

Title: Civil War Literature Circle

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Approximate Grade Level: 5th-8th grades

Approximate Length of Time: Approximately 4 weeks

[State Standards](#)

[NCSS Standards](#)

Goals: Students will gain a historical knowledge of the Civil War through the use of fictional novels about the era.

Objectives:

1. Given a work of historical fiction, students will be able to identify key aspects of Civil War history from the works, and present them to the class within an oral presentation.
2. Students will be able to participate in a group to identify important aspects of their work of historical fiction, and record them in written form.
3. After gaining knowledge from their works of historical fiction, students will be able to receive an original letter from the Civil War era and write a response to the letter based on historical facts.

Materials Used:

1. Literature Circle Role Sheets
 - Discussion Director
 - Word Wizard
 - Content Connector
 - Story Summarizer
2. “Understanding by Design” handout
3. Historical Fiction
 - Rifles for Watie – Harold Keith
 - Across Five Aprils – Irene Hunt
 - Iron Thunder – Avi
 - In My Father’s House – Ann Rinaldi
 - The Last Silk Dress – Ann Rinaldi
 - (These novels vary in reading level and difficulty.)
4. Original Civil War letters (any will do)
 - The 50 Greatest letters from America’s Wars—Edited by David Lowenherz
 - War Letters—Edited by Andrew Carroll
 - “Civil War Letters – A Michigan Connection” website at <http://www.oakland.edu/civilwarletters-amichiganconnection/transcriptions.htm>
 - “Letters from an Iowa Soldier during the Civil War” website at <http://www.civilwarletters.com/>

Anticipatory Set/Hook:

What can fiction books teach us about history? Can they teach us anything factual even though they are fictional? What can we tell about the time the books were written and the events they were written about?

Procedure:

Students read books over a four-week period. Literature Circles convene once a week. Lessons on the Civil War are taught on the other days.

Students choose the novel they will read and form groups. All members of a group read the same novel. There are 4 students per group. Using the organization form, the students divide the roles so that each student performs a different role during each of the four discussion days. They also divide the novel into four parts and determine how many pages will be read for each discussion day.

Discussion days:

There are four discussion days. Each group meets and has the story summarizer summarize what is happening in the book. The word wizard then shares “social studies” words they choose from the text. The students read the word in context and the wizard defines the word and explains why this word is a “social studies” word. The content connector chooses events that occurred in the book and connects that to information learned during the unit. Students determine if the events in the book are accurate according to the other information discussed in class. The Discussion Director leads the discussion using question stems from the Understanding by Design handout,

The teacher monitors the group discussions, clarifying for a group when necessary. The teacher should also listen for ideas that should be shared with the entire class.

When each group completes their discussion, the teacher leads a class discussion. Each group gives a brief summary of their book so far. This increases student interest in other books. The wizards share words used in their novels. We compare words that are used in the books and identify how these words are social studies words. Each group also shares the connections between events in their novels and information they have learned about the Civil War. The teacher asks groups to share elements of their discussions that will further the understanding of the Civil War for the whole class.

This class room discussion is the heart of the lesson. Students are internalizing events of the Civil War as they read the novels and see events from different points of view. They are seeing vocabulary normally found in textbooks used in the context of the story. Most importantly, they are creating their own understanding of the war, as they compare the fictional accounts with the factual information presented to them. The discussions are enriched by their knowledge and many viewpoints—Northern, Southern, women, poor farmers, Native American—that are presented in the novels.

When students have completed the unit on the Civil War and have finished the novels, they will apply their knowledge of the Civil War and the historical fiction genre.

Students should understand that historical fiction is based on facts and that historical fiction gives us a perspective on those facts.

Students will then be given artifact letters from the Civil War period and asked to reply to those letters based on facts they have learned from their study and from a historical perspective that they can choose. Letters should detail information their persona would have and be correct to the perspective they chose.

Closure: Is historical fiction useful in learning about history in general? Did you find it easy or difficult to understand the difference between the facts and the fiction?

Assessment: Students will successfully complete their roles within their assigned Literature Circle. Students will also successfully write a response to a period Civil War letter based off of the knowledge they gained from their Literature Circles.

Modification Ideas:

1. Choose different Civil War related books if the books listed above are too advanced or not challenging enough.
2. Make the groups larger and divide the tasks among more students if needed.

Sources:

The “Literature Circle” idea, as well as strategies surrounding the concept, may be found in:

Daniels, Harvey. Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2002.

The “question stems” used to help create student discussion come courtesy of:

McTighe, Jay and Grant Wiggins,. The Understanding by Design Handbook. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1999.

Questioning for Understanding

By Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

Explanation

What is the key idea in _____?

What are examples of _____?

What are characteristics/parts of _____?

How did this come about? Why is this so?

What caused _____? What are the effects of _____?

How might we prove/confirm/justify _____?

How is _____ connected to _____?

What might happen if _____?

What are common misconceptions about _____?

Interpretation

What is the meaning of _____?

What are the implications of _____?

What does _____ reveal about _____?

How is _____ like _____ (analogy/metaphor)?

How does _____ relate to me/us?

So what? Why does it matter?

Application

How and when can we use this (knowledge/process)?

How is _____ applied in the larger world?

How might _____ help us to _____?

How could we use _____ to overcome _____?

Perspective

What are different points of view about _____?

How might this look from _____'s perspective?

How is _____ similar to/different from _____?

What are other possible reactions to _____?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of _____?

What are the limits of _____?

What is the evidence for _____?

Is the evidence reliable? Sufficient?

Empathy

What would it be like to walk in _____'s shoes?

How might _____ feel about _____?

How might we reach an understanding about _____?

What was _____ trying to make use feel/see?

Self-Knowledge

How do I know _____?

What are the limits of my knowledge about _____?

What are my "blind spots" about _____?

How can I best show _____?

How are my views about _____ shaped by _____ (experiences, habits, prejudices, style)?

What are my strengths and weaknesses in _____?

Literature Circles
Discussion Director Role

Job Description – Develops a list of questions for the group to discuss. Use “Questioning for Understanding” guidelines on handout. Write six questions, one from each category, in the guidelines. Write your answer.

Explanation Question and Answer

Interpretation Question and Answer

Application Question and Answer

Perspective Question and Answer

Empathy Question and Answer

Self-Knowledge Question and Answer

Literature Circles
Content Connector Role

Job Description – The Content Connector finds connections between the book and our study of the Civil War. The Connector needs to locate four passages that make reference to the history in which the story is set. This can be new information or it can be a reference to a topic we have discussed in class. Copy the passage and write several sentences that explain the connection to our social studies class.

Passage 1

Passage 2

Passage 3

Passage 4

Literature Circles
Word Wizard Role

Job Description – The Word Wizard chooses words used in the book that are “social studies” words. They are words that might need to be defined in the glossary of a social studies book. Choose the word, write the sentence in which it is found, define the term, and write your own sentence. Choose six words.

Example:

1. Word – volunteers
2. Text use – At first there were so many volunteers that neither army could handle them all.
3. Definition – Volunteer means a person who chooses freely to enter military service.
4. My sentence – The 8th Pennsylvania Regiment was comprised of volunteers.

Word 1

Word 2

Word 3

Word 4

Word 5

Word 6

Literature Circles
Story Summarizer Role

Job Description – The Story Summarizer summarizes this section of the book. Include what is happening to all the main characters. Predict what will happen next.