

Dark Ages Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Were the “Dark Ages” really dark?

Materials:

- Dark Ages Documents A-G
- Dark Ages Introduction PowerPoint
- Timeline
- Guiding Questions
- Claims Organizer

Plan of Instruction: (NOTE: Working with all of the documents in this lesson will require multiple class periods. For shorter versions of the lesson, consider focusing on just Round 1 or Rounds 1 and 2. Further, this lesson will work best after students have studied the fall of the Roman Empire)

- 1) Do Now: Display and read the *American Cyclopaedia* quote from the PowerPoint.
 - a. Free write: Summarize the quote.
 - b. Share out and establish basic comprehension of the statement, including:
 - What is meant by an “intellectual depression”?
 - What was the “barbarian supremacy”?
 - What is meant by the “revival of learning”?
 - How long did the Dark Ages last according to this statement?
 - c. Ask: Do you believe this statement? Why or why not?
 - Did anyone notice the source?
 - Who wrote this? When? Why is such information important?
 - *Point to note:* The *American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* was a multi-volume set of encyclopedias published in New York and sold across the country in the years following the Civil War.

- 2) Use the PowerPoint to establish more information about the term “Dark Ages” and introduce the lesson’s questions:

Was the time period between 400 AD and 1400 AD a “Dark Age” for Europe? Was this a time of cultural decay and decline?

- 3) Round 1: Pass out Documents A and B, guiding questions, and claims organizer.

- a. Students read Document A and answer guiding questions.
 - *Points to note:*
 - *The textbook corroborates with the encyclopedia entry that this was a period of decline and should be referred to as “Dark Ages.”*
 - *The textbook includes the distinction of “early” Middle Ages and claims this period lasted from 476 to 1100. This is a different periodization than the encyclopedia.*
- b. Students read Textbook B and answer guiding questions.
 - *Points to note:*
 - *The second textbook’s depiction of prosperity from 1000 to 1300 overlaps with the time periods described by the other 2 texts.*
 - *The claim about population growth over the large period of time contradicts Textbook A’s account of this time.*
 - *NOTE: Students may claim that Textbook B is most reliable simply because of its date. Push such thinking to connect the different textbook accounts to changes in historical interpretations of the Middle Ages over the past 60 years.*
- c. (OPTIONAL) Hand out Timelines. Use Timeline to review the periods of time mentioned by the 2 textbooks and the *American Cyclopaedia*. Explain to students that they will be using the Timeline to help organize information and events from the other documents you will be working with today.

4) First Claim

- a. Students create an initial response to the questions: Was the time period between 400 AD and 1400 AD a “Dark Age” for Europe? Was this a time of cultural decay and decline?
- b. Students list 2-3 points from either textbook to support their claims.
- c. Share out sample initial claims.

5) Round 2: Pass out Documents C and D.

- a. Review purpose for reading documents to address question of whether or not the Middle Ages was a period of cultural decline.
- b. In pairs, students read documents and answer guiding questions.
 - *Points to note:*
 - *These documents were created before the time period described positively in Textbook B.*

- *The reliability of Document C is high, due in large part to its central purpose of simply recording events. This document seems to support Textbook A.*
 - *Document D both corroborates and contradicts Textbook A. The establishment of laws and rules for commerce runs counter to the textbook's claim about lack of government order and indicates at least some structured economic activity rather than a "semi-barbaric" lack of order. However, the laws depict a harshly unequal social system and divisions between people of different towns*
- c. (OPTIONAL): Students record 2-3 events from each document or the approximate date of the document itself on the Timeline.
- d. Pass out Document E. (NOTE: This is an OPTIONAL document if you want to go deeper into the inquiry. Skip to step 5 for students to make their second claim if you don't have time for Document E.)
- e. In pairs students, read Document E and answer guiding questions.
- *Points to note:*
 - *The document seems to contradict the notion of intellectual decline mentioned in the American Cyclopaedia, as the monk is studying an ancient classic along with medicine and botany.*
 - *However, the document seems to reflect how limited education was during this time period.*
 - *Highlight issues of reliability. This is only one person's account. This may not be representative of the time necessarily.*
- 6) Second Claim
- a. Students create a second response to the questions: Was the time period between 400 AD and 1400 AD a "Dark Age" for Europe? Was this a time of cultural decay and decline?
 - b. Students list 2-3 points from the documents to support their claims.
 - c. Share out sample initial claims.
- 7) Round 3: Pass out Documents F and G.
- a. Review purpose of analyzing final documents to address question of whether or not the Middle Ages was a period of cultural decline.
 - b. Students analyze documents and answer guiding questions.
 - *Points to note:*
 - *The establishment of European universities and construction of Notre Dame began in the 12th century.*

This is a period of time included in the American Cyclopaedia's description of the Dark Ages but not textbook A's description, which ends in 1100.

- *Gothic architecture and the university system of education counter claims this was a period of cultural decline.*
- *Reliability of Wikipedia. Is this a reliable source? Why or why not?*

c. (OPTIONAL): Students record 2-3 events from each document or the approximate date of the document itself on the Timeline.

8) Final Claim

- a. Drawing from evidence across the document set, students create a final response to the questions "Was the time period between 400 AD and 1400 AD a 'Dark Age' for Europe? Was this a time of cultural decay and decline?"
- b. Students include 4-5 pieces of evidence drawn from the entire document set to support their claim.

9) Discussion

- a. Did anyone's claims change over the course of the lesson? How and why?
- b. Why has the term "Dark Ages" to describe the Middle Ages been debated by historians? Do you think it is a valid description? Why or why not? What is the best way to describe the Middle Ages?
- c. Why do historians label time periods? What's the danger in this? What are the challenges in trying to describe different periods of history?
- d. What other sources would you analyze to continue exploring the issue of cultural progress or decline during the Middle Ages?

Citations:

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