

Christopher Columbus | Lesson Plan

In what ways can understanding the historical context of Christopher Columbus' time help us form a more balanced view of his achievements and mistakes?

Students will investigate the accomplishments of explorer Christopher Columbus and understand why we should never judge past events by today's standards.

Learning Objectives:

- List the accomplishments of explorer Christopher Columbus.
- Examine reasons why the celebration of Columbus Day is controversial to some.
- Identify several truths and misconceptions about Columbus' behavior toward the native people in the New World.
- Reflect on the ways Columbus was courageous and heroic.
- Evaluate the danger of judging past events by today's standards.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Controversial:** A subject, idea, or person that causes disagreement or debate because people have different opinions.
- **Persuasive:** Having the ability to convince someone to do or believe something through reasoning, argument, or appeal.
- **Biographical:** Relating to the written account or detailed description of a person's life.
- **Curious:** Having a strong desire to learn or know more about something or someone; eager to explore and discover.

Educational Standards: CCRA.L.1, CCRA.L.2, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.W.2

Academic Subject Areas: Biography, Western Civilization, Historical Figures

What You'll Need

- Video: *Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the New World* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Christopher Columbus: Explorer of the New World* (Click [Here](#))
- Images of Columbus and his ships, the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María*.

Lesson Plan (45 minutes)

Warm-Up: (10 minutes)

1. Begin by asking students to think about a time when they were misunderstood or judged unfairly by someone who didn't know the full story. Ask them to share their experiences and guide a brief discussion on how it felt to be judged without all the facts or without considering the context of the situation. Connect this to the idea that sometimes



people in the past are judged by today's standards, which can be unfair because we might not fully understand their circumstances or the norms of their time.

2. Transition to a discussion about Christopher Columbus by asking the students what they already know about Christopher Columbus. Why do some people think he's a hero while others see him as controversial? As students share their thoughts, write down their responses on the board, especially noting any conflicting ideas or misconceptions.
3. Explain that Columbus was a brave and curious explorer who made significant discoveries, but his actions have led to different opinions about his legacy. Highlight that during Columbus' time, the world had different values and norms, and it's important to understand those when we think about his actions. Ask students why they think it might be risky to judge someone from the past by today's standards.
4. Show students images of Columbus and his ships—the Niña, Pinta, and Santa María—and explain the challenges and dangers of his voyage. Emphasize that Columbus' journey required tremendous courage and was a significant achievement for his time, but also mention that some of his actions towards the native people are viewed very differently today.
5. Tell students that they will watch a video to learn more about the truth behind Columbus' story and to think critically about his legacy. Distribute the "Christopher Columbus Worksheet" and review it as a class so students know what to focus on during the video. Encourage them to consider both the accomplishments and controversies surrounding Columbus as they watch.

Watch and Complete: (15 minutes)

1. Watch the video.
2. Assist students in completing the worksheet as they watch.
3. Pause throughout the video to allow students to answer questions.

Wrap-Up: (20 minutes)

1. Allow students several minutes to complete the worksheet independently.
2. Collect as a formative assessment or use the worksheet to foster more discussion.
3. Invite students to share what they learned from the video about Christopher Columbus. Ask them to list his accomplishments and discuss some of the truths and misconceptions they discovered. Write these on the board to reinforce the key points of the lesson.
4. Remind students that one of the main goals of today's lesson was to think about how we judge historical figures like Columbus. Pose the question:
 - Why is it important to consider the time period and context when evaluating someone's actions from history?
5. Allow students to share their thoughts, guiding them toward the understanding that people's actions must be understood within the norms and values of their own time, which may be very different from today's.

6. To deepen their reflection, ask students the following open-ended questions and give them a few minutes to write down their responses or discuss them in small groups:
 - If you were living during Columbus' time, how might you have viewed his voyages and discoveries?
 - Do you think Columbus' actions can be both celebrated and criticized? Why or why not?
 - What lessons can we learn from Columbus' story that apply to how we treat and judge others today?
7. Conclude the lesson by summarizing that Christopher Columbus was a complex figure who achieved great things but also made mistakes. Emphasize that understanding history requires looking at it through the lens of the time in which it occurred and that judging historical figures by today's standards can lead to misunderstandings. Encourage students to carry this perspective forward as they continue to learn about other historical events and figures.

Extension Activity:

Invite students to write a brief reflection or journal entry on how they would want future generations to judge their actions, considering how values and norms might change over time. This can be a powerful way to personalize the lesson and drive home the importance of understanding context in historical judgment.

Don't have time for the full lesson? Quick Activity (15-20 minutes)

Distribute the worksheet and allow students to complete it while they follow along with the video.



LESSON THEMES

HERO VS. HEROIC ACTIONS

Distinguish between being a hero and performing heroic actions. Historical figures like Christopher Columbus can be viewed differently depending on perspectives and values.

COURAGE

Highlight the courage it took for Columbus and his crew to undertake their journey across the unknown Atlantic Ocean. Discuss the risks and uncertainties they faced.

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS

Teach students the importance of historical context and why it's crucial to consider the time period when evaluating historical figures like Columbus.

FOR PARENTS & TEACHERS

Want to brush up on your background knowledge? Check out these 5-Minute Videos before chatting with your kids:

[Why Immigrants Should Love Columbus Day](#)

[Celebrating Columbus](#)

[Are We Living on Stolen Land?](#)

[Goodbye, Columbus Day](#)

OUR EPISODE'S FOCUS...

History is filled with nuance. Our brother and sister duo, Leo and Layla, encounter this firsthand when they time travel to meet the man, the myth, and the legend himself, Christopher Columbus. During their visit, the kids come to appreciate the bravery it took for Columbus to journey into the unknown, but when hearing him detail his actions and activities, they learn that the man and his story are far more complicated than simply good vs. bad or right vs. wrong. Leo and Layla question the legendary explorer's tactics and beliefs (specifically about slavery and the importance of freedom), and come away thinking he was a brave and courageous man, but are also grateful to live in present times.

DID YOU KNOW THAT ?

BECAUSE OF COLUMBUS...

- Foods in modern diets, such as tomatoes, potatoes, corn, and chocolate, were introduced to Europe from the Americas as part of the Columbian Exchange initiated by Columbus' voyages.
- Advancements in navigation, shipbuilding, and geographic knowledge, contributed to the Age of Exploration and subsequent scientific discoveries.

WHY THIS MATTERS

It is vital for children to learn about Christopher Columbus because his voyages were pivotal in world history, leading to cultural and economic exchanges that shaped the modern world. Understanding both his achievements and controversies teaches historical complexity and promotes critical thinking. Presenting a balanced view allows students to shape their own informed opinions.



Scan to watch
the episode

ARM YOUR CHILDREN WITH THE TRUTH

PAVING THE WAY

Slavery was a prevalent and accepted institution in many parts of the world during the time of Christopher Columbus, including Europe, Africa, and the Americas. In Europe, slavery had declined significantly since the Middle Ages, but still existed, with many slaves being captured in wars, piracy, or as debtors. The Mediterranean region was notable for having Muslim and Christian captives taken during conflicts. Over time, growing opposition to slavery emerged, especially in America and Great Britain. Early American abolitionists and the gradual emancipation laws in Northern states set important examples that influenced British abolitionists. The ideals of liberty and equality from the American Revolution inspired British thinkers and activists, leading to the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, which freed all slaves in the British Empire. Later, the American Civil War and the 13th Amendment in 1865 abolished slavery in the United States, reinforcing the global movement toward freedom and equality.

CRITICS OF COLUMBUS SAY...

Atrocities Committed: Columbus committed atrocities against indigenous people, including enslavement and murder, initiating brutal colonization that caused immense suffering and death.

The Reality: Columbus was not uniquely brutal for his time, and his actions were similar to those of other explorers. Although Columbus initiated contact between Europe and the Americas, he was not directly responsible for the actions of all subsequent colonizers. Placing all the blame on Columbus overlooks the complexities of European expansion.

Introduction of Disease: Columbus' voyages brought European diseases to the Americas, which decimated indigenous populations who had no immunity to these illnesses.

The Reality: The introduction of diseases like smallpox by Columbus and his men was unintentional, as no one understood how illnesses were transmitted at the time. Disease exchanges have historically occurred whenever civilizations met, making these pandemics a tragic but inevitable consequence of global contact, not a moral failing of Columbus.

Greed and Ambition: Columbus was driven by a desire for wealth and power. His voyages were motivated by the promise of riches, and he was ruthless in his pursuit of these goals, often at the expense of the native populations.

The Reality: Columbus was motivated by the same spirit of exploration and discovery that drove many other explorers. His desire to open up new trade routes and bring wealth to his sponsors was part of the broader age of exploration. His ambitions were not unique, and they spurred the discovery of new lands and opportunities for future generations. While Columbus' actions were partly motivated by personal ambition, they ultimately contributed to the creation of global trade networks that connected distant parts of the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think someone can do both good and bad things and still be considered a hero? Why or why not?
2. What risks and dangers did Columbus and his crew face during their voyage?
3. Why is it important to understand the time period when Columbus lived to evaluate his actions?
4. How were the world and people's knowledge different during Columbus' time compared to today?
5. What values and beliefs did people have in the 15th century that are different from ours now?
6. How might Columbus' actions be judged differently if he lived today instead of in the 15th century?



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