

Columbus' Diary: A Primary Source

There are a number of different ways to use Columbus' diary entries so that students are exposed to using primary source materials. The first activity here is taken from *A History of US: The First Americans: Prehistory-1600, Teaching Guide* (3rd ed) by Joy Hakim. It is most easily used with middle or high school students, but if adapted, possibly done as a whole group activity, it can be used with upper elementary students as well. The second activity is taken from an article by Bill Bigelow "Columbus's Diary: Reading Between the Lines" in *RTC* (p. 95)

Hakim suggests using Columbus' report from his first voyage to help teach students how to organize and interpret information from a non-fiction source.

ACTIVITY ONE: HISTORICAL DISCUSSION

(Taken from *A History of US: The First Americans Prehistory-1600, Teaching Guide* for the 3rd Edition, p. 45)

1. Ask students to read Columbus' report of his first voyage (provided on the next page).
2. After reading, have students identify the main idea or idea from each of the paragraphs. Students can do this individually, in partners or small groups.
3. Once students have identified the main ideas, have them re-read the report and find the details that support each of the main ideas. They should make a list of each main idea with its supporting details.
4. Using the lists they've created, have students interpret Columbus' report. Use the following as guiding questions:
 - a. What was Columbus' general view of the Indians?
 - b. Why did he view them the way he did?
 - c. What is the significance of his comments about the gold the Indians wore?

Students can either just provide answers to these questions or have them use the questions and the answers as the basis for writing a paragraph that explains their interpretation of Columbus' report. Students can also create their own questions to pose to the rest of the class. Students may also come up with other interpretations not touched on by these questions that could be shared in a class discussion of students' findings.

RESOURCE PAGE 4

Columbus's Report on His First Voyage

Directions: Read these two excerpts from Columbus's letter to the court of Spain on his return from his first voyage to America. Then follow your teacher's instructions.

Here Begins An account of the first Two Days In America...From the Letter of Columbus Published Upon His Return

Saturday, October 13, 1492

At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, and very handsome....They came to the ships in small canoes made of single trunk of a tree wrought in a wonderful manner considering the country...They came loaded with balls of cotton, parrots, javelins, and other things...These they exchanged for whatever we chose to give them. I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of metal hanging at their noses, I gathered from them by signs that by going southward...there would be found a king who possessed great cups full of gold, and in large quantities. I tried to get them to go there but found they were unacquainted with the route...according to what I could learn from them, there was land at the S. and N.W. as well as at the S.W. The natives from these lands came many times and fought with them, and proceeded onto the S.W. in search of gold and precious stones. ...The natives are very docile and desirous to possess anything they saw with us. But not having anything to give in return, they take what they can get and presently swim away. Still they give away all they have got for whatever may be given to them,...I saw one give sixteen skeins of cotton thread...for three Portuguese ceutis....This traffic I forbade...The gold which they wear in their noses, is found here, but not to lose time, I am determined to see if I can find the island of Japan.

Sunday, October 14, 1492

At dawn I ordered the ship's boat...to see the other side of [the island]...Presently I saw two or three villages, and the people all come down to the shore, calling out to us, and giving thanks to God. Some brought us water, and others food. ...One old man came on board my boat. The others...cried with loud voices, "Come see the men who have come from heaven. Bring them food and drink."...They shouted to us to come on shore, but I was afraid to land, seeing an extensive reef or rocks which surrounds the whole island. [On another island]...were six houses. I do not...see the necessity of thus fortifying the place, as the people here are simple in war-like matters, as your Highnesses will see by those seven which I caused to be taken to Spain in order to learn our language, and return....Those natives whom I had taken on board informed me by signs that there were so many [islands] that they could not be numbered;...I determined to steer for the largest. It will be distant about five leagues from San Salvador...

These are the words of the Admiral.

ACTIVITY TWO: POINT OF VIEW DISCUSSION

For the complete activity, please see RTC (p. 95). Below is a brief description and explanation, but in the handout of Columbus' diary provided on the following pages Bigelow offers many guiding questions and ways to encourage students to think more deeply about the article. It would be an excellent resource for a teacher to read in order to prepare to teach this activity to your students.

1. Explain the history of the document being used here, and the idea of a transcription to your students.
2. Read and discuss the critical reading questions (found on p. 96 RTC)
 - a. What attitudes does Columbus have about the people he encounters (the "Indians")? Summarize these and then give at least three quotes from his journal as evidence.
 - b. Based on what you read in his journal, what does it appear that Columbus cares about, what he wants? Give several quotes as evidence.
 - c. Based on Columbus's observations, what if anything can you tell about the kind of people the "Indians" are—what they value, how they treat other people, etc." If you don't think you can tell anything about the Indians from Columbus' journal, give your reasons for why not.
4. Bigelow suggests reading at least the first day's entry with the students, line by line, asking them guiding questions to encourage them to think deeply about what entry reveals about Columbus's thoughts, priorities, etc.
5. Once students have read the entire document, have them work in small groups to answer the critical reading questions.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS

The Journal of Christopher Columbus

Friday, October 12, 1492. In order that they might feel great friendship toward us, because I knew that they were a people to be delivered and converted to our holy faith by love rather than by force, I gave to some of them some red caps and some glass beads, which they hung round their necks, and many other things of little value. At this they were greatly pleased and became so entirely our friends that it was a wonder to see.

Afterwards they came swimming to the ships' boats, where we were, and brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls, and spears and many other things, and we exchanged them for other things, such as small glass beads and hawks' bells, which we gave to them. In fact, they took all and gave all, such as they had, with good will, but it seemed to me that they were a people very deficient in everything.

They all go naked as their mothers bore them, and the women also, although I saw only one very

young girl. And all those whom I did see were youths, so that I did not see one who was over thirty years of age; they were very well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces. Their hair is coarse almost like the hairs of a horse's tail and short; they wear their hair down over their eyebrows, except for a few strands behind, which they wear long and never cut. Some of them are painted black, and they are the color of the people of the Canaries, neither black nor white, and some of them are painted white and some red and some in any color that they find. Some of them paint their faces, some their whole bodies, some only the eyes, and some only the nose.

They do not bear arms or know them, for I showed them swords and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are certain reeds, without iron, and some of these have a fish tooth at the end, while others are pointed in various ways.

They are all generally fairly tall, good looking and well proportioned. I saw some who bore marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to them to ask how this came about, and they indicated to me that people came from other islands, which are near, and wished to capture them, and they defended themselves. And I believed and still believe that they come here from the mainland to take them for slaves.

They should be good servants and of quick intelligence, since I see that they very soon say all that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for it appeared to me that they had no creed. Our Lord willing, at the time of my departure I will bring back six of them to Your Highnesses, that they may learn to talk.

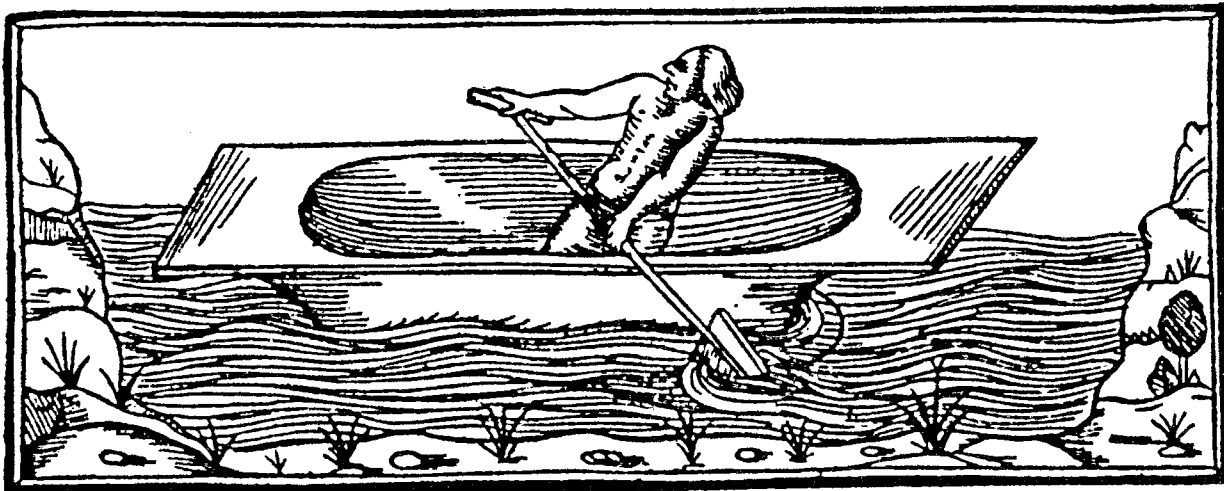
Saturday, October 13th. As soon as day broke, there came to the shore many of these men, all youths, as I have said, and all of a good height, very handsome people.... Their eyes are very lovely and not small. They are not at all black, but the color of Canarians.... Their legs are very straight, all alike; they have no bellies but very good figures.

They came to the ship in boats, which are made of a tree trunk like a long boat and all of one piece.

COLUMBUS'S JOURNAL

Reading Deeply

1. What attitudes does Columbus have about the people he encounters (the "Indians")? Summarize these and then give at least three quotes from his journal as evidence.
2. Based on what you read in his journal, what does it appear that Columbus cares about, what he wants? Give several quotes as evidence.
3. Based on Columbus's observations, what if anything can you tell about the kind of people the "Indians" are — what they value, how they treat other people, etc.? If you don't think you can tell anything about the Indians from Columbus's journal, give your reasons for why not.



Oviado, 1547

European illustration of a Native dugout canoe.

They are very wonderfully carved, considering the country, and large, so that in some forty or forty-five men came. Others are smaller, so that in some only a solitary man came. They row them with a paddle, like a baker's peel, and they travel wonderfully fast. If one capsizes, everyone at once begins to swim and right it, baling it out with gourds which they carry with them.

They brought balls of spun cotton and parrots and spears and other trifles ... and they gave all for anything that was given to them. And I was attentive and labored to know if they had gold, and I saw that some of them wore a small piece hanging from a hole which they have in the nose, and from signs I was able to understand that, going to the south or going round the island to the south, there was a king who had large vessels of it and possessed much gold. I tried to make them go there, and afterwards saw that they were not inclined for the journey.

I decided to wait until the afternoon of the following day, and after that to leave for the south-west, for, as many of them indicated to me, they said that there was land to the south and to the southwest and to the northwest, and that those of the northwest often came to attack them. So I decided to go to the southwest, to seek the gold and precious stones....

The people also are very gentle and, since they long to possess something of ours and fear that nothing will be given to them unless they give something, when they have nothing, they take what they can and immediately throw themselves into the water and swim. But all that they do possess, they give for anything which is given to them, so that they exchange things even for pieces of broken dishes and bits of broken glass cups....

Sunday, October 14th. At dawn, I ordered the ship's boat and the boats of the caravels to be made ready,

and I went along the island in a north-northeasterly direction, to see the other part, which lay to the east, and its character, and also to see the villages. And I soon saw two or three, and the people all came to shore, calling us and giving thanks to God. Some brought us water, others various eatables: others, when they saw that I was not inclined to land, threw themselves into the sea and came, swimming, and we understood that they asked us if we had come from heaven. One old man got into the boat, and all the rest, men and women, cried in loud voices: "Come and see the men who have come from heaven; bring them food and drink."

Many came and many women, each with something, giving thanks to God, throwing themselves on the ground and raising their hands to the sky, and then shouting to us that we should land. But I feared to do so, seeing a great reef of rocks which encircled the whole of that island, while within there is deep water and a harbor large enough for all the ships of Christendom, the entrance to which is very narrow....

And in order to see all this, I went this morning, that I might be able to give an account of all to Your Highnesses and also say where a fort could be built. I saw a piece of land, which is formed like an island although it is not one, on which there were six houses; it could be converted into an island in two days, although I do not see that it is necessary to do so, for these people are very unskilled in arms, as Your Highnesses will see from the seven whom I caused to be taken in order to carry them off that they may learn our language and return. However, when Your Highnesses so command, they can all be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with fifty men they would be all kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished....

Monday, October 15th. To this island I gave the name Santa Maria de la Concepcion, and about sunset, I anchored to learn if there were gold there, because those whom I had caused to be taken in the island of San Salvador told me that there they wore very large golden bracelets on the legs and arms.

I can well believe that all that they said was a ruse [a trick] in order to get away. It was nevertheless my wish not to pass any island without taking possession of it, although when one had been annexed [claimed], all might be said to have been. And I anchored and was there until today, Tuesday, when at dawn I went ashore in the armed boats and landed.

The people, who were many, were naked and of the same type as those of the other island of San Salvador; they allowed us to go through the island and gave us what we asked of them. And as the wind blew more strongly across from the southeast, I was unwilling to wait and went back to the ship.

A large canoe was alongside the caravel Niña, and one of the men of the island of San Salvador, who was in her, threw himself into the sea and went off in it, and during the evening before midnight the other threw himself overboard ... and went after the canoe, which fled so that there was not a boat that could have overtaken it, since we were a long way behind it. In the end it reached land and they left the canoe, and some of my company went ashore after them, and they all ran off like chickens....

These islands are very green and fertile and the breezes are very soft, and it is possible that there are in them many things, of which I do not know, because I did not wish to delay in finding gold, by discovering and going about many islands. And since these men give these signs that they wear it on their arms and legs, and it is gold because I showed them some pieces of gold which I have, I cannot fail, with the aid of Our Lord, to find the place it comes from.

Being in the middle of the channel between these two islands, that of Santa Maria and this large island, to which I gave the name Fernandina, I found a man alone in a canoe on his way from the island of Santa Maria to that of Fernandina. He was carrying with him a piece of their bread, about as large as the fist, and a gourd of water and a piece of brown earth, powdered and then kneaded, and some dried leaves, which must be a thing highly prized among them, since already at San Salvador they presented me with some of them....

He came alongside the ship. I made him come on board, as he asked to do so, and caused him to bring his canoe on board also and all that he had with him to be kept safe. I commanded that bread and honey should be given to him to eat, and something to drink, and thus I will carry him to Fernandina and will give him back all his belongings, in order to give him a good opinion of us, so that when, please God, Your Highnesses send here, those who come may receive honor and the Indians will give to us of all that they have.

From The Journal of Christopher Columbus, ed. by Cecil Jane (New York: Bramhall House, 1960). Paragraph breaks have been added.

