

# CREATING AN EXHIBITION



## *Objective*

Students will create an exhibition based on a particular theme, write labels and make design decisions in order to communicate a message to an audience.

## *Standards*

Reading 4.A.3.c, 4.A.4.c (grades 3 – 5)

Social studies 5.A.2.b (grade 3)

Social studies 5.B.2.a (grade 4)

## *Grade level*

3 - 5

## *Length of lesson*

1 – 2 class sessions

## *Materials from trunk*

- Objects from the trunk and catalog cards (made by students in the Mystery Objects lesson or pre-made)
- Exhibition planning worksheet

## *Materials from classroom*

- 3 x 5 note cards for student-generated labels
- Other projects or student-generated material from lessons

## *Overview*

If used as a culminating activity, this lesson is a wonderful way to tie together everything students have explored about the War of 1812 and life during the early 1800s. The activity can also be used as a way to bring together several individual lessons and feature students' work (from lessons like "Creating a Broadside", "Responding to Artwork", or "Creating Original Artwork"). Remember, you can always just use the objects in the trunk on their own as described in the following outline. Regardless, consider hosting an exhibition opening with period food created by students or families (see "Preparing and Tasting Food" lesson).

In general terms, this lesson uses the process of creating an exhibition as a way to codify an understanding of the work historians and museum staff do when they present an analysis of objects or artifacts. Students work collaboratively to create an exhibition that displays objects, research and concise labels, in an effort to communicate something about the meaning and significance of objects.

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## *Teacher Background*

**Exhibitions** are one of the main ways that **curators** and museum staff tell a story about their collections or site. There is a whole body of scholarship about the best-designed exhibitions, the learning that occurs in museum settings and how we can make exhibitions more meaningful and effective. Written **interpretive** material is one way that curators convey messages in an exhibition. They carefully craft only the most important, evocative and essential information about a theme or object into writing they hope visitors will read. The design of an exhibition can communicate messages in non-verbal ways. Object selection, labels and layout work together to give visitors a sense of the bigger message of the exhibition.

## *Procedure*

1. Discuss elements of an exhibition – what do museum staff do when they decide to create an exhibition? Record the comments from students and list them as best you can in a chronological order, adding the following points as needed: museum staff determine a theme for an exhibition, select objects along that theme, decide on a design, font and color schematic, determine where things go, write labels that are easy, clear and interesting to read, install or place pieces with their labels, advertise and create invitations to the opening of the show.
2. Explain that the class will be creating an exhibition that features objects from the trunk and student-generated labels. What is the story that we want to share with other students at school, or parents? Are children and adults interested in the same things? What will the title of our exhibition be? What is our “main message”? What can these objects tell us about life before, during and right after the War of 1812?
3. Once the exhibition story or theme is determined, students choose one object in the trunk (this may be an object they are already familiar with or one that they would like to “get to know” better).
4. Students write a label for their object on 3 x 5 cards. Discuss the purpose of labels: to convey the most important and interesting story related to an object, not to share all the information you know about an object. Based on research they have done on objects, students write a first draft and then, after it is reviewed, write their final draft on their cards.
5. Discuss how an exhibition tells a story using objects and labels, but also that the placement of the objects or the design of an exhibition can communicate messages in non-verbal ways (for example, if objects are exhibited in a grouping it can indicate that they have some sort of relationship). In small groups, students develop a plan for the design and placement of objects and report these proposals back to the class with a rationale. Then, students vote to determine the placement of objects. (you may use the Exhibition Planning worksheet as a tool here)
6. Design invitations and invite parents and other students to come to the exhibition. Students may give a tour of the exhibition, highlighting their objects, labels and the exhibition design.

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## *Extensions*

- Make an exhibition on a different theme that features objects from students' lives (made or lent), determining themes, significance of objects, messages conveyed and exhibition design.

## *Modifications*

- If space or security is an issue, consider creating a “catalog” instead of an exhibition. Either bind printed copies of student labels and photos of objects into a book or create a slideshow of the objects and student labels.

## *Related Resources*

Exhibition Planning worksheet

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## *Exhibition Planning Worksheet*

Use the following worksheet as a tool to help develop a plan for the design and placement of objects in your exhibition.

1. What is the theme or main message of your exhibition? Who is your primary audience? What is the title of the exhibition?

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2. What are the objects in your exhibition? List them here.

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3. How will you arrange or group your exhibition objects (chronologically, by similar function, type)? Do the objects fall naturally into distinct groups or categories? Can they be grouped in ways that relate to the overall theme?

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4. What should be the overall look and feel of your exhibition? Are there colors that come to mind (for the background, table coverings, etc.)? What font will you use in your exhibition materials (labels, titles, invitations to the opening)?

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