

# Making the Most of Field Trips to Historical Museums

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“I have gone to the [Spanish Missions historic heritage site] at least a handful of times but I’ve never paid attention to all the information. This time going, I read everything and explored all the exhibits. It was really eye-opening to take the time to sit and think about whose voices were silenced and reflect on the ‘why.’”<sup>1</sup>

Museums are the storehouses of our national historical memory and are an important part of our students’ education experience. Trips to museums provide students with engaging ways to learn about history beyond their typical classroom experience and can provide students with a critical understanding of the historic actors and events that make up our nation’s history curriculum. Students often view historical museums as

authoritative, even more so than their own classroom textbook, and because historical museums spotlight a range of topics and information spanning the entire country, they are often seen as unofficial *keepers of our nation’s stories*.

While there is no official national history curriculum, historical museums (and all public spaces that tell stories about our past) offer their own specific historical accounts and thus, by default,



O’Brien Middle School students visit the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Museum in Nixon, Nevada, where they learned about Paiute culture as well as renewable energy. The museum is partially powered by an arrowhead-shaped array designed and built by the nonprofit Black Rock Solar.

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form a pervasive national history curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Americans are increasingly engaged in the much-needed national discussion about whose history is presented as part of that curriculum. K-12 students should be part of that dialogue. This discussion centers on whose history is presented and what national memory we choose to claim. These decisions go to the heart of who we are as a nation. If everyone's story is not included, we cannot expect our students to trust that their own heritage, ancestors, and indeed their own lived experience, matters to the country. Promoting the sense of belonging is a civic skill as important as any other.

### **Benefits to Museum Learning**

The benefits to museum education are many. Students attending a museum approach this alternate learning space differently than they do a classroom. However, levels of learning vary depending on the person and the site.<sup>3</sup> Museum visits offer students distinct information and important historical detail. Students see artifacts or replicas of artifacts in three dimensions and in many cases are able to touch them. Often, audio and video recordings present realistic depictions of the past. Photographs often give students a sense of the lived experience of ancestors and founders. Most importantly, there are primary documents that personalize the past—personal letters, diaries, and magazine or newspaper articles. While these could be reproduced in a textbook or projected onto a screen in the classroom, going to a museum provides a tangible and engaging experience.<sup>4</sup>

### **Challenges to Museum Learning**

Museum learning can also present some stumbling blocks. In any museum, it's important to consider how the historical information is being presented. The content and focus of all museums have been carefully selected and scrupulously presented, leaving little room for learners to question or critique what they see, read, or hear. In turn, students rarely challenge the information they are exposed to at a historical museum. They often view the information as an *absolute truth*. Students are unlikely to consider that the story might be incomplete or content might have been deliberately omitted.<sup>5</sup> This immovable stance makes it difficult to have engaging and meaningful discussion with students about the importance of multiple perspectives and multiple viewpoints.

The second challenge is that the authoritative presentations use a simplified, single narrative that is often incomplete. Stories

of women, enslaved peoples, indigenous peoples, and others are often presented as ancillary, if at all, to the otherwise established national narrative. This challenge works in tandem with the first: if students do not question the information they receive at a historical museum, and if the significant historical actors they learn about do not include underrepresented groups, then students receive an incomplete view and may not see themselves in the fabric of their country.

In recent decades, more and more museums have worked to provide multiple perspectives and incorporate multiple voices in their museum collections. Indeed, we have seen important additions to the Smithsonian Institution such as the National Museum of the American Indian (which opened in 2004) and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (which opened in 2016), which signal a shift toward more inclusion in the national story. Even within these new additions, however, it is important for students to critically examine the material presented. Still, there are innumerable museums around the United States that could benefit from adding depth and breadth to the variety of historic narratives presented. Students and teachers can consider providing feedback and suggestions to museum educators and museum directors, who encourage such comments as they contemplate programmatic changes and update their collections and exhibits each year.

### **A New Approach to Museum Field Trips**

Helping students to see museums as places of culture, wisdom, and experience rather than as warehouses of pictures and objects can transform the museum-going experience. This approach acknowledges museums as learning spaces with specific historical curriculum. While museums and other alternative learning spaces can, and should, be engaging and fun—and distinctly different from the daily classroom—it's important to coach students in order to extend their historical content knowledge. Providing students with the tools of historical inquiry (see the historical museum evaluation tools on pp. 22–23) supports the C3 Framework, and addresses NCSS national standards 1, 2, and 5<sup>6</sup> and specific state standards, as well as the Common Core State Standards, for interpreting and evaluating historical evidence. The following steps support an inquiry-based approach to visiting museums that teaches students to critique and analyze the historical information presented and to examine ways to create a more complete historical narrative.



### *Step 1: Provide the Context and the Purpose of the Museum*

Prior to traveling to a historic museum, it is critically important to provide context for students. Explain what curriculum they will learn and what types of artifacts and other primary sources they might encounter. Connect the museum content to the content students are learning in class. This may seem obvious, but it is often overlooked when planning museum



O'Brien Middle School students learn about Paiute culture at the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Museum in Nixon, Nevada. (Black Rock Solar, October 29, 2012, via Flickr: CC BY 2.0)

trips. We often become fixated on trip logistics—permission slips, acquiring transportation, recruiting parental chaperones, planning for lunch—and taking time in class to link the content can become an afterthought. Provide meaningful historical information in advance about the people, places, and events the museum explores and how the museum directly relates to classroom learning. If possible, provide photographs, or primary documents, or show videos that might deepen preparation and interest in the museum visit (including books or magazine articles that focus on the historic events or people that will be discussed at the museum). A great deal of information is available on such websites as the National Archives ([www.archives.gov/](http://www.archives.gov/)) and the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov/](http://www.loc.gov/)).

### *Step 2: Provide Students with Critical Questions for an Analytical Lens to View the Museum*

This step focuses on providing students with questions they should ask *during* their visit. Questions such as “Whose story is being told at this museum?” and “Whose story is not being

told?” Encourage students to question whether the museum curriculum is well-rounded or whether it is lacking in detail and depth. Students should consider whose stories are given importance and then contemplate the larger question of “Why?” Provide middle school students with the Museum Evaluation Tool on page 22 (for secondary students, see the Museum Evaluation Tool on page 23) to take with them and complete during their museum visit.

### *Step 3: Provide Students with the Tools of Further Analysis*

After visiting the museum and completing the museum evaluation tool, students should have a sense of whose stories the museum told and whose stories were omitted. The next step is for students to investigate the *why*. For example, *why* might museum curators have made certain decisions and what might attendees lose from not hearing a more complete version of history. During this step, encourage students to reflect individually, as well as discuss with their peers, whether they felt the curriculum presented at the museum was complete or incomplete and what they felt would

have made the historical narrative more comprehensive. This step can also take place during the museum visit if students have the opportunity to break off into smaller groups. However, more than likely, this step will take place back in the classroom. For both Steps 2 and 3, encourage students to relate what they learned to their daily lives and their own lived experiences. (Older students, who should have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the past, will be able to relate their museum learning to prior classroom learning as well as to the broader world.)

### *Step 4: Provide Students with Space to Continue the Dialogue*

This fourth step is carried out back in the classroom. Provide students the opportunity to discuss the museum in a deeper way. Give them the space to dialogue with one another about the experience. This will allow students to talk openly and honestly about whether they saw their own cultural backgrounds reflected in the museum content and whether they heard the

*continued on page 24*

# Museum Evaluation Tool for Middle School Students

1.	What are some important people you learned about at the museum?	
2.	What are some interesting things you saw or did at this museum?	
3.	What people were not talked about in this museum?	
4.	Why do you think the museum did not include those people's stories?	
5.	What do you think was the overall historical message the museum wanted you to learn?	
6.	What other information do you now want to learn about after having visited the museum?	
7.	Did the museum provide suggestions for learning more about this topic?	
8.	How do you think the decisions are made as to what is included and what is not included in a museum?	
9.	What other types of historical museums would you like to visit?	
10.	Did this evaluation tool help you understand the museum better? (Please explain your answer.)	

# Museum Evaluation Tool for Secondary Students\*

1.	What is the <i>curriculum</i> of this museum? What is the focus of the museum? What is the content/information that is delivered?	
2.	What are the different ways the museum delivers this curriculum? How is the information delivered to those attending the museum (for example, videos, documents, photographs and images, or interviews)?	
3.	What are the main voices or perspectives that are presented in the museum curriculum? Is there a single dominant voice or story that is being told?	
4.	What voices are silenced or marginalized in this curriculum? Why might those voices have been left out?	
5.	What might be some consequences of the absence of certain voices from the narrative (in terms of understanding the curriculum)?	
6.	What larger historical narrative is advanced and supported by the museum's approach to presenting this history?	
7.	What information would you have liked to have seen that you didn't see in this curriculum? What other information do you think would have given a more complete historical narrative?	
8.	Does the museum provide any resources or materials for further investigation and research? If yes, please provide details.	
9.	Based on the information presented (perspectives spotlighted), what conclusions can you draw about the museum's curriculum decision-making process?	
10.	In what ways did this evaluation tool affect or impact your museum-going experience?	

\* Upper grade high school students would be expected and encouraged to provide more advanced critical analysis than lower secondary grades. This evaluation tool could also be easily adapted for teachers who are attending the museum as an in-service professional development.



voices of their own heritage in the stories told. They will be able to analyze the importance of having multiple perspectives and multiple histories present a more complex view of the past. This step is essential for helping students become more comfortable with using a critical lens in viewing historical museums.

### More Ways for Teachers to Change Museum Education

Teachers can improve the museum-going experience for their own students as well as other community members and the general public by becoming more actively engaged in the work of museum history and museum education. Being part of the conversation surrounding museum selections and decisions about which stories are presented—in short, determining the museum curriculum—bridges the gap between learning in the classroom and in alternative learning spaces.

Educators can become a part of this conversation by volunteering to be part of a museum board as an educational consultant. In this capacity, teachers can offer suggestions regarding pedagogical strategies and interactive activities that would best engage museum attendees, in particular students. Educators can also offer museum boards valuable insight into what is currently being taught in the K-12 classrooms and how the museum's approach can best enrich the classroom curriculum. A second and perhaps more significant involvement for teachers is to actually assist in developing the museum curriculum and supporting museum teaching materials. This commitment generally involves being part of a collaborative research team that develops the overall curriculum based on the mission and focus of the museum. Teachers who serve in this role engage in meaningful dialogue with museum directors and curators to ensure that a holistic and complete historical narrative is presented. In addition, they can help develop the ancillary teacher materials and classroom kits that museums often provide classroom educators.

### Why Evaluating Museums is Important

Taking the time to teach students to critically analyze historical information at a museum has the potential to produce benefits immediately and for years to come. Students will develop their analytical skills and be able to apply these same skills to the classroom. They will become comfortable with the “But what about this?” questions that they might not otherwise have had the confidence to ask in class. Secondly, the museum evaluation tool can guide students to see the broader contributions of all

people in our nation's story; or if they don't, it prompts them to question why. This can lead to open and honest classroom dialogue about how we as a country determine whose stories are included in our collective national memory. These activities help form a future generation that seeks an inclusive version of history in our nation's museums, one that includes multiple perspectives and multiple voices. 🌍

### Notes

1. A preservice teacher reflecting on using the museum evaluation tool at the Spanish Missions historic heritage site in San Antonio, Texas.
2. Keiran Egan, “What is Curriculum?” *Curriculum Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (1978), 66–72; Noel J. Stowe, “Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice,” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (2006), 39–65. doi:10.1525/tph.2006.28.1.39.
3. Christine Baron, “Understanding Historical Thinking at Historic Sites,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 104, no. 3 (2012), 833–847; Christine Baron, Sherri Sklarwitz, Hyeyoung Bang, and Hanadi Shatara, “Understanding What Teachers Gain from Professional Development at Historic Sites,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 47, no. 1 (2019), 76–107 (Published online: July 18, 2018); David Dean, “Museums as Sites for Historical Understanding, Peace, and Justice: Views From Canada,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 19, no. 4 (2013), 325–337; Alan S. Marcus and Thomas Levine, “Knight at the Museum: Learning History with Museums,” *The Social Studies* 102, no. 3 (2011), 104–109; Alan S. Marcus, Jeremy D. Stoddard, and Walter W. Woodward, *Teaching History with Museums: Strategies for K-12 Social Studies* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2017); Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Susan Wunder, “Learning to Teach for Historical Understanding: Preservice Teachers at a Hands-on Museum,” *The Social Studies* 93, no. 4 (2002), 159–163.
4. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (London: Routledge, 2007).
5. Karen Burgard and Michael Boucher, “Same Story; Different History: Students' Racialized Historical Understanding of Historic Sites,” *The Urban Review* 48, no. 5 (2016): 696–717, doi:10.1007/s11256-016-0374-9.
6. (1) Culture; (2) Time Continuity, and Change; (5) Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

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