

Recognizing Native American Perspectives: Thanksgiving and the National Day of Mourning

What is a Native American perspective on the arrival of the Pilgrims and the significance of the Thanksgiving holiday?

Overview

Students analyze a primary source to learn about a Native American's perspective on the arrival of the Pilgrims and discuss differing viewpoints about the significance of the Thanksgiving holiday.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://education.nationalgeographic.org/activity/recognizing-native-american-perspectives-thanksgiving-and-national-day-mourning/>

Directions

1. Activate students' prior knowledge.

Ask students: *What do we know about the "First Thanksgiving"? What do we know about relationships between Native Americans and Europeans in North America?* Regarding the first Thanksgiving, students will likely say: Pilgrims and Native Americans feasted together after the first harvest. Regarding relationships between Native Americans and Europeans, students answers will likely include: relationships were tense and complicated; there were disputes over land and resources; treaties were signed and not honored; Native Americans were forced to move and live on reservations. Ask: *Do you think Native American viewpoints have been recognized and addressed throughout history? Can you think of modern day Native American concerns?* Some students may mention disputes about sports mascots. Others may mention Native American reservations, while others may not think of examples. Explain to students that they will analyze a speech written by a Native American and consider the motivations and repercussions of that document.

2. Depict the Thanksgiving holiday from your perspective.

Hand out a sheet of paper to each student and explain that they will begin with a quick draw. Ask students to fold the paper in half. On one side, have students use drawings and words to depict the significance of Thanksgiving, how they celebrate the holiday, and what they associate with it. Students will likely depict giving thanks, food, family, football, Pilgrims, and Native Americans.

3. Analyze a speech that expresses a Native American’s perspective.

Ask: *What do you think might be a Native American’s perspective on the arrival of the Pilgrims? How might this affect their views on Thanksgiving?* Explain to students that they will now read a speech written by a Native American, Wamsutta James. He was asked to speak at a state dinner marking the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. Have students work in pairs to read the Suppressed Speech on the provided website and complete the Suppressed Speech Reading Strategy worksheet. Encourage students to explore other pages of the website to answer the last section, “Now what?”, of the worksheet. After students have completed the reading and the worksheet, facilitate a whole-class discussion. Ask:

- *From what perspective does the author write?*
- *How does the author say the Native Americans understood their relationship with land? How is this different or the same with how the Whites understood ownership of land?*
- *In what ways does the author think Natives have been misunderstood? Their skills and abilities? As a people?*
- *What did Wamsutta James mean when he said, “Our spirit refuses to die?” (paragraph 7)*

4. Discuss the significance of National Day of Mourning.

Explain to students that in the end, Wamsutta James did not attend the anniversary celebration at which he was asked to speak. Instead, he helped organize a protest that became the National Day of Mourning (NDOM). Organized by the United American Indians of New England, this protest takes place every year in Plymouth on the same day as Thanksgiving. On the National Day of Mourning, people gather around the statue of Massasoit, the Wampanoag Sachem who signed a peace treaty with the Pilgrims. Display one photo at a time from the National Day of Mourning Photo Gallery. Give time for students to read the NDOM Plaque. Facilitate a whole class discussion. Ask:

- *In what ways does the NDOM plaque reiterate statements made within Wamsutta James’ speech?*
- *Do you think that the statue of Massasoit and the NDOM plaque commemorate the Wampanoag people in a meaningful way? If yes, how so? If no, why?*

5. Think critically and respectfully about different points of view.

Have students complete another quick draw on their paper. Next to their depiction of Thanksgiving, have students use drawings and words to depict Native Americans’ perspectives on the significance of Thanksgiving. Have students work in groups of three to explain their drawings and express their own point of view. In their groups, have students discuss the following questions:

- *What did you learn that you did not know before?*
- *What are the different points of view about Thanksgiving Day? What evidence supports these different points of view?*
- *Have your thoughts about this holiday changed? Explain why or why not.*

Allow students to voice their own points of view and respectfully debate different points of view.

Modification

Pair struggling readers with stronger readers who can help explain the main points of the reading.

Tip

Remind students to be respectful of other people's viewpoints. A good rule of thumb is to restate what you heard the other person say before you begin your comment.

Tip

Students can conduct internet research to learn more about, and gather multiple viewpoints on, the significance of Thanksgiving and the National Day of Mourning.

Alternative Assessment

Collect and assess the Suppressed Speech Reading Strategy worksheet to see whether students thoughtfully and accurately completed all sections.

Extending the Learning

- Ask students to research the origins and history of the contemporary Thanksgiving holiday. Based on their research, have students compare and contrast different viewpoints about the significance of the holiday and the traditions associated with it.
- Have students conduct research and write an essay or prepare a presentation about Wampanoag leader Massasoit.
- Have students research and discuss Indigenous People's Day which is celebrated by some people in place of Columbus Day.
- Have students choose one contemporary Native American and report on the position and accomplishments of the person. The National Museum of the American Indian is a helpful resource.
- Have students investigate contemporary problems that are limiting the success and well-being of Native American people in the United States.

Objectives

Subjects & Disciplines

Social Studies

- Current events/issues
- United States history

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- analyze a Native American's point of view on the arrival of European settlers to North America
- discuss varying perspectives on the significance of Thanksgiving in a thoughtful and respectful manner

Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use

Teaching Methods

- Discussions
- Information organization
- Reading

Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- 21st Century Student Outcomes
 - Information, Media, and Technology Skills
 - Information Literacy
 - Learning and Innovation Skills
 - Communication and Collaboration
 - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
 - Life and Career Skills
 - Social and Cross-Cultural Skills
- 21st Century Themes
 - Global Awareness
- Critical Thinking Skills
 - Analyzing
 - Understanding

National Standards, Principles, and Practices

National Council for Social Studies Curriculum Standards

- **Theme 1:**

Culture

- **Theme 2:**

Time, Continuity, and Change

- **Theme 4:**

Individual Development and Identity

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1:**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2:**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate

summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

The College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- **D2.His.4.9-12.:**

Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

- **D2.His.5.9-12.:**

Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

- **D2.His.7.9-12.:**

Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

- **D2.His.8.9-12.:**

Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

Preparation

What You'll Need

Materials You Provide

- Blank paper
- Pencils
- Pens
- LCD projector or interactive whiteboard

Required Technology

- Internet Access: Optional
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per pair, Monitor/screen, Projector

Physical Space

- Classroom

Grouping

- Large-group instruction

Resources Provided: Handouts & Worksheets

- [Suppressed Speech by Wamsutta \(Frank B.\) James](#)
- [Suppressed Speech Reading Strategy](#)
- [Suppressed Speech Reading Strategy Answer Key](#)

Resources Provided: Images

- National Day of Mourning Gallery

Background & Vocabulary

Background Information

Every year, on the fourth Thursday of November, Americans celebrate the national holiday of

Thanksgiving. Though feasts of thanksgiving date as far back as the first Christian explorers in North America, the “First Thanksgiving” is often associated with the feast shared between the Wampanoag Native Americans and European settlers at Plymouth Plantation in 1621. The gathering came on the heels of a peace treaty, forged between Wampanoag leader Massasoit and Pilgrim leaders, vowing nonaggression and mutual defense. It was a treaty and a friendship between the Wampanoags and the Pilgrims that endured for a little over 50 years, until King Philip’s War in the 1670s.

Today, Thanksgiving is a holiday rich with tradition. Whether gathered around a table enjoying turkey, stuffing, and cranberry, or around a television set watching a football game, it is a time when many Americans come together with family and friends to celebrate and give thanks.

The Wampanoag people, however, hold a different view of Thanksgiving. Disagreeing with the holiday’s celebration of early European settlers in North America, Native Americans have gathered annually on Thanksgiving Day since 1970 to commemorate a National Day of Mourning. The day is a time to remember and reflect on the genocide and mistreatment of millions of Native Americans, to honor ancestors, to recognize the ongoing struggles of Native Americans, and to come together as a people.

Prior Knowledge

["Basic knowledge of the history of Native Americans and colonial settlements", "Basic knowledge about the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday", "Ability to read and analyze primary sources"]

Recommended Prior Activities

- None

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
epidemic	<i>noun</i>	outbreak of an infectious disease able to spread rapidly.
nautical	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with oceans and sailing or navigation.
rapacious	<i>adjective</i>	inordinately greedy.
suppress	<i>verb</i>	to end, prohibit, or not allow certain activities.
wigwam	<i>noun</i>	Native American hut made of a rounded frame covered with mats, hides, or other material. Also called a wickiup.

For Further Exploration

Articles & Profiles

- [Washington Post: More cities celebrating 'Indigenous Peoples Day' amid effort to abolish Columbus Day](#)
- [Huffington Post: Why Thanksgiving is a 'National Day of Mourning' for Some Americans](#)

Websites

- [Pilgrim Hall Museum - Information about Thanksgiving](#)
- [Encyclopedia Entry: Massasoit](#)
- [United American Indians of New England](#)

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