



# Personal Storytelling, Oral Traditions, and Narrative Art — Grades 4–6

## Summary

Students will learn about pictographic art and oral traditions by watching and responding to a PowerPoint, “The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indian Perspectives”; by considering important stories from their own lives, families, and communities; by examining the symbols Plains artists used in their pictographic art and the symbols we use today; by learning how to discuss and critique art; by creating a personal artistic piece using stylistic elements from ledger art; and by telling a personal story using visual language.

**This lesson is aligned With the OPI Indian Education For All (IEFA) “Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians” (EUs), particularly**

- EU 1–Tribal Diversity
- EU 2–Individual Diversity
- EU 3–Beliefs, Spirituality, Traditions, Oral History Persist
- EU 4–Reservations–land reserved
- EU 6–History from Indian Perspectives

**This lesson is also aligned with the following Montana Art Content Standards**

- Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #8. Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

- Anchor Standard #9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding, including artistic ideas and works by American Indians.

## Teaching Note

Educators can adapt this lesson, using parts or the whole. There are six distinct activities, and the lesson is designed so that one activity is done per day. However, this can be transformed into a unit study if educators focus on one image per day/week. Materials needed for each activity are specified under that activity.

## About this Lesson

Marina Weatherly, an artist and art educator from Stevensville, Montana, developed this activity in 2012. It was reviewed by the Indian Education Division of the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI). Funding for this project was provided through a partnership between the Montana Historical Society and OPI.

*(continued)*

## Activity 1: Learning about Narrative Art and Oral Traditions of the Plains Indians

---

### Materials:

- “The Art of Storytelling” PowerPoint: Download from <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/IEFA/GradesK-6TheArtofStorytelling.pptx>
- Lesson plan: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/IEFA/GradesK-6PPTLessonStorytelling.pdf>
- Blank ledger art paper for journals (optional) in “Printable Ledger Templates” PDF: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>

### Preparation:

Instructors should familiarize themselves with the “Art of Storytelling” material. Print out the PowerPoint script and preview the PowerPoint.

**Optional:** Have students make journals, in which they can write notes and make sketches. If you wish, make copies of the PDF “Fort Keogh blank ledger page” in the Ledger Templates PDF file to use for journal pages. Have students title their journals “My Ledger.”

### Procedure:

Introduce the activity by presenting the learning objectives to the students.

Art is like a window into cultures and history, and looking at art can tell us something about the people who made the art and help us to appreciate and respect other people.

This art lesson will help teach us the story of several Montana Indian tribes during three time periods: thousands of years ago, in the late 1800s during a time of great change (a little more than a hundred years ago), and the present.

We will learn this story by observing and discussing the art created by artists from those time periods. We will look at art from the Plains tribes of Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Hidatsa and Blackfeet, and from the Plateau tribe of Salish.

We will make our own art to tell our own stories using some of the styles of the Indian artists.

**Discuss:** Appreciation, respect, and how we show it.

### Present Background Information:

Stories hold histories, ideas, and events.

The storytellers in this lesson often told their stories with pictures called *pictographs*.

Historically, the Indian tribes of Montana did not have a written language; they had an oral tradition.

The people held knowledge, history, and stories *inside* of themselves and communicated in many different ways: the spoken word, sign language, picture writing or pictographs, music, dance, drama, and appearance. They often used symbols to communicate. Not all tribes and artists use the same symbols.

Today, people may use books and computers to store knowledge, history, and stories *outside* of themselves. They still communicate and express themselves with the spoken word and different art forms, but now we also use computers, the Internet, phones, radio, TV, and movies to communicate and tell stories.

Sometimes stories in books use pictures with words to tell a story. This is called an illustration.

Today, symbols are still used. What are some symbols used today?

Everyone has a special story to tell.

Discuss ways to communicate and tell stories, past and present, and use symbols. Provide examples that reflect the student’s understanding and student essential questions (below).

**Show PowerPoint Presentation, “The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indian Perspectives.”**

**Teaching note:** These images tell a sequential

(continued)

story, historical through contemporary. Instructors can either use all the images (and script) or focus on specific images, depending on amount of time and grade level. As you show the PowerPoint, engage students in rich

discussions and critical thinking, understanding that their depth of knowledge and sophistication will grow as more context is introduced through the slide images.

**General Questions for the Visual Presentation:** *While the students are viewing and discussing the images, engage the students by asking them the following suggested questions, when applicable. Explain to the students they will be art and history detectives and will look for clues in the storytelling images to help them understand the stories. Encourage students to raise hands for each question and provide different answers.*

<u>Content</u>	<u>Art Elements &amp; Principles of Design</u>	<u>Other</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is happening?</li><li>• Who is in the picture?</li><li>• When did it happen?</li><li>• Who made the picture? How many artists made the picture?</li><li>• What tribe is the artist from?</li><li>• Why was it made?</li><li>• What are the figures wearing? Why? Hair style and headdress? Are they different or similar? How?</li><li>• Which direction are the figures and animals moving? How are they moving?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What kind of lines can you find? Did the artist outline their design first?</li><li>• Shapes: What shapes? Are they flat or do they have depth? (2-D or 3-D perspective). Do they overlap? Are they realistic or abstract? Facing or profile? Do you see geometric shapes? What are they?</li><li>• Is there empty space? Big, little, or no space?</li><li>• How are the shapes placed on the painting?</li><li>• Is there a focal point?</li><li>• Who can find where pattern was used?</li><li>• Who can find symmetry? Asymmetry?</li><li>• Are the subjects in proportion or out of proportion to each other?</li><li>• Is there movement? How did the artist show movement?</li><li>• What colors can you find? Primary? Secondary?</li><li>• What materials did the artist use?</li><li>• Can you find a symbol? What do you think the symbol means?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What action words (verbs) can you use to describe what is happening?</li><li>• What descriptive (adjectives) words?</li><li>• Who can make a pose like that (<i>specify</i>) figure?</li></ul>

(continued)

## Vocabulary/Glossary

### Cross-Curricular Vocabulary

**Adaptation**

**Adverb**

**Appreciate**

**Bull-boat:** A small round boat made of hides stretched over a wooden frame and used by Plains Indians

**Ceremony and Social Dance**

**Collaboration**

**Communication**

**Community**

**Conflict**

**Cooperation**

**Counting Coups:** A prestigious act of touching or striking the enemy and retreating, used in battle by Plains Indian warriors

**Coups Stick:** A stick, often decorated, used to touch the enemy in the act of counting coups

**Culture**

**Displacement**

**Document**

**Generosity**

**Heroic**

**Individual**

**Intertribal:** Existing or occurring between tribes.

**Long Ago or Historically:** The distant past (in the context of this lesson: pre-1800s Plains Indian life)

**Memory**

**Oral Tradition:** A tribe's traditional beliefs and legends that have been passed down by word

**Parfleche Bag:** An American Indian storage container made out of rawhide

**Pompadour:** An arrangement of a man's hair in which it is brushed up high from the forehead

**Powwow:** A gathering of North America's Native people

**Regalia:** Attire used for special occasions

**Relationship**

**Reservation:** Land reserved by the tribes for their own use, through treaties

**Respect**

**Tipi Liner:** A second interior tipi wall or layer of canvas or hide used to insulate a tipi for warmth.

**Traditional/Contemporary:**

- **Traditional:** A long-standing action or belief of a community or group, usually handed down from one generation to another
- **Contemporary:** Modern something that is of the present time period

**Tribal names:** Crow, Cheyenne, Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Blackfeet, and Salish

**Tribe**

**Verb**

**Warrior:** A person skilled in combat or warfare, especially within the context of a tribal society

### The Language of Art

**Elements of Art:** Line, shape, space, color

**Principles of Design:** Proportion, pattern, rhythm, focal point, movement

**Color:**

- **Primary colors:** Red, yellow, and blue
- **Secondary colors:** Green, orange
- **Warm colors:** Reds, yellows, and oranges create a sense of movement or excitement and make shapes come forward
- **Cool colors:** Blues and greens make shapes visually recede in space

**Contrast:** Differences (e.g., light/dark, 2-D/3-D)

**Focal Point:** Center of attention

**Geometric Design and Patterns:** Using angles, straight and curved lines in a variety of combinations to create a balanced abstract design

(continued)

**Illustration:** Visual art that accompanies and complements text, that shows an idea or explains something

**Outline:** A line drawn around or depicting the outside edges of something to show its shape

**Pattern:** A repeated decorative design

**Space and Perspective:**

- **3-D:** Creating the illusion of space
- **2-D:** Flat space or shape

**Symbol:** Something that stands for or represents something else

**Symmetry:** the property of being the same or corresponding on both sides of a central dividing line

**Visual Art:** Art intended to be seen by the eyes

**Styles**

**Abstract/Realistic:**

- **Abstract:** Art that is not realistic or real-looking, but could be based on an actual subject
- **Realistic:** Representational, recognizable images that look like what they represent

**Ledger Art:** Pictorial images on paper

**Pictograph:** Picture writing, a pictorial sign or symbol

**Pictorial:** The art of painting or drawing pictures

**Petroglyph:** Design carved into rock, generally prehistoric

**Profile:** Side view

**Style:** A way of doing something that all people in that culture (or tribe) agreed is the proper way

**Techniques:**

- **Engrave:** To carve designs on a hard surface

**Materials:**

- **Canvas:** A strong heavy cotton, hemp, or jute fabric
- **Hide:** Animal skin

**Minerals**

**Preservative:** Applied to provide protection from decay or spoilage

**Pigment:** A natural material that gives color

---

After the PowerPoint, review what you have learned about ledger art. Particularly, students should know:

- Traditionally, Montana Indian tribes told stories orally and visually because they did not have a written language.
- Traditionally, Montana Indian artists created picture stories that were autobiographical.
- Through pictures they recorded important events that happened in the past or current events. They also recorded everyday life or events that illustrated good or brave deeds having to do with hunting or warfare. The tribes showed respect and honored those achievements.
- By looking at the art, you can see what life was like a long time ago, and you might see how it has changed.
- Today, many Indian artists continue to tell stories with their art, as seen in the contemporary exhibit pictures.
- Artists often create art to express changes, conflicts, and impacts in their life. Continuity, change, and adaptation of the art forms parallel historical and cultural changes.
- Art plays a role in defining tribal and individual identity. Historically, there is a traditional artistic style for each tribe, but there are also examples of individual artistic styles. Men and women traditionally had different artistic styles.
- Styles of visual storytelling may differ between individuals, tribes, and cultures. Their artistic styles show differences and similarities.
- Indian artists often traded ideas, gifts, and goods.
- Indian artists often used symbols to express ideas. Not all Indian artists used the same symbols.
- Symbols and images may be realistic (White Bear's drawings) or abstract (Terrance Guardipee's and Jaune Quick-to-See's art).

(continued)



- Indian artists often used materials that were most available to them. Long ago (and sometimes today), they used materials from animals, plants, and minerals.
  - The artists respect their materials because they come from the natural world.
  - Often, the stories, styles, and materials changed with time as the artists adapted to their changing culture.
  - Artists often collaborated to create art.
- 

## Activity 2: Discussion and Inquiry (Single and/or Group Activity)

---

### Materials:

- Images from packets or PowerPoint
- Student journals for brainstorming and taking notes

### Procedure:

Lead the class in a discussion of some of the following essential questions and/or choose a few of the questions for students to write about in their journals and share.

- What is an oral tradition?
  - What are all the different ways a story can be told?
  - How would I communicate today if I did not write?
  - How do the artistic styles show that the Plains Indian tribes of Montana went through transitions and adaptations throughout history? How were the artists influenced?
  - How has my life been impacted by an event? How did I adapt to change or react to an event?
  - What is an important event or memory I would like to record and show/tell others? Is it a personal, school, family, community, country or worldwide event?
  - What good or brave deed have I done in my life that I am proud of?
  - What important role do I have in my life that helps others?
  - How do we show respect for each other?
  - What can I do today to earn respect?
  - How are we different from each other? How are we the same?
  - How have I collaborated and cooperated on an activity with others? If there was conflict, how did I resolve it?
- 

## Activity 3: Remembering and Retelling Important Stories

---

**Teaching note:** This is a multi-day lesson.

### Materials:

- Family Story Assignment worksheet (on website: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>) or other worksheet with sample questions
- Family History Question Ideas (on website: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>)
- Student journal for brainstorming and taking notes. See Resources for background information and image sources.

### Procedure:

Explain to students that ledger art allowed artists to preserve and share important memories. All of us have important memories that can be shared and preserved.

Ask students to talk to a family member to learn a story from their own family history or a memorable family event.

- Provide students with sample questions (see Family History Ideas). Prepare your own questionnaire or use and/or modify the

(continued)

Family Story Assignment worksheet. In either case, provide support for students who may not have access to someone who can help them with this.

Have students brainstorm (individually or collectively) about a memorable event that happened to themselves, a family member, their family, classroom, school, community, country or world. Encourage them to choose only one to three moments in that event. Which was the most important moment? Ask the students to tell the class their story.

Discuss displacement: Have you ever been away from your family, home, or a place? Did you remember what they or it looked like? How would you remember it with pictures?

Discuss qualities and actions of a hero, respect, and how you show respect, cooperation, and collaboration. What is an act you have done that you are proud of? How did other people show you respect (and honor you) for that action? What is an activity you did with others that showed cooperation? What did you do to collaborate with others? Was there conflict? How did you resolve conflict?

Individually, in small groups, or as a class, have students look at traditional and contemporary pictorial American Indian designs. Study and compare traditional and contemporary Indian designs. Have the students identify changes in artistic styles and story content over time. Have students show and discuss the images, designs, and styles and their similarities and differences with the class.

**Discuss:** How is tribal identity portrayed in the images? Individual identity? What is the artist recording or remembering? What is traditional and what is new to that time period when the art was created? How is the artist illustrating how life is changing? Why is it changing and how? What materials is the artist using to adapt to the time period/place/situation?

#### **Related Extension Activities:**

Invite an elder to tell stories. Whenever possible, invite a tribal member to tell their tribal stories.

Read to or have students read Indian Reading Series stories (See Resources).

Students may write a story about an important event, or act out a story.

---

## **Activity 4: Art Evaluation**

---

### **Materials:**

- Images from PowerPoint or packet

### **Procedure:**

Teach your students how to properly critique an art project by training them in ways of looking and talking about art. (This skill will be practiced later when students offer peer critiques of each other's art projects.)

Choose a slide from the PowerPoint to model and practice critiquing a work of art. Stress that art should be judged in relationship to its intentions (for student art, that intention is often to fulfill a specific assignment).

Provide model sentences that avoid judgment. For example, "The first thing I see is ..." or "\_\_\_\_\_ stands out to me because of the (size, color, brightness, placement) contrast." (Marvin

Bartels, 2002.) In his essay, "Successful Art Class Critique," Bartel writes: "If it is peer evaluation, I ask students to avoid all judgmental comments. I stress description, analysis, and interpretation. These are comments that say what we see, why it makes an impression, and what it might mean or how it makes the viewer feel. No one may say, 'I like . . . ' or, 'I don't like . . . ' I ask them to simply say, 'The first thing I see is . . . ' 'This \_\_\_\_ stands out for me because of the . . . (size, color, brightness, placement, subject, etc.) contrast.'" [www.goshen.edu/art/ed/critique1.html](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/critique1.html)

Let students know that they will be critiquing each other's work using these tools. Discuss that during peer review it is important to use a proper voice and to pay equal attention to all classroom students (not more for friends, etc.).

(continued)

## Activity 5: The Creative Process: Introduction to Style (Traditional, Tribal, Individual)

---

### Materials:

- Untitled ledger drawing by Curley, (Crow) 1886 (show image from packet or PowerPoint)
- Crow buffalo robe, White Swan, ca. 1880 (show image from packet or PowerPoint)
- White or tan paper
- Pencil or Sharpie, color pencils

### Procedure:

Show image created by Curley.

Instruct the students to draw, with pencil, on the left half of the paper, the main shapes of the figure in the style of the example.

Remind students not to place their figure on the bottom of the page but to allow space above and below the figure. Tell them to omit the clothing, hair, details, and accessories.

You may model each step for them on the white board, as they follow you. Emphasize side profile face, front-facing torso, profile legs, and other distinct features in the example.

Show Crow buffalo robe, White Swan, ca. 1880.

Ask them to look closely at the black horse on the lower part of the robe.

Instruct them to draw, with pencil, an outline of it on the other half of the paper in the style of the example. Omit the figure riding the horse.

You may model each step for them on the white board, as they follow you. Emphasize long legs, neck, and body, side profile, small head, and other distinct features in example. Show the

action by bending some of the legs.

### Have students personalize their figures:

Tell the students: “This figure is you and this is your horse. You are on your way to a very special event. How would you make this person look like you? How would you dress for the occasion?”

Instruct the students to make their figure look like themselves by adding their hair.

Then have them add clothing and accessories of their choice on the figure.

They may decorate and color both the figure and horse using geometric patterns and symbols of their choosing.

Emphasize that the time period is now, and they should dress like they would today for a special occasion. It is the *style* of the art that we are borrowing.

Instruct the students to walk around and look at each other’s work.

Have them ask themselves: Did the students capture the style of the artist in their artwork?

Explain that they may comment on the artwork with statements that reflect the lesson objectives and content, for example: “This figure looks like the Crow style. The body is facing sideways, and it also looks like the person who drew it. She used geometric patterns on the clothing.” Or: “That horse has long skinny legs and it really looks like it is moving. It has a black outline around it.” Encourage them to use vocabulary words used in the visual presentation.

(continued)



## Activity 6: Tell a Story with Visual Language

---

### Materials:

- Use materials that are readily available in the classroom. You may also experiment with traditional natural materials.
- Choose one surface: the blank hide example in the kit (make copies), lined or plain construction or drawing paper (white or tan), torn edges or plain, recycled material, documents, maps, or fabric.
- Choose media: one to outline (pencils, Sharpies) and another for color (color pencils, tempera or watercolor paint, crayons, markers, chalk, or oil pastels).

### Procedure:

Explain the project: Individually and/or collectively, students will be asked to depict, from memory, a pictograph that tells a story of an important event or special memory in their life.

Emphasize that students are to use only images and symbols, not written words, to tell the story. The story could illustrate a good action or deed.

Students may illustrate several moments and events in the same story, if they are related.

Ask students to make sure that only what is necessary to tell the story is included.

Students may want to pre-draw their ideas first on a scrap paper.

Encourage them to add personal symbols and decorative patterns as needed and to add details regarding people, animals, clothing, accessories, etc., as they relate to the story.

Tell students that the style may be their own, but that they will use space similarly to what they saw in the earlier examples. For example, events and figures are not placed along the bottom of the page, but over the entire page.

You may model for them an example of a story/event from your life.

When finished, the students may show their story to the class. Have classmates try to “read” or interpret the story back to the artist in the oral tradition of recounting events. Then have artist will then tell the story verbally while showing the picture.

**Extension Ideas:** This lesson could be expanded to include the visual storytelling of historic and current events and other events the class may be studying in Social Studies and Government, including Indian Tribes of Montana. See Resources.

For example, 6th grade: *History of the Indian Tribes of Montana: A Story of Three Time Periods*

The class could choose one Montana tribe to focus on, or each group could focus on a different tribe. The class could break into three groups and would collaborate with each other. Each group can represent an important time period in the history of Montana Indian tribes. Group 1 may represent the pre-1700 time period, before European influence. Group 2 may represent the late 1700s through the first half of the 1800s, a time of gradual change, and Group 3 could represent the second half of the 1800s, a time of dramatic change.

Each group should research the timelines of those periods, and rely on what they have learned earlier from the visual presentation. Within their group, they will each choose main events through which to tell a story and decide who will draw which events. The time period may be shown by one big event, to which each student contributes, or created through several scenes.

Students will sketch their ideas in their journal first. Collectively, they may choose to draw in the Plains Indian style of the time period, or in their own personal style.

On a large roll paper, the students will map out where each image or event will be placed and in which order. They will draw (outline) and color the events with materials of their choosing.

(continued)

Several students may choose to add a geometric design to the border, or separate the time periods with bands of geometric designs. When complete, the students will view and discuss their art.

Are the different time periods and tribes recognizable? Can you see a difference? What is happening? What are the stories?

---

### Evaluation or Assessment

Students will be evaluated or assessed on their demonstration of knowledge, understandings, skills, and abilities of both the Essential Understandings and Arts content as outlined in the learning objectives. Assessment will be based on how well the students answered the questions during the visual presentation, the level of inquiry and research, and the outcome of the art activities. If individual student journals were kept through the lessons, they could be utilized as a formative assessment by how well the following concepts of the essential understandings are demonstrated, visually and through journal writing.

### Objectives to Evaluate and/or Assess:

Students will be able to:

- Analyze and discuss the art presented, utilizing appropriate vocabulary (both art elements and contextual).
- Identify unique apparel and art styles of Crow, Northern Cheyenne, and Hidatsa warriors of the 1800s.
- Identify basic art elements and principles of design using examples of Plains Indian art and apply that knowledge to their art.
- Identify basic figurative styles of Plains Indian art.
- Create original artwork inspired by Plains Indian pictorial style that illustrates a personal story from an event that has meaning.
- Use available materials and basic elements of art and principles of design to create their story.
- Present and discuss their artwork with their peers.

- Draw two figurative self-portraits and horses in two Plains Indian pictorial styles (Crow and Northern Cheyenne). Compare and contrast the two styles.
- Collaborate with others to create a collective picture story.

### Students will know:

- Plains Indian tribes originally had an oral tradition (and still do), and visual storytelling was a means of recording and communicating personal events of importance.
- The art of Montana's Indian artists (Northern Cheyenne, Crow, Hidatsa, Blackfeet, Salish), past and present, often reflects tribal history and culture including behavior, artistic roles, relationship, tribal and individual identity and diversity, cultural change, adaptation, and continuity.
- People are affected by events and change and express it in different ways.
- Indian artists often traded ideas, gifts, and goods with each other, other tribes, and new people moving into their homelands.
- The concept of symbols and images as language.
- Traditionally, art supplies were made from natural materials and were respected.
- Art and life were interconnected in the traditional life of Montana Indians.
- Basic art elements and principles of design using examples of Plains Indian art.
- Line and outline, shape (geometric), space (2-D and 3-D), color (primary, secondary, warm and cool), pattern, proportion, rhythm, movement, symmetry, focal point, abstract/realistic.

(continued)

## **Resources**

Books from the Indian Reading Series, published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory are available through your library or to download from the internet by searching “Indian Reading Series Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.”

Learn more about the Essential Understandings regarding Montana Indian and the Montana Art Content Standards on the Montana Office of Public Instruction’s website.

The Montana Office of Public Instruction also has tribal timelines and tribal histories posted on its Indian Education page as well as many useful lesson plans.

Many examples of ledger art are available through an internet search. See particularly the National Museum of the American Indians and the University of San Diego Plains Indian Ledger Art Project.