Investigating History

GRADE 4

# North American Geography, History, and Peoples

**COURSE OVERVIEW** | JUNE 2026

dese MASSACHUSETTS Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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## Introduction to the Grade 4 Course

In the Investigating History course for Grade 4, students study the physical and human geography of North America. They learn about its peoples from a geographic perspective, expanding map reading, mapmaking, and geographic reasoning skills. Students examine a wide variety of maps, then apply that knowledge in a research project focused on either Mexico or Canada. They learn scientific and Indigenous migration theories explaining how first peoples came to North America. Students learn how archeologists use evidence from artifacts, fossils, and Indigenous knowledge to understand complex societies in North America, and the importance of preserving archaeological sites. The Grade 4 course then shifts to European colonization and expansion, where students examine how specific voyages, choices, and government support had lasting impacts on Indigenous peoples in North America. Moving forward in time, students study the growth of the United States after winning independence, and how territorial expansion affected different groups of people. They investigate why people move to new territories, including economic opportunity, religious freedom, and government promises of land. At the end of the Grade 4 course, students become geographers themselves by exploring regions of the United States using features of physical and human geography.

As they engage in the close examination of primary and secondary sources, students continue to develop their ability to ask questions and conduct historical inquiry. Through the year, their learning is based on inquiry, discussion, and collaboration. Ultimately, Investigating History is designed to help students grow as readers and writers, as critical thinkers, and as empowered and engaged members of a diverse society.

Learning about the history of the United States from diverse perspectives presents opportunities for students to understand a more complete and nuanced version of events, which necessitates grappling with some of the more difficult chapters of our nation's past. For this reason, the teaching of "hard history" is supported throughout the curriculum with several strategies, including centering voices of oppressed peoples and bringing attention to their agency, activity, and resistance. Similarly, the curriculum's demands on teachers' contextual knowledge are significant. Gaining confidence and fluency in the experiences and contributions of the diverse groups who participated in the nation's development will require professional learning over time. The curriculum offers recommendations for high-quality educational resources to begin or continue this process.

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## Preparing to Teach Grade 4 Investigating History

Investigating History strives to model the approach of inquiry-based, student-centered learning through the regular application of the Practice Standards and Literacy Standards outlined in the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework. The curriculum aims to have students "do" history and geography for themselves, experiencing the joy of discovery and the satisfaction of critical thinking. This orientation places a premium on teacher facilitation skills as students are prompted to take risks with ideas and to voice their authentic questions and curiosity—even if these sometimes lead in unexpected directions. The routines and suggestions described in the **Curriculum Guidebook** will help facilitate this type of instruction, and we encourage teachers to begin the Investigating History journey by reviewing the guidebook. In addition, the **Investigating History Instructional Videos** provide rich examples of how teachers have brought these lessons to life in their classrooms.

As a social studies educator, you have likely already adopted many practices that are valuable and will fit well into this curriculum. Some of these might include routines around media literacy and current events, strategies for using literature to help students learn about the past and the experiences of diverse people, techniques for explaining timelines or developing map skills, methods for incorporating technologies or resources to which your district subscribes, or protocols for using models to introduce and reinforce vocabulary. As you get to know the lessons, consider bringing these pedagogical strengths into your work with Investigating History to enhance the lessons and make them your own.

The curriculum offers recommendations for high-quality educational resources for you to begin or continue this process. In particular, we encourage you to prepare to teach each unit by exploring the **Grade 4 Background Briefs**, which were designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. Each brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present every unit with confidence.

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## Year at a Glance

The Grade 4 curriculum, **North American Geography, History, and Peoples**, includes **116** 30-minute lessons spread across five units, with the flexibility to adapt the pacing of lessons as needed. In general, lessons will take the longest the first time you teach them.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Unit 1:** North American Geography | 22 lessons |
| **Unit 2:** Indigenous Societies of North America | 21 lessons |
| **Unit 3:** European Arrival in North America | 25 lessons |
| **Unit 4:** Impacts of U.S Expansion | 24 lessons |
| **Unit 5:** Regions of the United States | 24 lessons |
| **Total:** | **116 lessons** |

### *Launching the School Year*

The beginning of the year is the time for building classroom community and introducing key concepts and routines. Students may benefit from focused attention on the following:

#### Identity, Community, and Classroom Culture

Building a strong classroom culture is critical for the type of collaborative, discussion-rich environment in which Investigating History will thrive. Open the year by building a sense of classroom community, getting to know your students as they get to know each other.

- Incorporate materials from Children Discovering Justice's **priming module on civic skills and dispositions**. These materials include lessons, slide decks, handouts, and tutorials on identity and democratic classroom skills.
- Many educators find it valuable to establish shared norms for respectful, inclusive, or **democratic classroom** discourse and behavior in a curriculum that emphasizes civic learning, cultural affirmation, and the value of diverse perspectives. Numerous organizations offer guidelines and supports for developing classroom norms or models that can be adapted, including **these strategies** from Learning for Justice.
- Ensure students are prepared to engage with inquiry-based instruction by helping them build the appropriate skills while they learn how to work together productively. Learn why C3 Teachers suggest **starting small**, and review **inquiry task suggestions** from Edutopia; alternatively, practice elements of the instructional routines (such as generating questions) with students in a low-stakes setting or in a familiar context.

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### Geography

The Investigating History curriculum assumes students have been introduced to the geographic concepts in the Kindergarten through Grade 5 content standards. Lessons do present myriad opportunities for "just in time" remediation; but for students who are less familiar with these concepts, it may be helpful to spend several days in the first weeks of the year orienting them to major geographic features, such as continents and oceans.

- Programs online, such as **Seterra** or **WorldMap.io**, offer useful online map quizzes.
- Having students create hard-copy maps provides beneficial hands-on learning. Features of maps will be introduced in the lessons, but students might find it helpful to engage in a more concentrated map study early in the year.
- Demonstrate the use of and to allow students to practice with online geography tools such as **Google My Maps**, **Google Earth**, **National Geographic MapMaker**, or **ArcGIS StoryMaps**. This curriculum does not assume students are proficient in using these tools, but, as they are excellent resources, some of them are modeled at various points in both geography and history lessons. *Please note that some districts limit access to Google My Maps or Google Earth.*

### Timelines

Investigating History provides a variety of timeline tools, embedded in the curriculum in the relevant lessons. However, it leaves the teacher to decide whether and how to create and leverage timelines across the entire school year. Such holistic class timelines, whether visual wall representations or digital tools produced with a timeline-creation program, may be helpful for developing fourth-grade students' understanding of how historical and geographic developments are sequenced, connected, and spaced over time.

### Getting Organized

Throughout this course, students will need to refer back to their work from prior lessons when they are moving through a multiday inquiry or when Summative Assessments are open-note. Set the stage for their success by establishing a method to help them keep track of their materials, whether with binders or folders, a preprinted student workbook, or a digital platform like Google Classroom. Decide whether to create the Inquiry Charts on chart paper or to maintain them digitally using a template provided in the slide deck—choose a method of implementation that will best support engagement, anchor student questions, and track learning. Each unit also comes with vocabulary words formatted on cards; routines are included in the lessons for using the cards to build a Word Wall. Plan ahead to provide space for a Word Wall in the classroom.

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## Building Conceptual Understanding: Grade 4

In Grade 4, Investigating History takes an inquiry-based approach to the physical and human geography of North America. Content and practices are in alignment with the standards of the **History and Social Science Framework**.

Woven through the lessons are themes that appear in many of the Grade 4 Essential and Supporting Questions. They are:

1. **How physical and human geography can be used to describe the land and its people:** Students study physical features and how people interact with the land and water. Political geography, one kind of human geography, studies how territorial boundaries are organized and how they influence human populations. Students explore regions of the United States using features of physical and human geography.
2. **How scientific theories and Indigenous oral traditions help describe early human settlements and complex societies:** Students learn how archaeologists use fossils and artifacts to help explain how early humans in North America adapted to their physical environment in order to meet their needs.
3. **How interactions between societies shaped people, land, and power in North America over time:** Students learn how European expansion led to conquest and colonization, with lasting impacts on Indigenous peoples of North America. They examine the ways that the territorial expansion of the United States has affected people unequally, with some groups benefiting more than others.

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# Investigating History and the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

## *Standards for History/Social Science Practice*

Two or three key practice standards are explicitly taught in each Investigating History unit. Students receive multiple opportunities to apply the standards through activities and Formative Assessments before demonstrating their skills on the Summative Assessment. Practice standards that are not key to the unit are applied in lessons as opportunity allows.

Two types of skills are cultivated through the practice standards:

- **Work with sources, both primary and secondary:** The curriculum features a wealth of historical sources of many types, adapted, when necessary, to a fourth-grade reading level. Many of the practice standards focus on how to interact with sources by asking questions, gathering information, and analyzing and interpreting sources in their historical context.
- **Civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions:** Practice Standards 1 and 7 center civic thinking and action. In the Grade 4 curriculum, these are addressed at various points when different aspects of community and government are introduced. In Unit 3, students focus on different perspectives and points of view to study how interactions between Indigenous peoples and Europeans changed the people, land, and power dynamics in North America. In Unit 4, students explain how the decisions of a powerful government can affect different groups of people. At the end of Unit 4, students explore different strategies and approaches to restorative justice.

The chart on the next page maps the progression of students' mastery of practice standards over the course of the fourth-grade year; this growth fits into students' broader trajectory of learning across each grade of Investigating History. Each practice standard has one to two more detailed, grade-specific descriptors that illustrate what mastery of the standard might look like in Grade 4; these descriptors have been written to intentionally align with grade-level descriptors across the rest of the Grade 3 through Grade 7 Investigating History curriculum. Educators are encouraged to use those descriptors as they set expectations for student mastery over the course of the year.

Other practice standards do appear in units where they are not defined as the priority standard but may not be the focus of deliberate practice and feedback.

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## *Priority Practice Standards*

### PS 1: Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

| Grade 4 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Evaluate the extent to which different individuals or groups have similar or different perspectives on a civic issue or concern. | | | ✔ | | |
| Explain how governmental decisions and decision-making processes can affect groups, individuals, and societies. | | | | ✔ | |

### PS 2: Develop focused questions or problem statements and conduct inquiries.

| Grade 4 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Generate open and closed questions relevant to multiple aspects of a topic. | ✔ | | ✔ | | |

### PS 3: Organize information and data from multiple primary and secondary sources.

| Grade 4 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Explain how and why primary and secondary sources are used to gather information. | | ✔ | | | |
| Categorize information from one or more sources based on a given set of topics or questions, taking brief notes on the information gathered. | | | | ✔ | |
| In response to an inquiry question, integrate information from two sources on the same topic. | | | | | ✔ |

### PS 4: Analyze the purpose and point of view of each source; distinguish opinion from fact.

| Grade 4 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identify the purpose of a source using information about the source type, maker, intended audience, date, place of origin, and/or an analysis of key details. | ✔ | | | | |
| Identify the point of view represented in a source and discuss how a person's point of view might affect the way they represent an event or topic, distinguishing between facts and opinions in the source. | | | ✔ | | |

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**PS 5: Evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of each source.**

| Grade 3 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identify information about a given source, including the maker, date, source type and/or place of origin, and examine its intended audience and purpose. Using identifiable information, determine a source's relevance to an inquiry question. | | ✔ | | | |
| Evaluate a source's credibility using information about the maker's point of view, intended audience, and purpose. | | | | ✔ | |

**PS 6: Argue or explain conclusions using valid reasoning and evidence.**

| Grade 3 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In response to an inquiry question, develop a plausible claim based on evidence found in a source. | ✔ | | | | |
| Identify evidence from a source in response to an inquiry question. | | ✔ | | | ✔ |

**PS 7: Determine next steps and take informed action, as appropriate.**

| Grade 3 Descriptor | Unit 1 | Unit 2 | Unit 3 | Unit 4 | Unit 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Describe a specific local, regional, and/or national issue and explain various strategies students and others could use in working alone and together to address it. | | | | | ✔ |

## *Content Standards*

The curriculum covers the entirety of the content standards for Grade 4. Due to the abundance of content standards, some are prioritized and developed in greater depth, while others receive a lighter treatment. Enduring Understandings provide teachers with a synopsis of the content in each unit so that they can identify the key understandings students should take away from the unit. Students are supported in deepening their knowledge of significant historical concepts through both the topical focus of lessons and the Unit Synthesis provided before each Summative Assessment. An understanding of these ideas, more than detailed mastery and recall of specific historical facts, is crucial for applying knowledge accurately in the Assessment Tasks.

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## *Literacy Standards for History/Social Science*

Investigating History heavily emphasizes literacy, especially with regard to nonfiction texts and student-led discourse, with certain literacy standards selected for emphasis in each unit. By design, there is a great deal of reading, writing, and speaking and listening. The literacy focus of each lesson is highlighted in the lesson's language objective.

Many readings have been adapted to be appropriate for grade level. Due to the prevalence of proper nouns in historical sources, an automated Lexile analysis of some sources may erroneously suggest that these sources are written above grade level; know that these proper nouns are explicitly addressed in the lessons.

Some modifications for multilingual learners and others in need of additional language support are provided through the "Plan for English Learner Success" callout at the beginning of each lesson, the "Support All Students" sidebar boxes throughout the lesson, and the inclusion of scaffolded student handouts for key lesson tasks. Additional modifications may be necessary for some student populations. Wherever possible, multilingual learners and students with disabilities will be working toward the same unit and lesson objectives, even if they take different paths to accessing the content and demonstrating their learning.

Each lesson's language objective includes suggested modifications for English learners with WIDA proficiency levels of 1–2, 3–4, or 5–6. The **Curriculum Guidebook** provides specific suggestions on how best to leverage the curriculum's supports for multilingual learners.

## *Assessing Standards Mastery*

Over the course of the Investigating History curriculum, students are assessed on both their knowledge and their authentic application of skills and knowledge. In addition to informal assessments such as discussion prompts, students engage with Formative Assessments at the end of each cluster. These tasks provide teachers with an opportunity to monitor students' mastery of key content learning goals.

Each unit closes with a performance-based Summative Assessment that assesses practice standards and priority content standards. Each unit also has an optional Content Assessment that teachers can use to gain additional insight into students' mastery of the content standards addressed in the unit.

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## Instructional Principles

Investigating History's instructional approach is grounded in scholarly research and pedagogical best practices and is fully described with accompanying citations in the **Design Specifications** that accompany the curriculum. Teachers' skillful pedagogy is critical to help bring these principles to life in the classroom; see the **Curriculum Guidebook** for more. What follows is a brief overview of the four key principles that anchor the curriculum as a whole and a description of how these principles show up in students' day-to-day learning.

### *Historical Inquiry and Investigation*

Historical inquiry and investigation are achieved through an inquiry arc—the backbone for each unit and cluster—administered through the use of inquiry routines. With these experiences, students gain practice with generating questions, gathering information from sources, and communicating responses to Essential and Supporting Questions. Many lessons utilize primary and secondary sources of various types as texts and materials to be investigated. Throughout, the emphasis is on students constructing meaning in order to do the fundamental work of historians and social scientists.

### *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*

Instructional approaches in Investigating History show a commitment to centering the experiences and agency of non-dominant groups. Sources by and about Indigenous peoples, enslaved peoples, women, and other marginalized groups have been selected to provide access to the views and expressions of these groups.

The course further develops students' sociopolitical awareness by examining issues of power, equity, and justice, past and present. Essential Questions, sources, and activities dive into these topics, with guidance provided to teachers on how to teach the harder aspects of history. Among other goals, Investigating History aims to develop students' conceptual vocabulary to engage in discussions of and careful analysis of such issues.

Finally, Investigating History treats the cultural knowledge students bring with them as a valuable asset. Lessons encourage students to make connections between class and outside learning and allow them some choice regarding the process, content, and products of their learning in order to accommodate different interests and modes of sensemaking.

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Districts and teachers should know that this curriculum has been extensively reviewed by DESE, scholars, and grade-level teachers in Massachusetts. Guidance on difficult and culturally sensitive topics is offered throughout lessons and in "Cultural Competence" boxes. The Commonwealth remains committed to an accurate, authentic, and inclusive approach to history and appreciates the work that teachers do in helping students to investigate history for themselves. For additional information, please see DESE's "**Race, Racism, and Culturally Responsive Teaching in History and Social Science in Massachusetts: Frequently Asked Questions**."

## *Historical Empathy and Human Connections*

Students are motivated to learn history when they care about people and events. Investigating History engages students through sources that capture their sense of wonder, create an emotional connection, and spur their imagination. At the same time, the curriculum cultivates social and emotional learning by asking students to do the hard work of engaging in dialogue and collaboration with diverse peers across lines of difference.

## *Civic Engagement and Current World Relevance*

Investigating History offers guidance to show the connections between the past and present. This includes the "Connections to Current Events and Issues" section in each Unit Overview as well as "Make Connections" boxes throughout the lessons. Teachers will notice other potential connections to current events or to the school community and can and should add these to keep the curriculum timely and relevant.

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