

You be the author. What would you put in a textbook on the First World War?

Concept(s) Historical Significance

Prepared for Grade(s) 11

Province BC

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Time Period(s) 1900-present

Time allotment For the opening lesson: 1 x 75 minute classes; for the culminating lesson: 1 x 75 minute class.

Brief Description of the Task

Students have been hired to write a chapter on the First World War for a high school history book. The publisher, however, has put them on a tight budget for the number of pages and illustrations. Students, taking the roles of historians and authors, must choose only the three most important events of the time. They are responsible for researching the events of the First World War and writing a letter to the textbook publisher outlining and defending their choice of events. Students must use the criteria for historical significance when making their argument.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Use the significance criteria as listed below to explain their three choices of events or trends from the First World War.

a. Resulting in Change:

Profundity • The extent to which people's lives were affected by the event/development

Quantity • How many people's lives were affected by the event/development in the past.

Durability • How long people's lives were affected by the event/development.

b. Revealing • The event/development sheds light on enduring issues in history and contemporary life.

c. Connected to a larger narrative • The event/development is embedded in a larger, meaningful narrative.

Required Knowledge & Skills

To complete this task, students will need to have:

– knowledge of criteria for assessing historical significance (steps to do this are included in the lesson)

– understanding of the history of the First World War (included in lesson)

- ability to take notes from a text
- ability to write a persuasive letter (included in lesson)

Detailed Instructions

This lesson consists of two parts. The first is intended to teach the concept of historical significance at the beginning or close to the beginning of a unit on the First World War and to introduce the eventual culminating task. The second part is the culminating task. As students study the war, they should periodically reflect on the significance of events and complete **Attachments 1 and 2 on First World War events/trends** but there are no separate instructions for completing them beyond what is written on the handouts.

History teacher Bob Bain suggests two principles to help teach historical thinking: a) externalize all thinking so that students might "see" what is involved in historical reasoning and b) create cultural supports or scaffolding. The introductory instructions attempt to do this in addition to giving an opening hook.

1. Ask students to imagine that they are writing to a penpal in another country. Their penpal has asked for an auto-biography. Ask them to make a list ten significant events in their lives that might interest their writing partner. (It is not necessary for everyone to have ten.)
2. After some sharing of their choices, ask students to consider the thinking they used to make their choices. At some point, make a transition to events beyond their personal history and lead them to consider the criteria outlined above (resulting in change, revealing, linked to a larger narrative), although their words may be different.

You might use questions such as the following: How did you decide which events to choose? What were your reasons or criteria? In what ways might your life be of interest to people beyond your family or friends? Could your life ever appear in our textbook? What kind of events or trends might you have to be connected with to appear in a school history textbook? How do historians or the authors of history textbooks decide what to write about?

3. Make a chart of the criteria with a title such as "Criteria for Significance" or "Tools to Determine Historical Significance." Post this prominently throughout your unit of study or school year. This need not use the same vocabulary as the Benchmarks concepts. Nor does the list need to include all of the criteria if you wish to focus on a more limited number. The class could return to revise and develop the list in subsequent weeks.
4. Explain that the final task for this unit on the First World War will be to choose the three most significant events of the war using these criteria. They are being hired by a publisher to revise their textbook, but budgets are tight so the publisher only wants the most significant events among the many that took place. Which ones should you choose? On what grounds?

5. Teach the unit. As the unit progresses, use **Attachments 1 and 2 on First World War events/trends** to model one or more examples of good note-taking and thinking about significance. Reading and thinking out loud with the students about significance is one strategy.

As the unit continues, discuss criteria for significance often and introduce the understanding that significance varies from group to group and over time.

An example of the difference in significance for different groups would be the Conscription Crisis. Most Québec history textbooks give more importance to Conscription than English-Canadian texts. Moreover, it is seen as part of a narrative that includes the abolition of French language schools in Manitoba and Ontario, a connection that is less clear in most English-Canadian textbooks.

An example of change over time would be the history of the Spanish Flu epidemic. Until recently few high school history textbooks mentioned this worldwide event that began in the later stages of the First World War, even though it killed more people than all of the battles combined. Estimate range up to 50 million deaths. In recent years after the publicity about Aids, SARS, swine flu and other epidemics, there has been considerable historical research on the epidemic of 1918-20 and increased importance given to it in high school textbooks. Because of the number of deaths, one could argue that it is the most significant event of this period.

The most challenging standard for students because it involves background knowledge is connecting events to a broader narrative. You may want to refer briefly to such narratives as the struggle for equality of women or French-Canadian resistance to English-Canadian dominance during the unit and offer it at this stage as a challenge to more able students to research these events further. They will be featured in subsequent lessons.

6. Once students have an overview of the First World War, introduce the letter writing format with **Attachment 3, Letter Format** and **Attachment 4, Rubric**. The handouts completed earlier should be by their side for reference. Review for them their role as historians and authors and their audience, the textbook publisher. Take time that students understand the descriptions in the Rubric.

Look out for some pitfalls: students describing event and not explaining the reasons/criteria for choosing the event; and students using the criteria but not being explicit. You may want to set aside a time when students peer edit for these particular, common weaknesses.

7. Optional tasks would be to ask students to suggest and argue for illustrations, to draw possible illustrations with an explanation, or to choose war photographs or paintings that they think are the most significant.

Extensions:

On the First World War:

Choose the most significant events for a Remembrance Day display in the school display case.

For other units of study involving significance:

1. Create a museum exhibit.
2. For provincial history, create a mural for the provincial legislature (and then compare their choices and portrayal with the ones that already exist).
3. Create a web exhibit for a museum of progress and/or decline such as the one of the Museum of Civilization at <http://www.civilization.ca/hist/progrese.html>.

Outcomes

Students will:

1. apply critical thinking skills
2. demonstrate effective research skills
3. demonstrate effective written communication skills
4. describe the role of women in the development of Canadian society
5. describe Canada's role as an autonomous nation
6. describe Canada's role in the First World War
7. assess the impact of the conscription crisis on Canadian unity (British Columbia)