



Day 12-13 Age of Exploration Unit
60-80 Minutes

The Search for the Northwest Passage

NORTHWEST PASSAGE – LESSON PLAN (60-80 MINUTES)

Adaptable for Grades 3–9

TITLE:

The Search for the Northwest Passage: Myths, Challenges, and Global Impact

OBJECTIVE:

Students will understand why European nations searched for the Northwest Passage, analyze the hardships faced by explorers, evaluate the consequences of Arctic exploration, and connect these voyages to broader myths and legends of the Age of Exploration. Students will use an article, a PowerPoint presentation, a scavenger hunt, and a reading comprehension activity to deepen their understanding.

GRADE LEVEL:

Grades 3–9 (Differentiation included)

MATERIALS:

- Article: The Search for the Northwest Passage
 - PowerPoint presentation on the Northwest Passage
 - Printable scavenger hunt for “Myths and Wonders of the Age of Exploration”
 - Access to the online “Myths and Wonders” article (Northwest Passage, Fountain of Youth, Seven Cities of Gold, St. Elmo’s Fire, Sea Monsters, etc.)
 - Reading comprehension activity (culminating task)
 - Map of North America (physical or digital)
 - Notebooks or writing sheets
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INTRODUCTION (5-10 minutes)

Teacher says: “Today we will learn why European explorers risked dangerous journeys into unknown lands in search of a shortcut to Asia called the Northwest Passage.”

Ask students: “What problems do you think explorers might face in searching for the Northwest Passage in icy waters near the North Pole?” Do you think anyone ever found it?

Record student predictions.

ARTICLE READING (10 minutes)

Students read the Northwest Passage article.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/unit-and-curriculum/the-search-for-the-northwest-passage>

Review some of the vocabulary from the article:

- **Northwest Passage** – A water route through the Arctic from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.
- **Mutiny** – When a crew rebels against its captain or leader.
- **Arctic** – The cold northern region of Earth around the North Pole.
- **Indigenous** – The original people living in a region before outside settlers arrive.
- **Navigation** – The science of planning and guiding a ship’s route.

Differentiation:

- Grades 3–5: Teacher reads aloud selected paragraphs; students highlight dangers, explorers, and goals.
 - Grades 6–9: Students read independently and annotate (if printed for them, or, if attached to the student dashboard).
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POWERPOINT ACTIVITY (8–10 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/explorers/plans/nw.pptx>

Teacher shows slides explaining:

- Early explorers: John Cabot, Jacques Cartier (Individual biographies of these explorers are available, but will be covered in later units).
- Hudson’s voyages and mutiny.
- Dangers: ice, darkness, starvation
- Later attempts (Cook, Franklin)
- Amundsen’s successful crossing

Students discuss with partners:

“What would be the hardest part of traveling through the Arctic on a wooden ship?”

Grades 3–5: Share simple observations (ice, cold, storms).

Grades 6–9: Discuss navigation challenges, limited technology, poor maps, and lack of knowledge about seasonal ice.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE INTERACTIVE MAP - The ROUTES OF HUDSON AND CABOT (25 minutes)

Scroll to the middle of this page and project:

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/unit-and-curriculum/the-search-for-the-northwest-passage>

Grades 3-5

Students work in pairs using the map. They will:

1. Play Henry Hudson's journey

- Pause at each stop.
- Listen to the narration.
- Record simple facts:
 - *Where did Hudson go?*
 - *What problems did he face?*
 - *What happened at the mutiny?*

2. Play John Cabot's journey

- Listen at each stop.
- Record:
 - *Where did Cabot land?*
 - *What did he think he found?*

3. Discussion Prompt

- *"Which explorer went farther north?"*
- *"What challenges did they face because of geography?"*

Grades 6-9

Students work individually or in pairs.

1. **Students isolate one route at a time** using map buttons.
2. **Play Hudson's journey**, and have students note:

- Major stops
- Geographic obstacles
- Crew challenges
- Outcome (mutiny, no passage)

3. **Play Cabot's journey**, and have students note the same as above.

4. **Use map evidence to answer prompts:**

- *"Who traveled farther west? How do you know?"*
- *"How did climate affect Hudson's expedition?"*
- *"Which explorer collected more useful economic information?"*
- *"What long-term impacts did their discoveries have on colonization?"*

MYTHS & WONDERS SCAVENGER HUNT (15 minutes)

Students use the printable scavenger hunt with the online article "Myths and Wonders of the Age of Exploration."

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/legends-myths-and-destinations>

Scavenger hunt:

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/legends-myths-and-destinations-savenger-hunt-version-1>

The online mini articles are about:

- **Northwest Passage**
- Fountain of Youth
- Seven Cities of Gold
- Sea Monsters
- St. Elmo's Fire
- Other legendary places and dangers

Students search for answers and record findings.

Differentiation:

- Grades 3–5: Complete half the scavenger hunt or use a modified version with fewer items.
- Grades 6–9: Complete full scavenger hunt and answer extension questions (e.g., "Which myth do you think was most believable?").

Teacher prompt:

"How did myths like these motivate explorers? How did they sometimes mislead them?"

OPTIONAL - CULMINATING ACTIVITY: READING COMPREHENSION (20 minutes)

Students complete the Northwest Passage reading comprehension assessment. This is a differentiated activity with options for LEXILE 720 and 920. Each features a reading passage and seven multiple choice questions. It gives immediate feedback and allows for customization, annotation, and narration.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/the-search-for-the-northwest-passage-online-or-printable-reading-comprehension>

Grades 3–5: Use simplified version (Lexile 720)

Grades 6–9 (Lexile 920) Use simplified version (Lexile 920)
