

Antiracist educators are adept at finding what's missing from their curriculum materials and stand ready to fill those gaps. One place to look is U.S. history, which often begins with European exploration and colonization, starting in elementary school.

The "[Is Your U.S. History Text Racist](#)"¹ tool asks if the curriculum:

- Discusses Indigenous Peoples and societies as they existed before European arrival?
- Describes European explorers and their motivations in mostly positive terms?
- Names only European individuals and societies?
- Describes the encounter as an invasion?
- Discusses the systems colonizers devised to exploit and enslave both Africans and Indigenous peoples?
- Explicitly addresses how colonizers used racial and religious distinctions to justify their actions?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What we call something matters, a lot. In a curriculum resource, it reveals the writer's perspective and shapes students' interpretations. There are several ways to describe the period during which Europeans crossed the Atlantic and encountered the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

Age of Discovery

Age of Exploration

Age of Encounter

Age of Invasion

Consider: What assumptions lie behind each name? Whose perspective is centered, and whose is missing or at the margins? Which name do you think is most accurate?

WHAT'S THE NARRATIVE?

If something as simple as a name can convey perspective and interpretation, it's clear that textual passages are freighted with meaning, in what they include and what is missing. Consider these examples of what students might encounter as they learn about the period.

EXAMPLE 1

The teachers' outline for the first unit, "People of the Old and Pre-Columbian World" of an online high school history program approved for use in several states:²

Prehistoric Peoples – The Effect of Agriculture

The Spread of Civilization – The Greeks and Romans

The Middle Ages – The Early Middle Ages, The Late Middle Ages

The Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation

American before 1492 – Native Americans in North America, Native Americans in Central America

The Meeting of Two Worlds

¹ <https://antiracistfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CARE-FIVE-TOPICS.pdf>

EXAMPLE 2

The introduction to “The Age of Encounters,” from the homeschool version of a very popular 5th grade program used in many states:³

In the late 1400s, countries on Europe’s Atlantic coast were competing with each other for wealth and power. Portugal was the leader in exploration. In 1488, a ship from Portugal sailed to the southern tip of Africa. Then, in 1492, Spain paid for Christopher Columbus to sail west across the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus studied everything that was available. He was sure he could reach India by sailing west. No one in Europe at the time knew there were continents between the Atlantic Ocean and India. When Columbus landed, he thought he had reached India. He called the people he met “Indians.”

Columbus brought evidence of his trip back to Europe. He shared his adventures. Columbus became famous in Europe. Once Columbus and his crew shared what they learned on the voyage, other explorers followed.

Portugal, England, and France sent explorers across the Atlantic. Many early explorers believed they had reached Asia. In 1503, an explorer named Amerigo Vespucci claimed it was a “new world.” People later called the land “America” in honor of this claim.

Explorers share information that helps others explore. Columbus opened a new door of adventure. Many followed and shared their new knowledge.

The rest of the page has short biographies and illustrations of five European explorers, a map of their voyages, and a sidebar on the technology they relied on for navigation.

EXAMPLE 3

A teacher-made middle school lesson with a 5-star rating downloaded nearly 700 times from a popular lesson sharing site:⁴

Background: During the Age of Exploration, many individuals spent years traveling in search of the three Gs: gold, God and glory. These explorers were forced to leave friends and family behind while traveling throughout the world in the hope of becoming famous.

In the assignment, students are to take on the role of a famous explorer and create postcards to describe the journey, provide illustrations, and “speak as if you are the explorer.”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Use the questions at the top of the page to review the three curriculum examples.

- What’s missing?
- What would you, as an antiracist teacher, want to add?

² Worldview Software, Curriculum Guide: American History I, accessed March 4, 2021: <https://www.worldviewsoftware.com/guides/AmHist1cg2.pdf>

³ Social Studies Weekly, 5th Grade Samples with Teacher Edition, accessed March 4, 2021: <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/631695/2/>

⁴ Postcards from the Explorers, Share My Lesson, accessed March 4, 2021: <https://sharemylesson.com/teaching-resource/postcards-explorers-248104>