

# Learning About American Indian Oral Traditions

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: Grade Five  
Suggested Duration: Two-Four Days

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

THE SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT STANDARDS FOR FIFTH GRADE:

- (4) The history content standards for fifth grade are that each student will:
- (b) understand the inter-relationship of chronological historical events;
  - (c) identify roles of individuals and groups and their impact on United States and tribal historical events;
  - (d) understand the unique historical perspectives of American Indians.

### Understandings

- Each tribe has its own oral history, beginning with its origin, and the oral history is as valid as a written history. These histories pre-date the “discovery” of North America by explorers (EU3).
- Some tribal histories and traditions may be private, to be understood and used only by members of that tribe, and some tribes may tell certain stories during certain times of the year; this must be respected (EU3).

### Essential Questions

- How does who I am shape my views?
- How does a tribe’s oral tradition contribute to its unique cultural heritage?
- How and when can we use the knowledge that as we learn history there may be more than one point of view? More than one story?

### Students will be able to...

- research a tribe to learn about its oral history (this may include a tribe which keeps such history and tradition private).
- explain what they have learned about a tribe’s oral history.
- retell tribal oral histories in class discussions.



## Students will know...

- the etiquette involved in politely researching and respecting a tribe's traditions. For example, prior to researching, the class will discuss how to research and how to ask about oral history when interviewing tribal members.
- oral histories/stories from at least two tribes and how a tribe's oral tradition contributes to its unique cultural heritage.
- where and how to apply their new skills in recognizing and respecting diverse points of view in their reading and discussion of history.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Research a tribe's oral history, traditions, and stories. Write a summary of what you have learned. This can be a retelling of the tribe's oral history (an event), or it can be a summary.
2. Retell the story, sharing it in discussion. Use your written summary for talking points. If another student has researched the same tribal history, compare your summaries.
3. Explain what you learned about a Montana tribe's unique cultural heritage through its oral history. This can be a written activity, class presentation, and/or poster board presentation.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities

Introduce the lesson and give each student a copy of the "Oral Histories of American Indian Tribes" pages at the end of this lesson. After the class reads the information, facilitate a class discussion and summarize the key ideas from the handout.

Next, show the following clip called [Buffalo and Porcupine - Northern Cheyenne Trickster Story](#). This traditional trickster story provides students with an opportunity to hear a tribal specific story told by a tribal member.

Facilitate another class discussion regarding their reactions to the video. Connect concepts from the story back to the handout.

Compare written and oral histories and review how American Indians are/were portrayed in history books. If the history book you are using in your classroom has a section on explorers of North America, have students quickly look at specific pages where "discovery" is discussed — for example, Columbus, Dutch explorers, English explorers. How are American Indians written about in the section? Which specific tribes are discussed, or are any specific tribes discussed?

Review key ideas regarding oral history and point of view. Take time to explore the definition of "discovery" and make sure students are aware that "discovery" of an area is not necessarily a discovery. Indigenous people had been in North and South America for many thousands of years. At the time of these early encounters, the European explorers were entering a very old world.

Each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the "discovery" of North America. American Indian people had strong oral traditions and the traditional

stories told ranged from origin stories, star stories, and trickster stories. These stories contain valuable histories, and many are still told in the same manner they have been for thousands of years.

Traditional stories provide an engaging and fun way to learn about tribal histories, cultural traditions, and traditional values. They also provide students with an opportunity to practice their listening skills.

Now get your students ready for research. Have students (individually or in small groups) select a tribe they intend to research. Remind them they are looking specifically for a tribe's oral histories or stories. They could also conduct research by type of story without having to focus on just one tribe. Remind students they will be taking notes to make a summary of a historical event or story. They must be thorough, leaving nothing out.

Direct students to the [Indian Reading Series](#). Here they will have access to many different types of stories that were written by tribal members.

Ask students to find one story that is written down and another story from a video source. Several video resources are included in this lesson, and they feature tribal members sharing traditional stories. This is where they get to practice their listening skills.

Spend one-two class periods researching tribal histories and taking notes. Reserve a third class period for students to write an accurate retelling or summarization or prepare a poster board presentation for the class. If they have learned other related information (for example, the tribe they selected does not share its stories, or the stories are told only at certain times or only by certain tribal members), that information should be shared in a final, separate paragraph.

At mid-point of the second day, groups should begin sharing their research in small group discussions and helping one another to ensure complete information is being summarized. The third day is spent in writing the summarization/retelling.

When students hand in their final work; they should also attach the notes they wrote as they researched.

Class members report on the tribal oral history. Best listening behavior is encouraged by the teacher, so all students take notes on each tribe as it is reported. The notes are included as a graded activity.

Students who are not able to complete all of the assignment (for example, a student with an IEP) may participate with the larger group based on their different needs and abilities.

This particular lesson may take two-four days (50-minute periods), depending on students' backgrounds. Discussion and frequent active rethinking should keep student engagement and learning high.

## Resources - Tribal Oral Histories and Stories

"Essential Understanding 3," [Essential Understanding Regarding Montana Indians](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, Revised 2019.

### Oral Histories/Stories

Bullchild, Percy. *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985.

[Indian Reading Series: Stories and Legends of the Northwest](#). Portland, OR: Education Northwest, 1972.

***Ktunaxa Legends.*** Pablo, MT: Salish Kootenai College Press, 1997.

Medicine Crow, Joseph. ***From the Heart of the Crow Country: The Crow Indians' Own Stories.*** New York, NY: Orion, 1992.

[Montana Skies: Blackfeet Astronomy \(videos\).](#) Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2011.

[Montana Skies: Crow Astronomy \(videos\).](#) Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2011.

Old Coyote, Henry and Barney. ***The Way of the Warrior: Stories of the Crow People.*** Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

[Star Stories.](#) Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2019.

[Stories To Pass On.](#) Dubois, WY: Native Memory Project.

[Storytelling with Duane Hollow Horn Bear.](#) WoLakota Project.

# Oral Histories of American Indian Tribes

## Essential Questions We Will Discuss

1. What type of story is this? What is the story about? What did you learn?
2. How does a tribe's oral traditions and history contribute to its unique cultural heritage?
3. Why is it important to examine historical issues from multiple perspectives?

## Information You Need to Know

Each Montana tribe has a history, just as your history book presents the story of America's known historical events. Traditionally, a Montana tribe's history can be traced back to the beginning of time. Many of the Montana tribal histories are only told orally. They were passed down from generation to generation so the history of the tribe could be known to each new generation. While most tribes did not have a written language, their histories tell the story of what happened in the past.

The timeframes of a tribe's history differ from a written history book, because time was observed differently within that tribe. Written history texts refer to dates based on a calendar, as though a list of dates is the only way to organize a history. A tribe's oral history is also based on time, but time may be expressed through the description of the seasons in the stories handed down through careful retellings.

## Things to keep in mind as you do your research a tribe's oral history and its origin story

- Montana tribal histories differ in point of view from your American history book.
- Your history book and a tribal history present "points of view;" each point of view changes depending on whose story is being told.
- Identifying and respecting another culture's viewpoints of historical events is basic to your understanding of how histories can influence our ideas and points of view.
- Your history book may identify explorers (at the beginning of the text) as "discoverers" of the American continent. However, hundreds of tribes lived on the continent prior to European exploration. These tribes all kept oral traditional histories, passed down carefully from generation to generation.
- Tribal creation stories are not myths or legends. They are oral histories, passed down from generation to generation.
- Many of the Montana tribal histories place their people in current traditional lands in Montana.
- Some tribes only tell certain stories and histories during a certain time of the year—a particular season.
- Some tribes regard their histories and traditions as very private, and not to be shared with those outside of the tribe. If you are researching, respect the tribal traditions and do not ask for specific information about ceremonies and stories in that case.

## Vocabulary

### **Ancestor**

A person from whom one is descended; a relative who lived in the past.

### **Culture**

A system of beliefs, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and are shared by a group of people. It includes customs, language, and material artifacts. These are given from generation to generation.

### **Heritage**

Something passed down from one generation to the next generation.

### **History**

The study of the past; a record of what happened in the past. It is a story most often related through the experience of the teller.

### **Oral History**

Each tribe has a history that can be traced to the beginning of time. Many of these histories are told only orally, as they have been passed down through generations. Some tribes may only tell certain stories during certain times of the year, and this should be respected. **Important to know:** oral histories are primary resources — they provide firsthand evidence of historical events, although they are not written down.

### **Oral Tradition**

A tribe's traditional beliefs and legends that have been passed from generation to generation by word.

### **Point of View**

The standpoint from which something is considered or valued. **Synonyms:** Standpoint, viewpoint, way of thinking, perspective.

### **Primary Source**

Primary resources provide firsthand evidence of historical events. They are, generally, unpublished. These include materials such as manuscripts, photographs, maps, artifacts, audio and video recordings, oral histories, postcards, and posters. [UCLA Institute on Primary Sources]

### **Secondary Source**

Materials such as textbooks, which synthesize and interpret primary source materials. [UCLA Institute on Primary Sources]

### **Tolerance**

Respecting beliefs and actions which differ from one's own beliefs and ideas. Respecting what others value and do.