

# What is Culture

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: Grade 6  
Suggested Duration: Four days, 50-minutes each

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

Students demonstrate their understanding of culture by describing how the concept of culture relates to their own experiences.

Students will be able to explain some of the features of their own culture.

Students can define culture and explain some of its attributes.

### Understandings

- Everyone has a culture. It shapes how we see ourselves, others, and the world.
- Culture is like an iceberg. Some aspects are visible, and others are beneath the surface. Invisible aspects influence and cause the visible ones.
- All people share basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, respect).
- Each person learns a set of behaviors and beliefs from the people they grow up with.
- Each individual has unique talents and preferences.

### Essential Questions

- How does culture shape the way we see ourselves, others, and the world?
- How does my culture shape me?
- Why is it important to understand culture?
- How do the invisible aspects of culture influence the visible ones?
- Why is it important to understand the relationship between the two?

### Students will be able to...

- show respect and their awareness of another's culture.
- list examples of their own culture.
- define and give examples of the visible and invisible aspects of culture.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Students will be able to define the concept of culture.



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2. Students will be able to explain attributes of culture.
3. Students can distinguish between the visible and invisible aspects of culture.
4. Students will be able to explain how the invisible aspects of culture influence the visible ones.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities

#### Day 1 Building Bridges

When teaching about culture, keep in mind that culture is just one of numerous influences on behavior. People can differ from each other in many other aspects; e.g., personality, age, gender, level of education, abilities, and any other personal features that make each individual a unique human being. We need to be careful of over-generalizing or making statements like: “She’s an American, so that explains why...”; or “He’s from New York, so that explains why...”; or “He’s a Canadian, so that explains why ....” Cultural groups do have certain characteristics in common. But within each group, there is always a broad range of individual differences. Students might ask why people from the United States would need to have their culture revealed to them—isn’t their own culture pretty obvious? But people within a culture are in many ways the least able to see it. Cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors are so ingrained that we are often unaware of our own.

Ask students to imagine they are extraterrestrials – peaceful, intelligent creatures from another planet – who have been given the mission of spending a week researching life in your community and school. Their mission is to find answers to the following questions: What is unique, different, or interesting about your school and community? What explains why humans in your community and in your school think and act the way they do? The extraterrestrials are expected to return to their home planet to report their observations and findings.

Have students work in groups of three or four to discuss and write down observations extraterrestrials would make about life in their community. Provide several examples, such as:

- People live in small groups in houses or apartments. Children live with older people.
- Young people spend their days together in buildings in large groups.
- Young people dress in several styles that are different from each other.
- Older people dress differently from kids.
- Older people teach younger people what is expected.
- People eat together, usually sitting around a table.
- People look at watches and clocks a lot.
- There are lots of cars. They drive on the right side of the road. People seem to know when to stop and go by obeying colored lights.
- When people meet, some hold hands and shake them up and down. Others put their arms around each other.

Tell students an important part of the extraterrestrials’ mission is to answer these questions:

- What is important to human beings?
- Why are some things about human beings the same, and why are some things different?

- Why don't all people think and act the same way?
- What are the rules? How are they learned?
- What shapes how human beings see the world, themselves, and others?

Once students have shared their observations and questions in class discussion, ask them to step out of their role of extraterrestrials and now think about themselves. Ask students to take home the following questions and discuss them with their families.

- How and why they dress the way they do?
- How and why they celebrate certain holidays?
- The foods they eat and the way they've been taught to eat them?
- What is the polite thing to do?
- The traditions in their family?
- What is important to them?
- What influences and shapes the way they think and act?

The following day, have students discuss their answers in class. Explain to the students that we call these types of influences in our lives "culture." Introduce students to the enduring understanding: Everyone has a culture. It shapes how we understand the world, ourselves, and others.

## Day 2

Write the following statements on the board:

- a. No one is exactly like me.
- b. I have many things in common with the members of my family and community.
- c. Every person in the world needs some of the same things I need.

Point out to students that people in various groups often look at people in other groups as "different." Ask students whether they have seen this occur in their school or community. If so, why has it happened? Ask students to describe some of these differences. Then ask why people in one group might behave differently from people in another group. Explain that many differences are related to culture—beliefs and ways of living that are handed down from one generation to the next.

Working from the statements on the board, explain that all people share basic needs and ask students for several examples (e.g., food, shelter, love, respect). In addition, each of us learns a set of behaviors and beliefs from the people we grow up with. Ask students for examples (e.g., the manners we're taught, the way we celebrate holidays, how we are expected to behave toward neighbors). Finally, each individual has unique talents and preferences. Again, ask students for examples (e.g., I'm good at math, I'm good at soccer, I don't like chocolate).

Explain that when we talk about behaviors and beliefs a group of people have in common (not individual talents and preferences), we are talking about culture.

Now have students look at some of the features of culture. Provide each student with a copy of "Worksheet #1: Features of Culture." Ask the students to complete the worksheet by filling in an example for each feature of culture. Work through a few of the features with the students to ensure they understand they are being objective observers of their own taken-for-granted customs.

Take the five features of culture that follow and ask students to discuss the following questions about these features:

- a. Celebrations: What kinds of celebrations are important in your family? In the United States?
- b. Greetings: How do you generally greet people you don't know? People you do know?
- c. Beliefs about hospitality: How do you show hospitality in your community? In your school? In your home?
- d. The role of family: Is there a particular age at which you celebrate an important event in your life with your family or community?
- e. Attitudes about personal space and privacy: How important do you feel it is to have personal space and privacy?

Conduct a class discussion:

- a. What conclusions can you begin to draw about the culture of the United States?
- b. What are your impressions about how U.S. culture has shaped you?

Review "Worksheet #2: Everyone Has a Culture—Everyone Is Different" with students. For homework, ask students to complete Worksheet #2, either in class or as homework. This will help them identify unique aspects of their own culture. Students will follow up on this worksheet in class on day 3.

Day 3

Have students form small groups and compare their responses to Worksheet #2. After the groups compare their responses, ask:

- a. Were your responses to the questions exactly alike?
- b. What differences did you find among responses?
- c. How can you explain the differences?

Explain to students that their responses to the worksheet questions were partially shaped by the culture in which they were raised. Make the point that if these questions were given to students from another culture, their answers would be different because they have grown up in a different culture. Perhaps they have already found significant differences among their small groups.

Write the enduring understanding for this lesson on the board: Everyone has a culture. It shapes how we see the world, ourselves, and others. Ask students now to address these questions:

- a. What is culture?
- b. How does it shape the way we see the world, ourselves, and others?

Write the word "culture" in bold capital letters across the board. Ask students as a class to come up with a definition. They may find it easier to list aspects of culture—different elements that are true of culture—than to come up with a full definition. Such a list might include:

- a. Culture has to do with values and beliefs.
- b. Culture involves customs and traditions.
- c. Culture is collective, shared by a group.
- d. Everyone has a culture.
- e. Culture is learned.
- f. Culture influences and shapes behavior.

- g. Culture is transmitted from generation to generation.
- h. Culture is often unconscious; people are sometimes not aware of how their behaviors and attitudes have been shaped by their culture.
- i. People in all cultures have common needs.

Now provide the following definition: “Culture is 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 transmitted from generation to generation, rarely with explicit instructions.”

Use the following questions to focus discussion on the role culture plays in forming our behaviors and beliefs:

- a. How do you think you learned your culture?
- b. How do you think your culture has shaped you? How has it influenced your values, preferences, and beliefs?
- c. Despite the differences in culture in our class, what are some things everyone in our class has in common?
- d. How does culture shape the way we see ourselves, others, and the world?

#### Day 4 – Culture is Like an Iceberg

Before beginning this lesson, remind students that culture is a complex concept, everyone has a culture, and it shapes how we see the world, ourselves, and others.

Explain that metaphors often help us understand big ideas by relating something we don’t know to something we do know. A useful metaphor for culture is an iceberg. Ask students what they know about the size and shape of icebergs. How much of an iceberg is above the water? How much is under water?

Make the point that only about one-eighth of an iceberg is visible above the water. The rest is below. Culture is very similar to an iceberg. It has some aspects that are visible and many others that can only be suspected, guessed, or learned as understanding of the culture grows. Like an iceberg, the visible part of culture is only a small part of a much larger whole.

Ask students to look back at “Worksheet #1: Features of Culture.” Review with students that the numbered items on the list are all features of culture. If students haven’t completed the worksheet, make sure they understand all the features on the list. Ask them for examples, or provide examples if needed.

Provide students with a copy of an outline drawing of an iceberg with a clear line delineating the part of the iceberg that is above the water’s surface and the larger part that is below the surface.

Divide students into groups of four. Ask them to bring the Features of Culture worksheet with them. Have them discuss in their groups which features of culture they think are visible and which are invisible.

Ask students to look at both their outline drawing of the iceberg and their Features of Culture worksheet. Have them review the features one by one and decide as a group if a particular feature belongs above the line (i.e., is “visible”) or below the line (i.e., is “invisible”). Have students write above the water line the numbers of those features of culture that they, as a group, consider to be

observable features. They should write the numbers of the “invisible” features below the water line. Do the first few features with them. Provide examples, e.g., values cannot be directly observed; holiday customs are visible.

After students have had time to work in groups on the remaining features, have each group pair with another group and compare their placement of features. Students must be prepared to say why they placed a particular feature where they did. (Note: In the list of features, the numbers that should appear below the water line are 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 16–18, 22–24, 26–30.)

Ask students whether they see any item below the water line that might influence or determine any item above (e.g., ideas about modesty might affect styles of dress; religious beliefs might influence holiday celebrations, painting, and music).

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### Materials/Resources Needed

Peace Corps’ [Features of Culture lesson](#) with worksheets

- Worksheet #1: Features of Culture
- Worksheet #2: Everyone Has a Culture—Everyone Is Different