

# Historical Inaccuracy in Movies – Pocahontas and Peter Pan

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: Grades 7-8  
Suggested Duration: Three 50-Minute Periods

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

#### Social Studies Standards

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

### Understandings

- 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 (EU 6).
- Gain insight into how films such as Disney's *Pocahontas* and *Peter Pan* lead to the perpetuation of myths and misinformation regarding American Indians.

### Essential Questions

- What do you know about the story of Pocahontas and John Smith? What happened - when, where, and why?
- How could we find information from various sources about the Pocahontas story?
- What is a film producer's responsibility to historical facts when making movies for young children that are based upon actual historical events/people?
- Is it okay to portray stereotypical and offensive depictions of Native Americans in cartoons?
- What stereotypes do fictional cartoons such as Peter Pan perpetuate?

### Students will be able to...

- develop a better understanding of the story of Pocahontas that goes beyond myth and relies on reported facts.
- analyze film and media to identify and evaluate cultural stereotypes.
- understand how films and media can perpetuate inaccurate or distorted views of history and American Indians.



Students will know...

- key factual information about the life of Pocahontas.
- how to distinguish fact from myth in image and story in films.
- cultural stereotypes about American Indians have been perpetuated in film and media.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Students will watch and evaluate select clips from the 1953 Disney film *Peter Pan*. They will utilize an evaluation checklist to analyze the film for cultural stereotypes.
2. Students will share what they currently know about Pocahontas and then analyze different perspectives regarding how movies have portrayed her and events surrounding early interactions with European colonists and American Indians. Students will gather evidence and present their findings in the form of a brief essay.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities

Setting the stage for examining bias by viewing clips from *Peter Pan*. Start out by displaying this quote from the Disney Plus Channel:

This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together. Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe.

Disney has also created a website called [Stories Matter](#) and here is the statement about *Peter Pan*:

The film portrays Native people in a stereotypical manner that reflects neither the diversity of Native peoples nor their authentic cultural traditions. It shows them speaking in an unintelligible language and repeatedly refers to them as “redskins,” an offensive term. Peter and the Lost Boys engage in dancing, wearing headdresses and other exaggerated tropes, a form of mockery and appropriation of Native peoples’ culture and imagery.

For more background information regarding the stereotypical images in *Peter Pan*, check out this [article from Smithsonian Magazine](#). This short [YouTube clip](#) can be used to analyze for bias. Ask students to utilize the evaluation resource located at the end of this lesson plan as they watch the clip.

Lead a class discussion about the images from the film and ask them to complete a 3 - 2 - 1 prompt to summarize their understandings: Write down three things you saw in the video that caught your

attention, two questions you have about information presented in the video, and one thing you learned about stereotypes.

Examining the blatant bias within *Peter Pan* provides students with a new critical lens for viewing films that feature American Indians. Next, we move on to *Pocahontas* and cultural stereotypes in cartoons that feature real stories from history.

Ask the students to raise their hand if they have seen the Disney version of *Pocahontas*. Have students retell the story portrayed in the movie.

Ask students if they are aware of any historical inaccuracy or issues of bias in the film.

Play an excerpt from the film – it is suggested to only play a five- to ten-minute clip – the links to critical reviews in the resource section should also give you some insight into which segment would be the most relevant to show.

Lead a class discussion regarding the scene watched. Have students identify any issues that may not be historically accurate. Ask them to utilize the evaluation checklist as they watch the clips.

Tell students they will now have an opportunity to learn a more accurate version of the Pocahontas story. First, have them make a list of the historical inaccuracies contained within the current movie.

Make sure to have the evaluation handout prepared for distribution in class.

Allow time in class for students to research historically accurate information about Pocahontas. Ask them to debunk at least five historically inaccurate facts from the movie. It is suggested to have students make a chart with two columns; on one side list out Pocahontas myths, on the other side list out "The Real Story."

Allow students to work in small groups to complete this activity. The use of cooperative learning groups would help ensure class participation in the activity.

Students will be asked to share their newly found facts with the rest of the class.

Have students utilize the suggested links as resources for them to get background information. In addition, you should have students review information from their history textbook about Pocahontas and have them check out resources in the school library that pertain to Pocahontas.

Provide them with time to conduct their research. Suggested assignments for checking understanding include short research paper, poster presentation, participation in an on-line discussion forum, and multimedia presentation formats such as a video or podcast.

The following excerpt is from the Office of Public Instruction document, *Connecting Cultures and Classrooms*.

### **The Pocahontas Myth**

In an Associated Press news release, Karenne Wood, a tribeswoman and chair of the Virginia Council on Indians discussed the movie “The New World” and expressed her disappointment with it. The Pocahontas story has been more of a myth than probably any other story involving Indians in American history. Wood said that the Pocahontas myth is a result of history written by white settlers who wanted to use her as an example of a “good Indian” who became like the Europeans.

Wood said, “In real life, Pocahontas was not yet a teenager when she first encountered John Smith. While the two became friends, there was no romantic relationship between them. Pocahontas married an Indian as a teen but was later abducted by English settlers and held for ransom. During her captivity, she met John Rolfe, an English businessman credited with the introduction of tobacco farming in Virginia. She converted to Christianity, married Rolfe, had a son, and died at age 22 during an official visit to England.” The authors of *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children*, Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, say this about the Pocahontas myth:

The facts of the matter are these: Powhatan was the name of a town on The James River. “Powhatan’s” (Pocahontas’ father) name was Wahunsonacock, and he did not rule over 30 tribes. He was the founder of the Algonquian Confederacy of nations that the invaders, not knowing any better, also called Powhatan, after what they thought was the name of its chief.

The story about John Smith is not true. Historians believe Smith was the one who made it up; he was known to be a great liar. The “myth” does not say that Pocahontas never returned home because she contracted what was probably smallpox and died.

Native women were not drudges and beasts of burden as they are portrayed in the myth. Native people were neither more naive nor more cruel than the white invaders.

### **Resources**

It is highly recommended the Mansky, Pewewardy, and Edgerton articles be read prior to teaching this lesson.

Brant, Beth. “Grandmothers of a New World.” *Through Indian Eyes*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1992. 102-110.

This is the best one if you want something easy to read that probably represents an accurate source. “Beth Brant discusses the “legend” about John Smith and Pocahontas as related in accounts based on John Smith’s story. Then she counters Smith’s account with another Pocahontas story which is based on Brant’s understanding of Pamunkey practices and on her belief in the traditional strength and influence of Native women. Brant suggests

“John Smith’s so-called rescue was, in fact, a mock-execution--a traditional ritual often held after capture of enemies.” (Susag 63)

Edgerton, Gary. ["Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the "White Man's Indian," and the Marketing of Dreams."](#) *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24(2): 90-98, April 1996.

Ferguson, Laura. ["Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom."](#) Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015.

Fox, Sandra J. Ed.D. *Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: Indian Education K-12 Curriculum Guide: Language Arts, Science, Social Studies*. Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction and National Indian School Board Association, Spring 2006.

Green, Rayna. “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture.” *The Massachusetts Review*. 698-714. 16 (Summer 1975)

Jennings, Francis. *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976.

Mansky, Jackie. ["The True Story of Pocahontas."](#) *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 23, 2017.

[Montana PBS Nova Teachers](#). This website has some useful information regarding the topic of Pocahontas and misrepresentation in the movies.

Pewewardy, Cornel. ["The Pocahontas Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for Educators."](#) *Journal of Navajo Education*, Fall/Winter 1996/97.

*Peter Pan*, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wilfred Jackson (1953; Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Studios).

*Pocahontas*, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (1996; Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Studios).

Susag, Dorothea M. “World View, Myth, and Bias in America’s Ethnic and Cultural Roots.” *Roots and Branches: A Resource of Native American Themes, Lessons, and Bibliographies*. Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1998. (60-66)

## Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom Resource Evaluation Checklist

**Title of Resource:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Type of Resource:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Fiction:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Non-Fiction:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Publisher and/or Website:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Publication Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Creator (author, illustrator, director):** \_\_\_\_\_

### General Questions

1. Which tribe or tribes are identified in this resource?
2. If the creator of this resource is *not* a tribal member, were tribal members, cultural committees, or knowledgeable experts consulted about the American Indian content in this resource?
3. Has this resource been reviewed by a tribal cultural committee, tribal historian, or other well-qualified reviewer?
4. Is there anything about this resource that leads you to question the validity, accuracy, or authenticity of the information it presents about American Indians?

### What to watch out for

Does the resource...

- \_\_\_ mix and match cultural attributes or characteristics from different tribes?
- \_\_\_ feature generic “Indians” or a vague “Native American” identity?
- \_\_\_ imply all indigenous peoples from North America have the same language, culture, history, spiritual traditions, or way of life?
- \_\_\_ promote stereotypes or caricatures of American Indian people, tribes, or cultures?
- \_\_\_ imply American Indian people or cultures are inferior or bad?
- \_\_\_ use biased language to create prejudiced impressions of indigenous people or cultures?
- \_\_\_ perpetuate blatant inaccuracies about American Indian people, histories, or cultures?
- \_\_\_ omit, avoid, or minimize indigenous histories, people, or experiences?

- imply all American Indians and/or indigenous cultures are identical or extinct?
- present only a non-Indian point-of-view of history or events?
- mention only American Indians who were useful to Europeans or Euro-Americans?
- avoid controversial or complex issues or gloss over harm inflicted by the policies, non-Indian citizens, military, or government of the United States?
- deny or seek to undermine tribal sovereignty, cultural self-worth, or linguistic value?
- contain any material that would shame or embarrass an American Indian student?
- contain any material that would cause any student to think American Indians or indigenous cultures are inferior, bad, or unimportant?

### **What to include**

Does the resource...

- correctly locate and identify tribes?
- acknowledge the cultural, physical, and linguistic diversity between tribes?
- present information about American Indians respectfully and accurately?
- acknowledge tribal sovereignty and promote a better understanding of the unique relationship between tribes and the federal government?
- recognize and honor the intrinsic value of indigenous cultures as well as the importance of continued cultural and linguistic survival?
- acknowledge indigenous contributions to American society, history, politics, and culture?
- include American Indian perspectives and experiences in a respectful manner?
- address controversial or complex subjects by giving equal voice to all sides, including American Indian people?
- depict the cultural, religious, political, and economic diversity among present-day American Indians?
- recognize and honor contemporary and/or historical American Indians who are heroes or heroines within their own tribes?
- portray American Indian people as intelligent, capable, trustworthy, and caring human beings?
- nurture cultural and personal pride in American Indian students?
- provide positive American Indian role models for all students?
- encourage all students to respect American Indian people, histories, and cultures?
- inspire all students to learn more about American people, histories, and cultures?