

Ideas for Classroom Discussion

When teaching about Native Americans, you can conduct many fun and educational hands-on activities in your classroom. Please be mindful that there are a few dos and don'ts when teaching about Native peoples. Below are some "rules of the road" as well as suggested activities that will reinforce the lessons addressed in this website.

DOS

We encourage educators to absorb the following information and highlight it in classroom discussions:

- To help kids understand that each Native group is distinct, talk about how diversity is based on the places where we live. The places and the resources different people have access to all play a part in what makes us different from one another. Talk to your students about the different animals that live in various parts of the country, as well as how climates vary from place to place. This will help them understand that not everyone is the same.
- State that there is no one "Indian" language or way of thinking.
- Inform students that indigenous communities in the Western Hemisphere number in the thousands. Each community or tribe is unique. While there are often similarities between groups, tribes can also be as different from each other as people from Japan and Germany.
- Emphasize the fact that the Americas' indigenous cultures are living cultures.

DON'TS

Please be mindful of the following when doing hands-on activities or holding classroom discussions:

- We kindly ask that you not have students make masks or headdresses. As you will learn in this site, headdresses and masks are worn by Native people who have particular abilities, have achieved specific cultural goals, or possess cultural knowledge. Some masks and headdresses can be worn only by men or only by women. The right to wear these often comes with specific, associated conventions. Wearers must know the proper ways of caring for a mask or headdress. In some Native American nations, masks are sacred and are considered living beings that must be properly nourished. Masks and headdresses are not for "dress up" occasions, such as Halloween; Native people wear them only at specific times. When not wearing their regalia, Native people dress in jeans and other everyday clothes. There are few Native communities in which children are permitted to wear headdresses or masks.
- Please do not have students dress up as Indians or use the term "costume" when describing Native American clothing. Native people prefer the terms "regalia" or "outfits" to describe their clothing. Costume implies that Native people dress up as one would for Halloween when, in fact, there are specific protocols for how Native people dress for special occasions, which include powwows, ceremonies, and social occasions.
- Please do not give students "Indian" names or assign them to "tribes." Just as students should not impersonate members of other ethnicities, they should not learn about Native identity by assuming a made-up Native name or becoming part of a fictitious Native group. Most Native peoples' names are translations from different languages (i.e., Sitting Bull is a translation of *Tatanka Iyotake*, from Lakota, his Native tongue). Sometimes a community's spiritual leaders

give Native individuals a name that reflects that person's unique qualities. These names are given following specific cultural protocols.

- Please refer to Native people in the present tense. Unfortunately, many books describe American Indians only as living in the past, ignoring the thriving Native presence in the Western Hemisphere today.
- Please do not use phrases like “sit Indian style,” “Indian giver,” or “have a powwow.”
- Please do not tell students that they're “acting like a bunch of wild Indians.” Be mindful of misused and misunderstood terms like “brave,” “chief,” or “squaw.”

Adapted from the [website](#), created in conjunction with the exhibition *Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American*.