

1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area:	Language Arts and Social Studies
Grade Level:	Grades 6-8 (adaptable for younger and older students)
Suggested Duration:	2-4 Days
Tribe:	Wampanoag
Place:	Plymouth, MA
Time:	1621

About the Author and Illustrator

This text is a collaborative effort between the National Geographic Society, Plymouth Plantation, and authors, Catherine O'Neill Grace and Margaret M. Bruchac (Abenaki). Photographs are by Sisse Brimberg and Cotton Coulson.

Text Summary (from inside flap front cover)

1621 A New Look at Thanksgiving provides us with a more accurate understanding of the historical events that surround the popular narrative of the first Thanksgiving. Students who engage with this text will be exposed to a more inclusive look at history and gain insight into how some of the common themes and issues associated with Thanksgiving have no factual historical basis but were invented or made up over the years. The authors state the following: "Taking a new look at Thanksgiving means putting aside the myth. It means taking a new look at history. It means questioning what we know. It means recovering lost voices – the voices of the Wampanoag people."

Materials Needed

- Grace, Catherine O'Neill and Margaret M. Bruchac with Plimoth Plantation. *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2001.
- Seale, Doris (Santee/Cree), Beverly Slapin, and Carolyn Silverman (Cherokee), eds. *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. Berkeley, CA: Oyate, 1998.
- Links to on-line resources for background information, teaching strategies and primary and secondary sources.

Essential Understandings and Montana Content Standards

Essential Understanding 3 The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally,



each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories pre-date the “discovery” of North America.

Essential Understanding 6 History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.

Montana Content Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy – Sixth Grade

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies (RH.6-8)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas **RH.6-8.9** Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic, including sources by and about American Indians.

Social Studies Standards

(4) The history content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:

(b) analyze how the historical events relate to one another and are shaped by historical context, including societies in the Americas.

(c) analyze how, since European contact, historical events and policies have mutually impacted American Indian and European societies;

(f) understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events;

(g) analyze how people's perspectives shaped the historical narratives they created;

(h) identify limitations and biases in primary and secondary sources, specifically regarding misinformation and stereotypes.

Learning Targets

- Identify and use relevant primary and secondary sources when researching and to support writing.
- Compare and contrast the treatment of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Assessment

- Use the Guiding Questions based upon the text to assist with assessment.
- Participation with in-class reading, assignments, and discussion is required of all students.

- Individual/group presentations about what they learned about the first Thanksgiving.

Learning Plan

Day 1

It may be important to preface the lesson with a statement about the overall purpose of gaining an informed opinion, supported through evidence, of the history of Thanksgiving from thorough primary source analysis. *Our intent is not to take away Thanksgiving but to ensure that evidence can be cited to support the declaration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Students will discover that its declaration occurred in 1863.*

Introduce the lesson through one of the following activities:

Essential Question: Why was Thanksgiving declared a national holiday?

Option 1

Ask students to write and share their writing in small group and a large group using one of these prompts.

- ✓ What are your family traditions for Thanksgiving or your favorite traditions (some students may not have a family to celebrate Thanksgiving with)?
- ✓ What is your favorite Thanksgiving story or holiday/celebration story?

Guide students during sharing to find similarities in our stories and experiences.

Option 2

Write “Thanksgiving Day” in the center of the board and circle it. Ask students for their associations with it. Record their ideas graphically by writing words so they radiate out from the center. Related ideas can be grouped. Encourage associations and ask open-ended questions to simulate groups that are having a hard time getting going. As energy tapers off, ask students to read what is on the web and ask some or all of them the following debrief questions:

- What do you notice about the web?
- Is there anything that surprises you?
- Do you see any word clusters that are related?
- Are there any generalizations you can make at this point?

Option 3

Ask students: *What do we know about the “First Thanksgiving”? What do we know about relationships between Native Americans and Europeans in North America?* Regarding the first Thanksgiving, students will likely say pilgrims and Native Americans feasted together after the first harvest. Regarding relationships between Native Americans and Europeans, student’s answers will likely include that relationships were tense and complicated, there were disputes over land and resources, treaties were

signed and not honored, and Native Americans were forced to move and live on reservations. Ask: *Do you think Native American viewpoints have been recognized and addressed throughout history? Can you think of modern day Native American concerns?* Some students may mention disputes about sports mascots, some may mention Native American reservations, while others may not think of examples.

After the introductory activity display this picture, [“The First Thanksgiving 1621” by J.L.G. Ferris](#), on the board. Invite students to choose a person to depict in the painting. Students will go to a designed spot in the room and still act the person in the painting. One student is a reporter. That student has a microphone (real or fake) and goes around asking each person how they feel or what they are doing. Students are then asked to complete this [Analyze a Photograph](#) (National Archives) checklist.

Ask students to self-assess their understanding of the topics covered during the day with these guiding questions. What is Thanksgiving? What myths or misinformation was in the historic painting? What questions do you have about the real story behind the first Thanksgiving?

Day 2

Guiding Question: What do we know about the history of Thanksgiving?

Provide students with copies of the following primary source documents:

[Letter from Edward Winslow to a friend, December 11, 1621 \(abridged\)](#)

[Sarah Hale’s Letter to President Lincoln](#)

[President Lincoln’s Proclamation](#)

Have students either read individually or jigsaw the articles. Any primary source analysis guide can be used to analyze the documents. Here is a suggested resource: [Analyze a Written Document](#) (National Archives).

Now introduce the book, *1621 A New Look at Thanksgiving* by reading the summary from the inside front cover flap. Afterwards distribute additional copies, if you have them, to the class.

Review the text with students and have students read in class. The reading could be done in small groups if there are not enough copies for all students. This activity could be an individual homework assignment if there are enough copies for each student.

Have students answer the Guiding Questions using information from the text (individually or in small groups).

Guiding Questions:

- Where was the traditional Wampanoag territory?
- How did they view the land?
- What is oral history?
- What is the Wampanoag language called?
- What impact did disease have upon the Wampanoag?
- Why was it so devastating?

- What were the origins of Plymouth Colony?
- Why did the colonists think they could just "take" land?
- In what ways did the interests of the colonists and the Wampanoag conflict?
- What are some of the common misconceptions associated with Thanksgiving?
- Why do you think there are differing narratives about the first Thanksgiving?
- What foods were eaten at the 1621 gathering?
- In what ways did the Wampanoag help the early colonists?

Review the teacher background materials and provide students with links to the suggested resources. Have students identify primary sources and secondary sources.

Lead a discussion about primary source and secondary sources. Ask students if they can define primary and secondary sources. Make note of their definitions on the board. Summarize their ideas in a working definition for the class or provide students with an existing definition.

Exit Ticket: Have students identify a primary source and secondary source used from the day and provide a summary of the information presented.

Day 3

Guiding Question: How do you know the accuracy of information?

On the board have the following written: Thanksgiving: primary sources and secondary sources. Have students take out a blank sheet of writing paper and make two columns with these headings. Based upon new information from the text, have students list primary sources in the first column and secondary sources in the second column. This could be done individually or in small groups. Students should review their notes from Day 2 on the primary and secondary sources.

Direct students to identify similarities and difference between the information provided in the two documents.

Have students report out individually or in small groups Myth vs. Fact. Encourage them to make connections with other historical events and their own experiences.

Highlight common themes on the board to reinforce the main learning targets. Have students reflect on this information compared to their understanding on the first day.

Day 4

Assessment

Have students respond to the sources by making a claim about uncovering the truth behind the first Thanksgiving. Possible cues for measurement may include introducing claim(s), acknowledging alternate or opposing claims, and organizing the reasons and evidence logically.

Have students do small group or individual presentations about what they learned regarding the Wampanoag people and their interactions with early colonists, e.g., research paper, poster presentation, participation in an on-line discussion forum, and multimedia presentation formats such as a video or podcast. Present information regarding the development of our current Thanksgiving holiday.

Teacher Background Materials

[National Museum of the American Indian: American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving](#)

[Plymouth Plantation Teacher & Educator Resources](#) Visit the site for sample lesson plans, information, and teaching ideas.

[“Rethinking Thanksgiving: Myths and Misgivings”](#) This article has background information and links to other resources that look at Thanksgiving from American Indian perspectives.

[Interview with Dr. James Loewen from C-Span](#) This interview includes historical facts regarding Squanto.

[“The Myths of the Thanksgiving Story and the Lasting Damage They Imbue,”](#) Smithsonian Magazine

[“Thanksgiving from an Indigenous Perspective”](#) Smithsonian Magazine

Vocabulary

(Some terms were defined by dictionary.com)

Colonist - A person who settles in a new colony or moves into new country.

Myth - A widely held but false collective belief used to justify a social institution.

Pilgrim - A traveler or wanderer, especially in a foreign place. (Please note although dictionary.com and many Americans refer to Pilgrims as being at Plymouth colony, Plymouth settlers did not refer to themselves as pilgrims. They called themselves Separatists or Puritans.)

Plymouth - Early colony established in 1620 by the Separatists and Puritans.

Sachem - Traditional name for chief in the Wampanoag language.

Wampanoag - People of the first light.

Explorer- One who explores, especially one who explores a geographic area.

Bibliography

Grace, Catherine O'Neill and Margaret M. Bruchac, with Plimoth Plantation. *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2001.

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (revised edition). New York, NY: Touchstone Simon & Schuster, 2007. This book has an excellent analysis of the first Thanksgiving and deconstructs some of the common myths (chapter 3).

Seale, Doris (Santee/Cree), Beverly Slapin, and Carolyn Silverman (Cherokee), eds. *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. Berkeley, CA: Oyate, 1998.