

Working with Primary Sources:

Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America*

In the 17th century, as Europeans explored and settled the New World, reports of “savages” made their way through Europe. Some Europeans had read one or more of the small number of books written about this new wilderness across the Atlantic. In 1643, Roger Williams wrote and published *A Key into the Language of America*, the most comprehensive ethnographic survey produced, to date, about the native peoples of New England. The *Key* continues to be used today as an anthropological study of 17th century American Indian culture, a phrase book of the Narragansett language, and a commentary on 17th American Indian life during the early colonial period.

This lesson plan introduces students to *A Key into the Language of America* and provides a glimpse into the complex relationship Williams had with the Narragansett and gives a first-hand account of 17th century native culture.

Content Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss Roger Williams' motives in writing this book.
- Explain what message(s) he wanted to convey about the Narragansett to his readers.
- Explain the significance of this book for 17th century readers.
- Identify parallels with our present-day struggles to live in a multicultural society.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze a primary source document and identify the main idea.
- Use examples from the text as evidence to show how Roger Williams used language as a means of fostering understanding between the English settlers and the Native Americans.

Enduring Understanding:

Historians interpret and analyze primary source documents to learn about the thoughts, ideas, perceptions, motivations and rationales for action at a point in history.

Essential Question:

In what ways does an analysis of Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* provide insight into the relationships between colonists and native peoples in early colonial Rhode Island?

Grade-Span Expectations

C&G 5: As members of an interconnected world community, the choices we make impact others locally, nationally, and globally.

C&G 5 (7-8) – 1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the many ways Earth's people are interconnected by...

- a. tracing and explaining social, technological, geographical, economical, and cultural connections for a given society of people (trade, transportation, communication)

b. identifying, describing, and explaining how people are politically, economically, environmentally, militarily, and (or) diplomatically connected (e.g., World Bank, UN, NATO, European Union)

HP 1: History is an account of human activities that is interpretive in nature.

HP 2: History is a chronicle of human activities, diverse people, and the societies they form.

HP 2 (7-8) – 2 Students chronicle events and conditions by...

- a. identifying key events and people of a particular historical era or time period (e.g., centuries, BCE, “The Sixties”)

HP 3: The study of history helps us understand the present and shape the future.

HP 3 (7-8) – 2 Students make personal connections in an historical context (e.g., source-to-source, source-to-self, source-to-world) by...

- a. recognizing and reflecting on how the similarities of human issues across time periods influence their own personal histories (e.g., so what? *How does this relate to me?*)

National Standards for History (U.S. History, Grades 5-12)

Era 2: Colonization and Settlement (1585-1763)

Standard 1B: The student understands the European struggle for control of North America.

- Analyze relationships between Native Americans and Spanish, English, French, and Dutch settlers.
[[Compare and contrast different sets of ideas](#)]

Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details

RH.6-8.1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

RH.6-8.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Craft and Structure

RH.6-8.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

RH.6-8.5. Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).

RH.6-8.6. Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RH.6-8.8. Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

Teaching/Learning Sequence

Teacher Preparation

1. Make copies of page 1, **To the Reader**, for all students.
2. Make copies of each chapter for groups.

Launch: 20 minutes

Williams' relationship with the Narragansett was more respectful than the typical relationships between Native Americans and colonists, but still complex. When he published his *Key into the Language of America*, he hoped it would “. . . unlock some rarities concerning the natives themselves, not yet discovered . . .”, and improve communication between the Europeans and Native Americans.

To begin, have students:

1. Read page 1 of **To the Reader**.
2. Divide the class into small groups.
3. Ask each group to identify Roger Williams' purpose for writing the *Key*. Discuss as a class.
4. As a class, brainstorm and discuss current day examples of sources that accomplished what Roger Williams was trying to do. (Wikipedia, Urban Dictionary, etc.)
5. Although Roger Williams was respectful of the Native American culture, he used terms in *To the Reader*, which would be derogatory if used today. Ask students to identify the term(s) that are politically incorrect and discuss as a class if Williams intentionally used these words as insults or not.

Exploration: 40 minutes

1. Divide class into six groups and assign each group one of the following sections:

Title of Chapter	Transcribed pages
Of Salutation	2-6
Of Persons/Parts of Body	7-9
Of their Coyne	10-13
Of Buying and Selling	14-18
Of the Sea	19-21
Of Eating and Entertainment	22-25

2. Ask each group to read the selection and answer the following questions:
 1. Give an example and describe a “key” from your reading that would have been helpful to the English.
 2. What insight did it reveal about the Native Americans?
 3. As a colonist, how might you have used these insights?
3. Have each group report its findings.

Assessment

After all groups have reported their findings, have students respond either in small groups, in writing or orally to the following question:

How did Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* foster understanding of daily life, work, and relationships between the Native Americans and colonists?