics are processed—typically several months after you file. You will receive a written notice (Form N-400 Interview Notice) with the date, time, and location of your appointment.

What happens at the interview?

A USCIS officer will review your N-400 application with you, ask questions about your background and eligibility, and administer two tests:

- English Test – Covers reading, writing, and speaking in English.
- Civics Test – Tests your knowledge of U.S. history and government (see below).

How does the Civics Exam work?

The civics exam is an oral exam given by the USCIS officer during your interview. Here is what to expect:

Key Facts About the Civics Exam

- USCIS has an official list of 128 civics questions covering U.S. history, government, and geography.
- The officer will ask you up to 20 questions, chosen from the 128.
- You need to answer at least 12 out of 20 correctly to pass.
- The exam is oral—you answer out loud, not in writing.
- If you do not pass, you will have one more opportunity to take the exam, usually within 60–90 days.
- Applicants 65 or older who have been a permanent resident for 20+ years may qualify for a shorter, easier version of the exam.

What topics does the exam cover?

The 128 official questions fall into three broad categories:

- American Government – Principles of democracy, branches of government, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the role of elected officials.
- American History – Colonial era, the Civil War, World Wars, the Civil Rights Movement, and key historical figures.
- Integrated Civics – Geography, national symbols, and holidays.

The full list of 128 questions and their accepted answers is available for free on the USCIS website. We recommend studying this list regularly in the months before your interview.

Tips for the Exam

- Start studying early—give yourself at least 3 to 6 months.
- Practice answering out loud, not just reading silently.
- Use the free USCIS study materials, flashcard apps, and practice videos.
- Focus on understanding the answers, not just memorizing them word for word—any correct answer is accepted.
- If you are nervous, remember: the officer wants you to succeed.

Frequently Asked Questions: The Civics Exam

Q: Can I bring notes or a study sheet to the interview?

A: No. The civics exam is oral and must be completed from memory. You may not bring notes, phones, or any reference materials.

Q: What if I do not understand a question?

A: You may politely ask the officer to repeat or rephrase the question. The officer cannot provide hints or answers, but they can repeat the question.

Q: Is the exam in English?

A: Yes. Both the civics questions and your answers must be in English. Some applicants who qualify for an exemption based on age and years of residency may be permitted to use an interpreter for the civics portion—please ask our office if this may apply to you.

Q: What if I fail?

A: Do not panic. You will be scheduled for a second attempt within 60 to 90 days. The second interview covers only the portion you did not pass—English test, civics exam, or both.

PART 3 — NATURALIZATION vs. THE U.S. PASSPORT

An Important Distinction Many Clients Miss

One of the most common misconceptions we encounter is the belief that receiving your Naturalization Certificate automatically means you will also receive a U.S. passport. This is not the case. Naturalization and a U.S. passport are two separate processes, requiring separate applications.

Naturalization (N-400)	U.S. Passport
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grants you U.S. citizenship• You receive a Naturalization Certificate• Issued by USCIS• Required before you can apply for a passport• No expiration date• One-time process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proves your citizenship for international travel• You receive a passport book and/or card• Issued by the U.S. Department of State• Requires separate application (DS-11 for first-time applicants)• Expires every 10 years (5 years for children under 16)• Must be renewed periodically

⚠ Please note:

Your Naturalization Certificate is not a travel document. You will still need a valid passport to travel internationally as a U.S. citizen. Do not travel on your previous country's passport after naturalizing without first consulting our office—doing so may have legal implications.

How Do I Apply for My U.S. Passport?

Once you have your Naturalization Certificate in hand, you can apply for your U.S. passport. Here is a brief overview of the process:

5. Complete Form DS-11 (Application for a U.S. Passport). This form is available online at travel.state.gov.

6. Submit your Naturalization Certificate as proof of citizenship. You must present the original—photocopies are not accepted.
7. Provide a valid photo ID (such as your driver's license or green card) and a passport-sized photo.
8. Pay the required fees. As of 2025, the fee for a passport book for adults is \$130 (application fee) plus \$35 (execution fee). Fees are subject to change—check travel.state.gov for current amounts.
9. Submit your application in person at a passport acceptance facility (such as a post office, library, or courthouse that offers passport services). First-time adult applicants must apply in person.

How Long Does a U.S. Passport Take?

Routine processing currently takes 6 to 8 weeks. Expedited processing (for an additional fee) takes approximately 2 to 3 weeks. If you have upcoming international travel, plan accordingly—and check current processing times at travel.state.gov before you apply.

Frequently Asked Questions: Naturalization & the Passport

Q: Will USCIS send me a passport after my naturalization ceremony?

A: No. USCIS issues your Naturalization Certificate, which proves you are a U.S. citizen. The U.S. Department of State—a completely separate government agency—issues passports. You must apply for your passport separately after you receive your certificate.

Q: Can I apply for a passport before I receive my Naturalization Certificate?

A: No. Your Naturalization Certificate is required as proof of citizenship when you apply for a passport. You must wait until after your oath ceremony and receive your certificate before submitting a passport application.

Q: Do I need to surrender my foreign passport after becoming a U.S. citizen?

A: The United States does not require you to surrender your foreign passport when you naturalize. However, your country of origin may have its own rules about dual nationality and passport use. Additionally, you should use your U.S. passport—not your foreign passport—when entering and exiting the United States.

Q: Can I travel internationally right after my naturalization ceremony while I wait for my passport?

A: Not without some planning. You will need to apply for your U.S. passport before traveling internationally. In urgent situations, you may request an expedited appointment at a U.S. Passport Agency if you have documented, imminent travel. Contact our office and we can help you think through your options.

Q: Is my Naturalization Certificate a form of ID I can use domestically?

A: Your Naturalization Certificate is an important document proving citizenship, but it is large, printed on security paper, and not designed for everyday use as an ID. For domestic identification, a U.S. passport book or passport card, or a state-issued driver's license, are more practical. Keep your original Naturalization Certificate in a very safe place—replacing it requires a separate application (Form N-565) and can take months.

CONTACT US

We are here to guide you through every step of this journey. If you have questions about your N-400 application, your interview preparation, or your next steps after naturalization, please do not hesitate to reach out.

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