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ABSTRACT

In this lesson plan, students in grades 3-5 compare imagined travel experiences of their own with the actual experiences of 19th-century pioneers on the Oregon Trail. After the 4 lessons students will have: (1) learned about the pioneer experience on the Oregon Trail; (2) compared and contrasted modern-day travel experiences with those of the 19th century; and (3) synthesized historical data through creative writing. The plan notes subject areas covered (American Literature/Language Arts/United States History), time required to complete the lesson, skills used and taught in the lesson, and lists the standards developed by professional associations or governments that are related to the lesson. Activities to extend the lesson and further resources conclude the lesson plan. (SR)

Go West: Imagining the Oregon Trail

Introduction

A 2,000-mile trek across a continent-with no idea what awaits you on the other side. Tell your students to put on their traveling shoes and prepare for the journey of their lives! In this lesson, students compare imagined travel experiences of their own with the actual experiences of 19th-century pioneers. After writing stories about contemporary cross-country journeys, students learn about the experiences of the emigrants who traveled on the Oregon Trail. They then create works of historical fiction in the form of picture books or letters, drawing upon the information they have learned.

Guiding Question:

What was it like to travel west on the Oregon Trail?

How has the experience of travel changed over the course of the last 150 years?

Learning Objectives

After this lesson, students will have:

- learned about the pioneer experience on the Oregon Trail
- compared and contrasted modern-day travel experiences with travel experiences of the 19th century
- synthesized historical data through creative writing

Lesson Plan

1 Before the lesson, explore what students already know about pioneers. Who were they? With what period in history are they associated? Where did they come from? Where did they go, and why?

Explain to students that they are now going to imagine themselves as modern-day pioneers. On a map of the United States, show students a state far away from their homestate. A large selection of maps is available in the Atlas section of the EDSITEMENT-reviewed **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website. Click for a current map of the United States.

Tell students to imagine that they are going to move to this distant state one month from now. Have students brainstorm a list of questions about the trip (e.g., How will I get there? With whom will

SUBJECT AREAS ▶

Literature & Language Arts: American

Literature & Language Arts: Fiction

History & Social Studies: United States

GRADE LEVELS ▶

3-5

TIME REQUIRED ▶

Step 1: One to two class periods, 45 minutes each

Steps 2-3: One 45-minute class period

Step 4: One 45-minute class period

Extending the Lesson: Two class periods, 45 minutes each

SKILLS ▶

- observation and description
- comparing and contrasting
- critical thinking
- historical analysis
- creative writing
- visual art
- collaboration
- Internet skills

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▶

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

- 5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements

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I travel? How long will it take to get there? What can I take with me? How will I feel about going on this trip?). Compile all of their questions in a master list; save the list so that students may refer to it later.

Have each student create a story about his or her imagined cross-country trip. If students get stuck for ideas, they may refer to the master list of questions for inspiration. After their stories are complete, put students in pairs so that they may read their stories aloud to each other.

2 Explain to students that they are now going to learn about the experiences of people who really did move across the country—the pioneers who traveled west on the Oregon Trail in the 1840s. Show them a map of the route the emigrants traveled, available on the EDSITement-reviewed website [The Oregon Trail](#). Click to view the entire route; then click on each state for a close-up view.

In order to give students a feeling for the period of history they are about to enter, you may also wish to show them some photographic images. In addition to images included on The Oregon Trail website, a series of photographs from a re-enactment of the Trail experience are available through the EDSITement-reviewed website The Digital Classroom. To access these images, follow these steps: Enter the [Digital Classroom](#). On the left-hand side of the screen, you will see a list entitled "Other NARA Sites for Primary Sources." Select "NAIL" from this list. Now click on "Search for Archival Holdings." Next, click on "NAIL Digital Copies Search." In the blank space next to the instruction "Enter Keywords," type in the words "Oregon Trail." Scroll down the boxed list titled "Media" and select "Photographs and Graphic Materials." Finally, click on "Display Results" to view the re-enactment photos.

If you have limited computer access in your classroom, you may want to print out some photographs to distribute to students. To make a copy, click on the desired photograph and hold your cursor down until a list of options appears. After selecting "Copy this image," you may post the image into a word processing document and print it out as you would any other document.

As students view each image, ask them what they notice about details such as people, clothing, transportation and setting. What does each photograph reveal about the experiences of the pioneers who traveled west on the Oregon Trail?

3 Using the students' questions (see Step 1) as a starting point, describe the experiences of the 19th-century emigrants who traveled on the Oregon Trail. You can research this information ahead of time using the [Oregon Trail](#) website. Click to access useful and entertaining information about the following topics:

- "Jumping Off" Cities lists the places where emigrants, many of whom initially traveled the Missouri River by steamship, would "jump off" before the river made a turn to the north.
- Waiting tells how thousands of pioneers delayed their journeys until the grass (necessary for feeding their animals along the way) had started to grow.
- Supplies describes the amount of food a family would need in order to survive on the Trail.
- Wagons offers a detailed description of the farm wagons that

appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. ([more](#))

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. ([more](#))
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. ([more](#))
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). ([more](#))

National Geography Standards

9. Geography Standard Human Systems: The Characteristics, Distribution, and Migration of Human Population on Earth's Surface ([more](#))
- 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](#))
- 17 How to Apply Geography to Interpret the Past ([more](#))

National Council for the Social Studies

2. Time, Continuity, and Change ([more](#))

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes ([more](#))
3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and Ideas ([more](#))

View your state's standards

- most emigrants used for the westward journey.
- Congestion describes the traffic jams that delayed the start of the pioneers' journeys.
- Overpacking recounts how emigrants would simply throw things off their wagons when they realized they had brought along too much for their journeys..

"All About the Oregon Trail" also offers detailed information on the following topics:

- The Route West describes the 2,000-mile journey across the country.
- Power explains why emigrants chose mules or oxen to pull their wagons.
- Hardships describes some of the physical risks of the journey, such as fatigue, accidents, storms, disease, and dangerous river crossings.
- Camping documents the daily routine of trail life.
- Buffalo describes the emigrants' encounters with herds of buffalo along the Trail.
- Native Americans recounts both friendly and unfriendly meetings with Native Americans.

Finally, "**Fantastic Facts about the Oregon Trail**" contains a wealth of odd tidbits that are bound to appeal to young imaginations. Each of these sections also includes photographs that can be shared with the class.

For first-hand accounts of the experiences of some of the pioneers who traveled the Oregon Trail, visit the Trail Archive section of the **Oregon Trail** website to access a selection of diaries, letters, and memoirs. Segments from **Harriet Scott Palmer's memoir** and **Catherine Sager Pringle's diary** are likely to be particularly fascinating to young children. As you read the excerpts together, you may ask students to note the similarities and differences in these first-hand accounts.

After students have learned about pioneers' real-life experiences of traveling on the Oregon Trail, have them compare these experiences to those they imagined in the travel story they wrote (see Step 1). In what ways were their experiences similar? In what ways were they different? Would students have wanted to travel as pioneers on the Oregon Trail? Why or why not?

4 Have students create picture books or write letters based on the experiences of a 19th-century family traveling on the Oregon Trail, drawing on the historical information they have learned. Younger students (grade 3) may wish to write a letter addressed to a young emigrant, describing what to expect on the journey, while older students (grades 4 and 5) may wish to write a series of letters from the perspective of a young pioneer.

Extending the Lesson

Based on pictures and descriptions available through The Oregon Trail website, have students work in groups to create dioramas depicting events that could have happened along the Oregon Trail. Students may wish to use their own Oregon Trail stories for inspiration.

For a discussion of the multi-ethnic dimension of westward migration, visit the EDSITement-reviewed New Perspectives on the West website. Episode 7, "The Geography of Hope," details the migration experiences of African Americans and Asian immigrants, and also discusses the displacement of American Indians and Hispanic Americans that resulted from the massive settlement of the west. You may access this section of the website by selecting "Tour of the West" from the frame on the left-hand side of the website's opening screen and then choosing "Episode 7."

Students may also wish to visit the EDSITement-reviewed Women of the West website for accounts of the lives of women in the West in the 1800s. "**There are no Renters Here: Women's Lives on the Sod House Frontier**" offers a virtual tour of life in a Nebraska sod house, while "**The Lodo Mural Project**" at tells the stories of eleven Colorado women who helped to shape the American West.

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