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## ABSTRACT

Christopher Columbus remains one of the most studied yet the least known of major historical figures. In this lesson, students read excerpts from Columbus's letters and journals, as well as recent considerations of his achievements so that they can reflect on the motivations behind Columbus's explorations, his reactions to what he found, and the consequences, intended and unintended, of his endeavors. The lesson plan contains material on how to prepare to teach the lesson, including notes to the teacher and guiding questions. It also contains suggested activities for eight lessons, divided into Part 1: Columbus Speaks (Lesson 1: Dear Diary; Lesson 2: Dear Europe; Lesson 3: Dear Ferdinand and Isabella; Lesson 4: What Was Columbus Thinking?); Part 2: The Scholars Speak (Lesson 5: Looking Back at Columbus); Part 3: The Students Speak (Lesson 6: Organizing Facts and Findings; Lesson 7: But Instead...; Lesson 8: Learning about Columbus); and Extending the Lesson. The lesson plan provides detailed information and ideas for teaching each lesson; cites learning objectives; gives appropriate grade levels (Grades 3-5) and time required for each lesson; and outlines national standards for social studies, geography, and English covered in the lesson plan. Contains a list of helpful Web sites and additional resources. (NKA)



## What Was Columbus Thinking?

### Introduction

Who was Christopher Columbus? Variouslly regarded as:

one of the greatest mariners in history, a visionary genius, a mystic, a national hero, a failed administrator, a naive entrepreneur, and a ruthless and greedy imperialist.  
-- from The Library of Congress' **1492: AN ONGOING VOYAGE**

Columbus remains one of the most studied yet least known of major historical figures.

**In 1492, Columbus sailed...**

Most students recognize the name Christopher Columbus. They may be aware that his voyages ushered in the first period of sustained contact between Europeans and the Americas and its people. They may not know, however, *why* Columbus traveled to the New World or *what* happened to the native people he encountered.

In this lesson, students read excerpts from Columbus's letters and journals, as well as recent considerations of his achievements. Students reflect on the motivations behind Columbus's explorations, his reactions to what he found and the consequences, intended and unintended, of his endeavor.

### Learning Objectives

#### SUBJECT AREAS ▶

**History: World: Europe**

**History: U.S.: Colonial**

**Literature: Biography**

#### GRADE LEVELS ▶

**3-5**

#### TIME REQUIRED ▶

**One to two class periods  
for each of eight lessons**

#### SKILLS ▶

**primary document analysis**  
**critical thinking**  
**graphic representation of information**  
**collaboration**  
**brainstorming**  
**information gathering**  
**summarizing**  
**analysis**

#### STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▶

1519 portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo of a man said to be Christopher Columbus (born about 1446, died 1506).

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After completing the lessons in this unit, students will be able to:

- Identify three stated aims of Columbus's voyages.
- Characterize changes in Columbus's purposes in writing the documents studied.
- Describe the native peoples Europeans encountered and the results of their contact.
- Compare the goals of early European exploration with the results.

## Preparing to Teach This Lesson

- Before you begin to teach this unit, review the suggested lesson plans. Download and duplicate as necessary the Columbus documents and any articles you will use. If desired, mark the pertinent excerpts, or bookmark pages online that students will use. (See [Links to EDSITEment Participating Websites](#) for a complete listing of documents.)
- It is very important to help students understand the historical context of this topic. An excellent brief overview of the historical context of Columbus's voyages, the native cultures of the New World and the aftermath of sustained European contact is available through EDSITEment at the Library of Congress' online exhibition [1492: AN ONGOING VOYAGE](#) .

The complete ENCARTA entry on Columbus is available online at [Columbus and the Age of Discovery](#) .

A tutorial with extensive information for contextualizing Columbus's voyage in terms of the larger world of the Renaissance is available through EDSITEment at [The End of Europe's Middle Ages](#) .

## Notes to the Teacher

- This teaching unit includes several suggested activities that can be used individually as lesson plans, or presented in sequence as a complete unit that will help students fully grasp the impact of Columbus's voyage to the New World. Each suggested activity will take approximately one to two class periods to present, or more time if explored in greater detail.
- In this unit, students will work with primary source documents written by Christopher Columbus around the time of his voyage to the New World, and with secondary source documents written at a later date. They also have a chance to write their own secondary source material in this unit. Using both primary and secondary source documents within a single unit gives students an opportunity to see the difference between these two types of documents. You may wish to have students work alone or in small groups to read and interpret these documents. Groups could be based on areas of interest (especially for analyzing the scholarly documents), or could allow students with stronger reading skills to help others work through the source documents.
- You may wish to provide students with a copy of the [Written Document Analysis Worksheet](#) , available through EDSITEment at [The Digital Classroom](#) , to guide them as they review the primary source documents written by Columbus.

If time or other constraints do not permit you to teach the entire unit, simply reviewing the primary source documents written by

## **National Council for the Social Studies**

1. Culture and Cultural Diversity ([\\_more](#) )
2. Time, Continuity, and Change ([\\_more](#) )
3. People, Places, and Environments ([\\_more](#) )
6. Power, Authority and Governance ([\\_more](#) )
7. Production, Distribution and Consumption ([\\_more](#) )
9. Global Connections ([\\_more](#) )

## **National Geography Standards**

12. The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement ([\\_more](#) )
13. How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of earth's surface ([\\_more](#) )
16. The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources ([\\_more](#) )

## **NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language**

### **Arts**

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; ([\\_more](#) )
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. ([\\_more](#) )
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. ([\\_more](#) )

## **View your state's standards**

Columbus (lessons 1 through 4) can provide a very interesting look at the historical context surrounding Columbus's voyage through a perspective that will be new to many students - Columbus's own.

- Each document in this unit could be read by the whole class or by a small group, which would report back its findings. When reading primary sources, keep in mind issues of point of view. Help students understand that documents written by Columbus could slant interpretation in a particular direction. The same is true of documents about native peoples of America, since these were written by Europeans.
- The desire to bring Christianity to native peoples was essential to European exploration. It is a topic that cannot be ignored in discussions of Columbus; however, the issues raised need sensitive handling.

**Guiding Questions:** What were the intentions behind Columbus's voyages of exploration? What were the consequences in the lives of Native Americans and Europeans?

## Suggested Activities

### ...the Ocean Blue: Preparing Students for the Unit

#### **PART I: COLUMBUS SPEAKS**

Lesson 1: Dear Diary

Lesson 2: Dear Europe

Lesson 3: Dear Ferdinand and Isabella

Lesson 4: What was Columbus Thinking?

#### **PART II: THE SCHOLARS SPEAK**

Lesson 5: Looking Back at Columbus

#### **PART III: THE STUDENTS SPEAK**

Lesson 6: Organizing Facts and Findings

Lesson 7: But Instead...

Lesson 8: Learning About Columbus

#### Extending the Lesson

### ...the Ocean Blue: Preparing Students for the Unit

The class should brainstorm a list of previously learned facts about Columbus's voyages of discovery.

Columbus did not discover America. It had already been visited by Vikings and British fishermen. The so-called New World was already inhabited by a variety of people, some of whom had developed complex societies and technologies. Then why is Columbus so well remembered today? How did the world change as a result of his voyages? Make a list of student ideas to refer to at the end of the lesson.

Let students know that they will gather information about what Columbus was intending and then work in small groups to focus on one result of Columbus's voyages. In that way, the class will compile a lot of information for analysis.

**PART I****COLUMBUS SPEAKS****LESSON 1****Dear Diary**

Students will read from Columbus's journal of his voyage of 1492, available through EDSITEment from the Internet Medieval Sourcebook. Of special interest are the following:

1. The introduction -- a restatement of the purpose of the voyage as explained to the King and Queen of Spain -- primarily the sentence beginning, "Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith...";
2. The entry for October 11, the day of the discovery;
3. Excerpts from the entries for October 13, 16 and 21 for descriptions of the Native Americans Columbus encountered.

What seemed of particular interest to Columbus on his voyage? What were his impressions of the places he visited? What ideas did he have about what might happen next?

**LESSON 2****Dear Europe**

Students will read a letter written by Columbus in May 1493, available from the Osher Map Library of the University of Southern Maine. Columbus used this letter to publicize his successful voyage; it became a sort of best-seller throughout Europe. It contains descriptions of the peoples he encountered. Of special interest are the five paragraphs beginning with, "There are besides in the said island Juana...", as well as the last two paragraphs. What did Columbus emphasize in publicizing his journey?

**LESSON 3****Dear Ferdinand and Isabella**

In this Letter to the King and Queen of Spain, circa 1494, Columbus lists his recommendations about how Spain should proceed, including his suggestion that the area he encountered be systematically colonized. The letter is fairly brief; especially pertinent are points 1, 4, 5 and 9. What does Columbus emphasize about what he saw and what should happen next?

**LESSON 4****What was Columbus thinking?**

After students have read each document, discuss the following:

- Who was the intended audience for this document?
- When was the document written?
- Does Columbus seem to have a goal in mind in creating this document? Is it intended to persuade the reader, emphasize a point, share information or some other purpose?
- What details are described in this document?
- Can students identify a primary message in this document?

Working in small groups or individually, students should write their

answers to these questions for use in comparing the documents with each other.

Now, in a group or as a class, have students compare the three documents. Ask students to compare their analyses of the individual documents. How do they differ? Are there any similarities? Ask students to reconsider the following:

- What does Columbus emphasize in his journal as the purpose of his journey? Does this purpose seem to change in the later documents?
- What details seem to interest Columbus as he describes the first days of discovery? Does his interest change as his journey progresses?
- What other changes can students identify between the documents? Can students propose a hypothesis that would explain these changes?

Students should make and post statements summarizing what Columbus found (for example, natives with a simple technology) and a list of outcomes Columbus believed would come as a result of his journey (for example, he stated that the natives he met would make good servants).

## PART II

### THE SCHOLARS SPEAK

#### LESSON 5

##### Looking Back at Columbus

Now the students will find out the effects of Columbus's voyages according to scholars by reading brief excerpts from specially chosen articles. Divide the class into groups to be assigned any or all of the following areas of research (topics can be duplicated among groups if desired). Each group should have at least one strong reader. Students can use information from the following sources, as well as texts and online sources of their own choosing.

In reviewing an article, students need only read those sections containing the specific information they are researching. A brief guide has been provided for each article.

- **Foods and Plants:** A variety of new foods and plants were introduced from Europe to the Americas and from the Americas to Europe. Students should concentrate on naming such plants and flowers.

**SOURCE:** "[The Gardeners of Eden: a bouquet of exotic flowers was one trophy of European expansion](http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON08.ART)" by Samuel M. Wilson.  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON08.ART>]

**GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE:** Read the passage from "Many of the New World's most spectacular contributions..." to "Europeans' gardens began to fill with the exotic flowers of Africa, Asia, and, eventually, the Americas." Find the names of fruits, grains, vegetables and other plants that were common during this time period. Which started in the New World? Which started in the Old? What, if any, changes in where plants grew occurred after Columbus voyages?

For information about the gardens the Aztecs had when the Europeans arrived, read from "The sixteenth-century chronicler

Fernando de Alva Ixtilochitl..." to "So no bird, fish or animal of the whole country was wanting here they were either alive or figured in gold and gems."

- **Disease:** Diseases introduced by the Europeans ravaged native populations. Only one disease migrated from the New World to the Old.

SOURCE: "The Great Disease Migration" by Geoffrey Cowley from Newsweek (Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991, pp. 54-56)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/COWLEY01.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read the section beginning "Many experts now believe that the New World was home to 40 million to 50 million people before Columbus arrived," to "by germs." Then read from "By the time Columbus arrived, groups like the Aztecs and Maya" to "any Indian who received news of the Spaniards could also have easily received the infection." Find out what diseases were particularly damaging to the people of the New World.

- **Native Americans Encountered by Columbus:** Columbus only met peoples with very simple technologies. However, America was home to a number of complex cultures that would have their own encounters with Europeans. What cultures and technologies did Columbus himself encounter in the New World? How were these cultures changed?

SOURCE: "The Lost Worlds of Ancient America" by Melinda Beck, from Newsweek (Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991, pp. 24-26)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/BECK-M01.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read the introduction and the section "Mesoamerica" to create a list of the accomplishments of these "lost worlds." Look especially for mentions of buildings, inventions and scientific achievements. Why do you think the author calls them "lost worlds"?

SOURCE: "Rumors of Cannibals" by Dave D. Davis in Archaeology (January/February 1992, p. 49)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/DAVIS-D1.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read the first three paragraphs. Were the Carib people (also known as Caribe and Canima) cannibals? What happened because the Spanish thought they were cannibals?

SOURCE: "Columbus, My Enemy" (A Caribbean chief resists the first Spanish invaders) by Samuel M. Wilson in Natural History (December 1990, pp. 44-49)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON02.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read from "Two years earlier" to "By 1497, after two years of epidemics and famine following the arrival of the Spaniards, the other chiefs were pushing Guarionex to put up some resistance."

Did the Taino have reasons to be afraid of the Spanish? What did they agree to do for the Spanish to keep the peace? Why were the other chiefs pushing Guarionex to fight the Spanish? How successful was Guarionex?

Now read from "Bartolome staged a midnight raid on the



surrounding villages" to "gave them their king and other leaders."

Lastly, read the paragraph beginning "The impact of the Europeans' arrival was felt differently on other islands of the Caribbean," for a summary of what happened to various native peoples.

SOURCE: Excerpt from "What Columbus Discovered" by Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Nation* (October 22, 1990, pp. 444-446)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/SALE-03.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read from "Take, for example, the Taino" up to "are gentle and are always laughing." Then read the paragraph beginning, "Do not ask, by the way, what happened to those gentle Taino...."

What were the Taino people like before the Europeans arrived? Learn about their houses, transportation, crops and way of life. What happened to them? Why does the author say, "Do not ask ... what happened to those gentle Taino?"

- **Christianity:** Columbus declared he was sailing west "to see the said princes, people, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith." How successful were the Spanish in converting the native peoples?

SOURCE: "How Did Native Americans Respond to Christianity?" by Thomas S. Giles in *Christian History* Issue 35 (Vol. XI, No. 3)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/GILES-01.ART>]

GUIDE TO THE ARTICLE: Read the introduction and the first paragraph of the section "Holding to the ancient faith." What were some ways the Europeans tried to convert the native peoples? What are some ways the native peoples responded?

Read from "In a letter in 1601, Brother Juan de Escalona laments" to "The true God, the true Dios, came, but this was the origin too of affliction for us." What do students think was the main reason the Europeans had trouble converting native peoples?

Now read from "What about those Indians who responded positively to the Christian faith?" to "Because these go about poorly dressed and barefoot just like us; they eat what we eat; they settle among us...." What made some missionaries successful?

Additional information on a number of these topics can be found at [1492: AN ONGOING VOYAGE . Europe Claims America: The Atlantic Joined](#) provides a brief summary of the effects of the arrival of the Europeans.

Also available through [Columbus and the Age of Discovery](#) :

- "The Seeds of Change" by Herman J. Viola in *OAH Magazine of History* (Vol. 5, No. 4, Spring 1991, pp. 31-32)  
[<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/VIOLA-01.ART>], a summary of changes initiated by the arrival of the Europeans.

## **PART III**

### **THE STUDENTS SPEAK**

#### **LESSON 6**

#### **Organizing Facts and Findings**



After completing their research, each group should prepare items for posting on a large graphic organizer designed to display the facts students learned. The class could decide, on the basis of the information at hand, exactly how to design the organizer. For example, the migration of food and plants or of diseases could be represented through text and/or pictures organized in the form of a chart with four columns: Before Columbus (In Europe), Before Columbus (In America), After Columbus (In Europe), After Columbus (In America) . When this project is completed, each group can present its findings to the rest of the class, using the graphic organizer to illustrate what they learned.

## LESSON 7

### But Instead...

Events don't always turn out the way one expects. As a culminating activity, have the class brainstorm and list many appropriate statements about expectations and outcomes in the following form:

Columbus (or "Europeans" or "Native Americans") \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_, but  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

For example, students might say:

"Columbus thought he had discovered a new route to the Indies, but he had really traveled to what we now call the Americas."

"Columbus thought the natives 'would be good servants,' but trying to make slaves out of them was so unsuccessful that eventually Spain imported slaves from Africa."

"Columbus encountered natives living with a simple technology, but civilizations with advanced technologies also lived in the Americas."

Post the statements. As the students continue to study other events in history, especially meetings of disparate cultures, such as the colonial settlers and the Native Americans, they should note the effects of these encounters, both intended and unintended.

## LESSON 8

### Learning About Columbus

At the beginning of this lesson, students listed some of the ways the world changed after Columbus's voyage to the New World. Review this list with students. How would their list be different now if asked the same question? What should be added? Removed?

Students had learned some things about Columbus before this lesson. Based on what they have learned *during* this lesson, do students recommend any changes in the information young people are taught about Columbus? Changes in our celebration of Columbus Day?

### Extending the Lesson

- If students found their list of changes significantly different at the end of the lesson, some might be interested in writing, for teachers

of young people, a set of guidelines for teaching about Columbus and/or for observing Columbus Day. Share the guidelines with the appropriate teachers.

- Have students perform a textual analysis of the three primary source documents they studied to find the number of references to the following words:
  1. gold
  2. spice(s)
  3. Christ or Christian (NOTE: In a search for the word "Christ," "Christian" will also be found as will "Christopher" unless otherwise specified. Count the instances of Christ and Christian only.)

Copy and paste each document to its own word processing file. Use the word count tool to count the number of words in each document; then use the "search" tool to find and count the number of references to the words listed above. (Students may also search for key words of their own choosing, based on their studies of Columbus's writings.)

Determine the percentage of times any particular word occurs by dividing the number of occurrences by the total number of words in a document and multiplying by 100.

What can be concluded from the differences in percentages? Why would Columbus's emphasis have changed? Consider the audience as well as the purpose of the document. Have students consider the following questions based on their search results:

- **Gold:** Is there a change in how often gold is mentioned? Was there a change in the quest for gold?
  - **Spices:** One goal of finding another route to India was to make the trade in spices easier. How prominent was that goal in Columbus's writing?
  - **Christ or Christian:** Columbus began his journal by stating that the purpose of his voyage was to meet the people of India "to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith," the Christian religion. Did the prominence of this goal change as evidenced by Columbus's writing?
- What can students find out about the encounters other explorers had with native peoples? How did their experiences compare with that of Columbus? Information on various explorers may be found at the following sites:

[1492: AN ONGOING VOYAGE](#) , an Exhibit of the Library of Congress.

[Discoverer's Web](#) , a link from [Columbus and the Age of Discovery](#) , an impressive source of primary and secondary documents relating to voyages of discovery and exploration.

## **Links to EDSITEment Participating Websites**

[The Digital Classroom](#)

<http://www.nara.gov/education/>

- [Document Analysis Worksheets](#)  
<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/analysis/analysis.html>

The End of Europe's Middle Ages  
<http://www.ucalgary.ca/HIST/tutor/endmiddle/>

Internet Medieval Sourcebook  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>

- Christopher Columbus: Extracts from Journal  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/columbus1.html>
- Columbus's Letter to the King and Queen of Spain, circa 1494  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/columbus2.html>

Columbus and the Age of Discovery  
<http://muweb.millersv.edu/~columbus/>

- Source on plants:  
"The Gardeners of Eden: a bouquet of exotic flowers was one trophy of European expansion"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON08.ART>
- Source on diseases:  
"The Great Disease Migration"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/COWLEY01.ART>
- Sources on native peoples:
  - "The Lost Worlds of Ancient America"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/BECK-M01.ART>
  - "Rumors of Cannibals"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/DAVIS-D1.ART>
  - "Columbus, My Enemy"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON02.ART>
  - Excerpt from "What Columbus Discovered"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/SALE-03.ART>
- Source on Christianity:  
"How Did Native Americans Respond to Christianity?"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/GILES-01.ART>
- Additional resource for the teacher:  
"The Seeds of Change"  
<http://www.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/VIOLA-01.ART>

### **Additional Resources**

The following resources can be reached through links available from EDSITEment-approved websites.

1492: AN ONGOING VOYAGE (available through the EDSITEment resource American Memory )

<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/intro.html>

This exhibit of the Library of Congress has especially pertinent information in the following sections:

- What Came To Be Called "America": The Caribbean -- Island Society (The Taino and Caribs)  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/caribbea.html>
- What Came To Be Called "America": Middle Atlantic Cultures (The Aztecs)  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/midamrcu.html>
- What Came To Be Called "America": The Andes -- Life In The Highlands (The Incas)  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/andes.html>
- Europe Claims America  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/eurocla.html>
- The Atlantic Joined: The Caribbean, Las Indias  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/carib.html>

- Europe Claims America: Middle America -- Creating New Spain  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/midamns.html>
- Europe Claims America: Conquest In The Andes  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/1492/andescon.html>

Discoverer's Web (available through the EDSITEment resource Columbus and the Age of Discovery )  
<http://www.win.tue.nl/~engels/discovery/>

The Columbus Letter May, 1493  
<http://www.usm.maine.edu/~maps/columbus/translation.html>



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