

High School Lesson Plan: How to write for an encyclopedia

Teaching Ideas by Santha Cassell

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Recommended for grades 9-12

The following lesson plan offers teachers a variety of ways to integrate critical thinking, research, and writing skills into their classroom social studies curriculum. Based on a prototype by Santha Cassell, a high school teacher at Riverdale High School in Portland, this resource provides students with a “hands-on” experience on how to research, write, and edit Oregon history in the format of an encyclopedia entry.

Part 1

Throughout a six-week period, introduce students to The Oregon Encyclopedia (OE) at www.oregonencyclopedia.org. Make sure that they first understand the differences between primary and secondary sources and have the opportunity to examine primary source documents, discuss historical perspective, and have an overview of 19th-century U.S. history.

Part 2

Have each student choose and read five to ten OE entries. Then have students list what they think are the basic components for writing encyclopedia entries. Students should think about such elements as entry format, writing style, and basic information included. Students should also identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual entries so they can analyze what makes a good entry. Have students keep a list of questions on what constitutes an effective entry. For example, “Does the entry cite reliable sources?” “Does the entry address a broad audience?” “Is the entry unbiased?” “Is the writing clear and well organized?”

Show students the OE writing guidelines and the explanation of significance from The Oregon Encyclopedia web site. See:

http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/content/author_guidelines/

<http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/content/significance/>

Ask students if the OE entries generally follow the guidelines and if the entries are in general interesting, engaging, and well written.

Students might also compare OE entries with entries in other kinds of encyclopedias—both printed and electronic—to see if there is anything distinctive about the OE’s approach to writing entries.

Part 3

Have students write at least two OE entries (one 250-word entry and one 500-word entry). Students can choose their own topics or choose topics from the “open topics” list at <http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/topics/unassigned/a/>. The entries students choose should include at least one biography and an event or place. Discuss with students the guidelines for researching and citing sources. Each entry should be edited and revised to replicate the editorial process that OE entries go through before publication. It is important that each entry has sources for fact checking and a short bibliography for further reading.

Part 4

Have students peer edit each other's work. Set up review teams that follow these steps in the review process: fact checking, first review, editing, and final evaluation. Students could even create their own editing board and submit a select number of entries they recommend, with final review by the teacher, to The Oregon Encyclopedia's editors-in-chief. These entries might be invited to proceed through the OE regular editing process, including review by the editorial board, fact checking, and final review by the editors-in-chief. Those that are approved will be archived by the OE as examples for other students and teachers.

Part 5

Send no more than five recommended student entries (both printed and electronic copies) to The Oregon Encyclopedia staff for review.

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OE staff will review the five submitted entries and provide feedback with comments or suggestions on how to improve the entries. The OE will archive the best entries as examples for other students and teachers.

Connections to Oregon State Standards

By using The Oregon Encyclopedia in the classroom, teachers can address the following Oregon Department of Education Social Studies Standards:

State & Local History: Understand and interpret the history of the state of Oregon.

- Understand and interpret events, issues, and developments in Oregon history.
- Understand and interpret events, issues, and developments in local history.

Social Science Analysis: Design and implement strategies to analyze issues, explain perspectives, and resolve issues using the social sciences.

- Identify and research, and clarify an event, issue, problem, or phenomenon of significance to society.
- Gather, use, and evaluate researched information to support analysis and conclusions.
- Understand an event, issue, problem, or phenomenon from multiple perspectives.
- Identify and analyze characteristics, causes, and consequences of an event, issue, problem or phenomenon.
- Identify, compare, and evaluate outcomes, responses, or solutions; then reach a supported conclusion.