



Native Ed

LESSON PLAN

THE TRUE STORY OF POCOHONTAS

SECONDARY

AIM

How do stories become part of accepted history and what happens when the people telling the story are not the people whose history it is?

GUIDING QUESTIONS/OBJECTIVES

What are the different ways that information can be passed down through generations? What influences the historical stories that are recorded, preserved, published and taught? How did the method of passing down information affect what we think we know about Native American history? What are various reasons that Native Americans were portrayed as “uncivilized” or “savages”? How does popular culture shape our understanding of history? Why does it matter who tells Native American history?

KEY VOCABULARY

Historical Record—The surviving evidence historians use to understand and interpret the past.

Perspective—The particular point of view from which a person or group sees and interprets events.

Bias—A tendency to view or present something from a particular perspective rather than neutrally.

Oral Tradition—Knowledge, stories, history, beliefs, and cultural information passed from one generation to another through spoken words and other practices.

Colonization—The process by which one society establishes control over another people or their land.

Historical Narrative—A particular way of organizing and explaining events from the past into a story.

Popular Culture—Forms of entertainment and media—such as movies, television, and music—that reach large audiences and influence society.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT AT END



ACTIVITIES

1. Who tells the story? (1 minutes)
 - a. ASK STUDENTS to think of a famous historical person or event. (
2. SHOW VIDEO “The True Story of Pocohontas.” (5 minutes)
3. When video is over, ask students to work in pairs or small groups to consider: (7 minutes)
 - a. What is different between the Pocahontas story many people know and the story in the video based on the historical record?
 - b. Why might someone change what the record suggests actually happened when they pass on a story?
 - c. Take responses from 2-3 groups or pairs. Possible answers include:
 - i. Make it more entertaining
 1. Romance
 2. Create heroes and villains
 3. Have a happy ending
 - ii. Make the teller of the story or their group look better
 - iii. Simplifying complicated events
 - iv. Had a different perspective
 - v. Misremembered
 - d. *Does a story have to be deliberately false for it to change people's understanding of history?*
4. How does a story become the known and widely accepted history? (10 minutes)
 - a. Write or project the following 3 questions for students to see (but don't go into them):
 - i. Who tells the story?
 - ii. Who preserves the story?
 - iii. Who teaches the story?
 - b. **ASK:** If two groups experience the same event, whose version is more likely to survive if one group has much greater political and economic power?
 - i. Follow up: Ask if anyone has heard the cliché “The winners write history.”
 1. What does this mean?
 - ii. Guide class to this: People with power often use it to shape which versions of history are recorded, preserved, published and taught.



- c. How important is writing? And printing for the masses what is written?
 - i. Explain that Native Americans had many ways of preserving and transmitting their histories, including oral traditions, genealogies, ceremonies, art, and place names. Few Native nations developed and adopted written languages.
 - 1. oral transmission → limited number of tellers/keepers → transmission depends on people
 - ii. European/American written records, however, became disproportionately powerful in America. They could be printed in mass, used by governments and eventually incorporated into textbooks and taught in schools.
 - 1. writing → printing → potentially millions of copies → archives/textbooks → institutional authority → generations of students
 - iii. **ASK:**
 - 1. If one culture's stories can be printed and reproduced thousands of times while another culture's stories are primarily transmitted orally, which culture's version is more likely to become the version everyone knows?
 - 2. Then: Does something become less true simply because it wasn't written down?
 - 3. Back to the story of Pocahontas
 - a. Whose perspective do we know more about from the historical record—Pocahontas's and the Powhatan's or the English colonists'?
 - b. How might that affect the story we learned to be the real history?

5. Back in groups or pairs. (7 minutes)

- a. Native Americans were often described by European Americans as “savage,” “uncivilized,” or “primitive.” Why might people describe another group this way?
- b. What could descriptions like these make easier to justify?
- c. Possible answers:
 - i. taking Native land and removing Native people
 - ii. treating Native people as inferior
 - iii. ignoring Native political rights
 - iv. imposing European culture



6. Read the following: “People are often very good at creating explanations that make their own actions seem reasonable or justified—especially when they benefit from those actions.”
 - a. Give a general example: “Suppose I take something that belongs to someone else and tell myself, ‘They never use it anyway.’ Did that explanation change what I did—or did it change how I felt about what I did?”
 - b. Now imagine an entire society expanding onto land occupied by another group of people. What kinds of stories might help that society see its actions as justified?
 - c. This does **not** mean that every person consciously invented these ideas or accepted something they knew to be untrue to justify taking land. People can sincerely believe ideas that also benefit them. It is just that human nature makes them more likely to do so.
7. Why does Hollywood change history when making movies and TV shows? (7 minutes)
 - a. Possible answers include:
 - i. Make it more entertaining by adding:
 1. Romance
 2. Drama
 3. Heroes and villains
 4. simplifying complicated history
 - b. Remember, the goal of Hollywood is to make as much money as possible, not show accurate history.
 - c. Movies are NOT history textbooks. Filmmakers tell stories for particular audiences and purposes. But movies are powerful because they make stories vivid, emotional and memorable and are often the **ONLY** history many know about a person or event.
8. Return to the 3 questions:
 - a. Who tells it?
Who preserves it?
Who teaches it?
 - b. Conclude: ***Learning Native history isn’t just about correcting a few facts about Pocahontas. It is also about understanding why some versions of Native history became dominant in the first place—and making sure Native people have the opportunity to tell their own histories.***
9. EXIT TICKET (3 minutes)
 - a. Go back to the historical person or event they thought of at the beginning of class, before the video.
 - i. How do you know about this person or story? What source or sources did you hear it from?
 - ii. Do you think it is the whole story? If not, what else would you like to know to decide if it is?

OPTIONAL ADD-ONS ON NEXT PAGE



1. WHAT IF NATIVE PEOPLE HAD TOLD THE STORY? (5 minutes)

How might the Pocahontas story be different if Native people had been the primary people telling, preserving, publishing, and teaching the story for the last 400 years?

Then:

Would the Native version necessarily be completely objective?

The goal is not just to replace one version with another. It is to recognize that **multiple perspectives help us understand the past more fully.**

2. THE BENEFIT TEST (5 minutes)

Why might people be especially willing to believe a story that benefits them?

Then:

Does benefiting from an idea prove that someone invented it?

Use this to distinguish between deliberate propaganda and beliefs that reinforce existing systems of power.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ON NEXT PAGE



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COMMON CORE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6 / RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6

Identify and evaluate how different perspectives and points of view shape historical accounts, including the selection and emphasis of particular information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7 / RH.9-10.7 / RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate information presented in different formats and media, including video, visual information, and written sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8 / RH.9-10.8 / RH.11-12.8

Distinguish between fact, interpretation, and reasoned judgment and evaluate the claims, reasoning, and evidence used in historical accounts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9 / RH.9-10.9 / RH.11-12.9

Analyze and integrate information from multiple primary and secondary sources and compare different treatments and perspectives on the same historical topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9 / WHST.9-10.9 / WHST.11-12.9

Draw evidence from informational sources to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1 / SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1

Engage effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing ideas clearly and persuasively.