

# Critical Thinking About the Arrival of Columbus

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade level: 6-8  
Suggested Duration: Three 50-minute class periods

## State 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

- (2) The economics content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:  
(a) explain how economic decisions impact individuals, businesses, and society, including Indigenous societies.
- (3) The geography content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:  
(e) explain the role and impact of spatial patterns of settlement and movement in shaping societies and cultures, including Indigenous cultures.
- (4) The history content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:  
(c) analyze how, since European contact, historical events and policies have mutually impacted American Indian and European societies.

### Understandings

- As Europeans arrived to the “new world,” they encountered thousands of tribes of indigenous peoples already living here. During this period, Europeans developed the ideas that would later “justify” the taking of Indian lands. (EU 5)
- 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. (EU 6)

### Essential Questions

- What were the primary motivations for Columbus as he set out on his expedition?
- Was Columbus ultimately successful in achieving his goals?
- What were the impacts and implications for indigenous peoples of Columbus’s voyage and those that followed?
- Is it appropriate to celebrate Columbus Day?



## Students will be able to...

- Explain the factors that motivated Columbus and other Europeans who explored and colonized the “New World” and the justifications they used.
- Understand and articulate how those factors impacted the indigenous societies of the Americas.
- Articulate their views on the appropriateness of Columbus Day as a national holiday.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Assess whether or not Christopher Columbus was successful in achieving his goals.
2. Articulate the ways in which European policies of religious and political supremacy impacted both Indigenous and European societies.
3. Determine whether or not they support Columbus Day and/or Indigenous Peoples Day as a national holiday, using evidence and analysis to explain how they have reached their conclusion.

## State 3 Learning Plan

### Day One

Pose the question “Who discovered who in 1492?” Facilitate a brief class discussion and begin the class by telling the students they will be exploring Christopher Columbus and his legacy in more detail over the next couple of days. First, split them into groups and give them five minutes to brainstorm everything they know about Columbus. Have each group designate a recorder and reporter. Afterwards, bring everyone back together and have students report out the things they talked about. A few common responses might be he discovered America, he proved the earth was round, he was a famous explorer, he sailed for the king and queen of Spain, he was the first person to meet Native Americans, he was in search of a route to India. Note: Did any groups point out violent atrocities committed by Columbus and his men against the Taino Indians? Remind students that Columbus Day is a holiday celebrated across the United States. Pose the question “Why might some people not want to celebrate Columbus Day?” Call on random students to share their thoughts and facilitate a class discussion.

Distribute the “Timeline of Columbus and the Taino.” Have students utilize a 3-2-1 prompt as they review the timeline. They should write down three things they learned, two things they found interesting, and one thing they would like to further explore. At the conclusion of the activity, have students share what they learned and discuss where appropriate. Pose this question: “Was Columbus successful in his endeavors?” Suggested pro and con talking points for facilitating a class discussion:

- He is commonly credited with discovering America, ultimately leading to the establishment of our nation.

- His discovery led to a new interest in the Western hemisphere and additional “discoveries” by other European explorers.
- America celebrates a holiday in his honor.
- Many historians have credited him for his outstanding seamanship and navigation skills.
- His arrival in the Americas and he and his men’s treatment of the Tainos resulted in millions of deaths.
- His promises of gold to the king and queen were largely unfulfilled. He did send slaves back to Europe, but many died of sickness and disease. In desperation to find gold, his men tortured or killed Tainos who could not provide enough gold every three weeks.
- His men did not respect his leadership as Governor of Espanola and complained to the king that his operation was a disaster. They also mutinied against his brother’s rule while he was away.
- He was ultimately removed from the governorship and died without distinction.

Facilitate the discussion by working through the talking points and follow up on any relevant thoughts or ideas raised by students.

Now circle back to Columbus Day and show the Vox video: [Why the US Celebrates Columbus Day.](#)

Ask students to revisit their original 3-2-1 prompt and update it. Have them turn it in before the end of the class.

## Day Two – Historical Context

Recap the discussion and themes of day one. Then explain to the students that part of the often-untold story of Columbus is what happened with the European explorers and colonizers that followed him. Their harsh and violent treatment of the Natives they encountered in North and South America was like that of Columbus and his men. The European colonizers justified this by saying they were following the will of God who had anointed St. Peter and the Pope as his messengers who could decree his will. Popes issued **Papal Bulls** which were considered a decree from God and carried the weight of law in European societies. Papal Bulls regarding Indigenous peoples specifically stated they had to conform to the ways of their European colonizers and adopt their religion if they did not want war waged against them. The Papal Bulls also said it would be their fault if Europeans inflicted violence and warfare on them due to their failure to comply.

Close analytical reading activity

Tell students they are going to read a decree to Indigenous tribes from 1510 that was based upon a Papal Bull of 1493. Divide the students into small groups and assign them each a paragraph of the Requerimiento to review and summarize. Some vocabulary assistance and facilitation may be needed due to the older language and unfamiliar vocabulary words. Students might have to look up or search for the definitions of words before or during the activity. Please note there are helpful hints to the right that summarize or draw attention to specific language. After all groups have completed their summaries, start with the group assigned to the first paragraph and have each share out. As each group presents, summarize

the overall message of the document and highlight language that might be revealing or surprising (i.e., lands occupied by Europeans were considered donated to them and their kings and queens under decree of the Pope.)

Ask students to reflect upon and discuss the following points:

- Papal Bulls were often read to Natives in Latin or read to an empty beach as Europeans advanced on a newly “donated” island or territory.
- Why might some people have a negative perspective regarding Columbus?
- How did early interactions between European explorers and Indigenous peoples influence the belief in “Manifest Destiny”?

Now circle back to Columbus Day and the themes of the video from the day before. Ask students if there is anything in the Requerimiento that impacts their thinking about celebrating Columbus. How may his treatment of Native people influenced explorers who came after him?

The video mentions that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the president who declared October 12 as a national holiday. Distribute copies of the speech he gave when he made the declaration. Have the students read the speech and write down their thoughts regarding the following questions:

- What things does FDR leave out of his speech about Columbus?
- What picture does he seem to be painting of Columbus?
- Why might he want to leave certain parts of the story of Columbus out?

Included in this lesson are two Native American perspectives regarding Columbus, direct students to read these two perspectives and compare/contrast with the speech made by President Roosevelt. To save time, this activity could be done with three groups each reading a different perspective and then have them report out their summaries.

Facilitate a class discussion regarding their reactions to the articles and this will most likely take the remainder of the period.

### Day Three

Start off the class period by recapping the activities and themes of days one and two. Facilitate a short discussion regarding the appropriateness of celebrating Columbus Day. Highlight pros and cons to ensure robust discussion and student analysis. Mention that some states have renamed Columbus Day to honor the Indigenous people who resided in the Americas before Columbus and are still here today. Explain that Montana is one of these states where legislation was introduced to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day but that the legislative efforts in Montana failed during the 2019 and 2021 sessions.

### Assessment

Explain that their final task is to write a one to two-page paper that argues for or against celebrating Columbus Day. They must be able to back up their perspective with supporting evidence and clear explanation. (Optional assignment: Is there a way to acknowledge both Columbus and Indigenous people on the same day? Explain how this might be done and provide supporting evidence and justification.)

Provide time for writing during the remainder of the class period and assist students in their outlining and writing efforts as appropriate. If time permits or you would like to make the lesson more open ended, you may also offer the option of presenting the argument in a poem, rap, or other creative presentation. The supporting evidence they cite can also be peer reviewed by fellow students as a way for them to consider deeper, more diverse perspectives and thoughts before formulating their final opinion.

## Resources

[Why the US Celebrates Columbus Day – video](#)

[Requerimiento, Council of Castille, 1510](#)

[President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Declaration of Columbus Day](#)

## Timeline of Columbus and the Taino

**Approximately 8 B.C.:** The People who call themselves Taino, or “men of good,” arrive in the region. With great care for the earth, the Tainos are able to feed millions of people. No one in a community goes hungry. They play sports and recite poetry. They are great inventors and travel from island to island. One Spanish priest reported he never saw two Tainos fighting.

**1451:** Columbus is born probably in the Italian port city, Genoa. At the time of his birth, there may be as many as 70 to 100 million people living in what will one day be called the Americas. They are of many nationalities, with perhaps 2,000 different languages.

**1484:** Columbus first presents his idea to the king of Portugal for reaching the Indies by sailing west. The plan is rejected.

**April 1492:** Ferdinand and Isabella agree to Columbus’s westward voyage to the Indies. They also agree to his demands: ten percent of all the wealth returned to Spain, the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea, governor, and viceroy to all the territory he discovers.

**August 3, 1492:** Columbus departs from Palos.

**October 12, 1492:** Juan Rodriguez Bermejo, a sailor on the Pinta, shouts, “Land, land!” Columbus later claims he first spotted land and thus will collect the lifetime pension promised. The ships arrive at the island, Guanahani, where Columbus takes possession of the island for Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus receives presents from the people he encounters and gives them some red caps, glass beads, and “many other things of little value.” The first thing he tries to ask the people is “if they have gold.”

**October 14:** Columbus’s thoughts turn to slavery: “. . . When your Highnesses so command, they [the Indians] can be carried off to the Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with 50 men they would all be kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished.”

**December 9:** Columbus sails into the harbor of the island the Taino people call Bohio. Its plains are “the loveliest in the world.” It reminded Columbus of Spain. He calls the island Espanola.

**October/November/December:** Columbus’s every move is determined by where he believes he can find gold. On December 23 he writes in his journal: “Our Lord in His Goodness guide me that I may find this gold, I mean their mine, for I have many here who say they know it.” Still, by mid-December Columbus has found very little gold.

**December 26:** Realizing he will have to leave men behind, Columbus orders a fort and tower built. He writes it is necessary to make the Indians realize they must serve Spain’s king and queen “with love and fear.”

**January 2, 1493:** Columbus prepares to leave Bohio. He leaves behind 39 men and orders them “to discover the mine of gold.”

**February 15:** Columbus returns with relatively little of value.

**May 28, 1493:** The king and queen confirm that Columbus, his sons, and his heirs will be Admiral and Viceroy and Governor of the islands and mainland discovered “now and forever.”

**September/October 1493 (approximate):** The men left behind at La Navidad brutally mistreat the Tainos. They steal, take slaves, and rape women. In response, the Taino cacique, Caonabo, kills all the Spaniards on the island.

**September 25, 1493:** Columbus's second voyage begins. His fleet includes 17 ships and between 1,200 and 1,500 men (no women). Pressure is high for Columbus to make good on his promises.

**November 3, 1493:** Columbus lands on Dominica. On Guadeloupe, his men go ashore "looting and destroying all they found."

**Early February 1494:** Columbus sends 12 of the 17 ships back to Spain for more supplies. Several dozen Indian slaves are taken aboard, "men and women and boys and girls," he writes. He justifies this by writing they are cannibals and thus slavery will more readily "secure the welfare of their souls."

Columbus recommends to the king and queen that supplies needed in the Indies could be paid for in slaves.

**September 14:** Columbus heads to Puerto Rico to raid for Carib slaves. However, he becomes ill, and his officers return the ships to Isabella.

**November 1494:** Returning to Spain, mutineers against Columbus complain to the king and queen. They say there is no gold and the enterprise is a joke.

**February 1495:** Columbus rounds up 1,600 Tainos, the same people he had earlier described as "so full of love and without greed." Some 550 of them, "among the best males and females," writes colonist Michele de Cuneo, are chained and taken to ships to be sent to Spain as slaves.

**1495:** Columbus establishes the tribute system. Every Taino 14 or older is required to fill a hawk's bell full of gold every three months. Those who comply are given copper tokens to wear around their necks. Where Columbus decides there is little gold, 25 pounds of spun cotton is required. The Spaniards cut the hands off those who do not comply; they are left to bleed to death. As La Casas writes, the tribute is "impossible and intolerable."

**March 24, 1495:** Columbus and his brothers Diego and Bartolome, who had arrived earlier, send an armed force to the mountains to put down Taino resistance to Spanish brutality.

**October 1495:** Responding to reports of Columbus's misrule, the king and queen send an investigator to Espanola.

**March 1496:** Columbus departs for Spain. Two ships make the journey. On them, Columbus forces 30 Taino prisoners. Columbus arrives and awaits an answer from the king and queen to his request for a third voyage.

**May 30, 1498:** Columbus's third voyage begins.

**Mid-August 1498:** Columbus lands in Espanola. The admiral finds a rebellion against his brothers' rule.

**1500:** By now the Spaniards have established at least seven forts in Espanola and at least 340 gallows.

**August 1500:** The king and queen, upset over the negative reports of Columbus's bad government, though not his mistreatment of Tainos, send a commissioner to take charge in Espanola. The commissioner arrives amid another uprising against the Columbus brothers. He arrests them and in October sends them to Spain for trial.

**Late October:** Columbus arrives in Cadiz in chains. A few months later, he presents his case to the king and queen. He demands he be reinstated governor. He will make one more voyage but will never regain his power.

**May 20, 1506:** Columbus dies in Valladolid, Spain.

**1542:** Bartolome de la Casas writes that a mere 200 Tainos still live in Espanola. One scholar recently estimated that perhaps more than three million Tainos lived there when Columbus first arrived.

## Interview with Suzan Harjo

*Why aren't you joining in the celebrations of the Columbus quincentenary?*

As Native American peoples in this red quarter of Mother Earth, we have no reason to celebrate an invasion that caused the demise of so many of our people and is still causing destruction today. The Europeans stole our land and killed our people.

But because the quincentenary is a cause celebre, it provides an opportunity to put forth Native American perspectives on the next 500 years.

*Columbus was just "a man of his times." Why are you so critical of him? Why not look at the positive aspects of his legacy?*

For people who are in survival mode, it's very difficult to look at the positive aspects of death and destruction, especially when it is carried through to our present. There is a reason we are the poorest people in America. There is a reason we have the highest teen suicide rate. There is a reason why our people are ill housed and in poor health, and we do not live as long as the majority population.

That reason has to do with the fact that we were in the way of Western civilization and we were in the way of westward expansion. We suffered the "excesses" of civilization such as murder, pillage, rape, destruction of the major waterways, destruction of land, the destruction and pollution of the air.

What are those "positive" aspects of the Columbus legacy? If we're talking about the horse, yeah, that's good. We like the horse. Indians raised the use of the horse to high military art, especially among the Cheyenne people and the tribes of the plains states.

Was that a good result of that invasion? Yes. Is it something we would have traded for the many Indian peoples who are no longer here because of that invasion? No.

We also like the beads that came from Europe, and again we raised their use to a high art. Would we have traded those beads for the massacres of our people, such as the Sand Creek massacre (in which U.S. soldiers massacred hundreds of Native American men, women, and children at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864)? No.

Why do we focus on Columbus rather than any number of U.S. presidents who were also responsible for the death and destruction of Indian people? Because it's his 500 years; it's his quincentenary.

*What should be the goal and perspective of teachers when telling their elementary and high school students about Columbus?*

First, that no one knows the truth about Columbus. His story is a very complex history in and of itself. Too often, this history is posed as romantic myth, and the uncomfortable facts about Columbus are eliminated.

Explaining the unpleasant truths about Columbus does not take away from the fact that he was able to lurch over to these shores in three little boats. In fact, it gives the story of

Columbus more dimension. It also makes it easier for kids in school to accept not only Columbus but other things.

Teachers need to respect the truth. What happens if I'm sitting in a classroom and teachers are telling me that Thomas Jefferson was one of the greatest men in the world, and I also know that he owned slaves, but they don't tell me that? What am I going to do when I'm told, "don't use or abuse drugs or alcohol"? Will I think there may be another side to that too? What else am I being told that isn't true?

Kids are smart. And they have not experienced enough setbacks to know that they have to be sheep. But that's what they're taught in the public school - how to exercise not personal discipline, but top-down discipline. It's the "do as you're told" approach to the world, rather than trying to help kids understand their place in the world.

We have to inject more truth in the classroom generally. And that only comes from discussion. I guess I'm a fan of the Socratic method.

*What are the key struggles that native people face today?*

We need, in the first instance, basic human rights such as religious freedom. Or how about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and other things that many people in the United States view as standard fare but are out of reach for Indian people?

There is also the issue of land and treaty rights. We have property that we don't own and we should, and we have property that we own and we don't control and we should.

We have treaties with the United States that are characterized in the U.S. constitution as the supreme law of the land. Yet every one, without exception, of nearly 400 treaties signed between native peoples and the U.S. government has been broken. Every one of them.

A good place to start would be for the United States to live up to every treaty agreement. It's also the way you get at resolving some of the problems of poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and poor health.

If we don't handle the big things, we can't get to the manifestations of the problem. We have to go to the basic human rights issues, the basic treaty rights issues.

If we don't resolve these issues, then all people in this country are going to be complicit in the continuing effort to wipe out our Indian people. It's as simple as that.

## Article on Columbus Day

The following article was received with some hurt and angry feelings among many people of Indian and non-Indian communities alike. However, opinions such as these exist and can provide for productive dialogue for students in middle and high school and their teachers.

### **On Columbus Day, Celebrate Western Civilization, Not Multiculturalism**

By Michael S. Berliner

Columbus Day approaches and this year has a special meaning. Christopher Columbus is a carrier of Western Civilization and the very values attacked by terrorists on September 11. To the “politically correct,” Columbus Day is an occasion to be mourned. They have mourned, they have attacked, and they have intimidated schools across the country into replacing Columbus Day celebrations with “ethnic diversity” days.

The politically correct view is that Columbus did not discover America, because people had lived there for thousands of years. Worse yet, it’s claimed, the main legacy of Columbus is death and destruction. Columbus is routinely vilified as a symbol of slavery and genocide, and the celebration of his arrival likened to a celebration of Hitler and the Holocaust. The attacks on Columbus are ominous, because the actual target is Western Civilization.

Did Columbus “discover” America? Yes - in every important respect. This does not mean that no human eye had been cast on America before Columbus arrived. It does mean that Columbus brought America to the attention of the civilized world, i.e., to the growing, scientific civilizations of Western Europe. The result, ultimately, was the United States of America. It was Columbus’ discovery for Western Europe that led to the influx of ideas and people on which this nation was founded – and on which it still rests. The opening of America brought the ideas and achievements of Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, and the thousands of thinkers, writers, and inventors who followed.

Prior to 1492 what is now the United States was sparsely inhabited, unused, and undeveloped. The inhabitants were primarily hunter-gatherers, wandering, wandering across the land, living from hand to mouth and from day to day. There was virtually no change, no growth for thousands of years. With rare exception, life was nasty, brutish, and short: there was no wheel, no written language, no division of labor, little agriculture and scant permanent settlement; but there were endless, bloody wars. Whatever the problems it brought, the vilified Western culture also brought enormous, undreamed-of benefits, without which most of today’s Indians would be infinitely poorer or not even alive.

Columbus should be honored, for in so doing, we honor Western Civilization. But the critics do not want to bestow such honor, because their real goal is to denigrate the values of Western Civilization and to glorify the primitivism, mysticism, and collectivism embodied in the tribal cultures of American Indians. They decry the glorification of the west as “cultural imperialism” and “Euro centrism.” We should, they claim, replace our reverence for Western Civilization with multiculturalism, which regards all cultures (including vicious tyrannies) as morally equal. In fact, they aren’t. Some cultures are better than others: a free society is better than slavery;

reason is better than brute force as a way to deal with other men; productivity is better than stagnation. In fact, Western Civilization stands for man at his best.

It stands for the values that make human life possible: reason, science, self-reliance, individualism, ambition, productive achievement. The values of Western Civilization are values for all men; they cut across gender, ethnicity, and geography. We should honor Western Civilization not for the ethnocentric reason that some of us happen to have European ancestors but because it is the objectively superior culture.

Underlying the political collectivism of the anti-Columbus crowd is a racist view of human nature. They claim that one's identity is primarily ethnic: if one thinks his ancestors were good, he will supposedly feel good about himself; if he thinks his ancestors were bad, he will supposedly feel self-loathing. But it doesn't work; the achievements or failures of one's ancestors are monumentally irrelevant to one's actual worth as a person. Only the lack of a sense of self leads one to look to others to provide what passes for a sense of identity. Neither the deeds nor misdeeds of others are his own; he can take neither credit nor blame for what someone else chose to do. There are no racial achievements or racial failures, only individual achievements and individual failures. One cannot inherit moral worth or moral vice. "Self-esteem through others" is a self-contradiction.

Thus the sham of "preserving one's heritage" as a rational life goal. Thus the cruel hoax of "multicultural education" as an antidote to racism: it will continue to create more racism. Individualism is the only alternative to the racism of political correctness. We must recognize that everyone is a sovereign entity, with the power of choice and independent judgment. That is the ultimate value of Western Civilization, and it should be proudly proclaimed.