

Class Discussion Prompts

Demographic Trends in Rural America (Johnson)

Prompts are grouped by depth. The **Warm-up** set suits an introductory (101) course; the **Analysis** and **Reading the data** sets suit an upper-division course. Each prompt includes a short facilitation cue in green.

Warm-up — surfacing assumptions (intro level)

1. When you picture “rural America,” what comes to mind? How many different kinds of rural places can the class name?

Facilitation: Surface the “not one rural America” theme before the chapter makes it.

2. Is your home county growing or shrinking? How would you actually find out?

Facilitation: Prime students to think about real data before the county-profile assignment.

3. What makes a town’s population go up or down? List every reason you can think of.

Facilitation: Elicit births, deaths, and moves — the components of change — in everyday terms.

4. Why might young people leave a rural county — and why might newcomers arrive?

Facilitation: Preview out-migration, amenity migration, and the pandemic move to rural areas.

Analysis — the chapter’s arguments (advanced level)

1. Distinguish natural change from net migration. Why does the chapter treat them as two separate “engines”?

Facilitation: Draw out births–deaths vs in–out migration; note they can pull in opposite directions.

2. Between 2010 and 2020, rural America lost population for the first time in history. Which engine was mainly responsible, and why?

Facilitation: Migration loss (–1.1%) exceeded a shrinking natural increase (+0.5%); births never recovered.

3. The chapter insists there is “not one rural America.” How do adjacency and town size (the continuum) shape a county’s trajectory?

Facilitation: Compare adjacent micropolitan vs remote “other” counties.

4. Why did manufacturing counties shift from a demographic “bright spot” to population loss?

Facilitation: Migration losses plus collapsing natural increase; contrast with amenity counties.

5. After 2020, rural America grew even though deaths far exceeded births. How is that possible?

Facilitation: Nearly a million net in-migrants offset record natural decrease (+407,000 overall).

Reading the data — working with the figures (advanced level)

Project the deck's charts. For each, have students read the numbers before interpreting them:

1. The decadal chart shows +8.3%, +3.4%, then -0.6%. What single word describes 2010–2020 that never applied before — and what does the size of the bar tell you about how close the balance was?
2. Deaths averaged 620,000 a year and births 487,000. Roughly how large was the annual gap, and why does 82% of counties in natural decrease matter more than the national total?
3. The share of counties gaining in-migrants rose 28% → 41% → 65%. What story does that trend tell, and what does it suggest about the pandemic's effect on rural migration?
4. Recreation and retirement counties gained 376,000 while the rest of rural America gained 39,000. What does that concentration imply for places without amenities?

Apply & extend

1. The chapter warns of a “downward demographic spiral” in depopulating counties. Trace the loop: how do out-migration, aging, and mortality feed one another?
2. In-migrants are often well-educated and resourced. What would it take for a rural community to integrate them — and what could go wrong?
3. If natural increase is largely spent, rural America's future ‘hinges on migration.’ What policies would you prioritize for a growing county versus a shrinking one?

These teaching materials were generated with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic). All content was reviewed and verified by the chapter authors.