

American History Activators

Early Nineteenth Century through the Industrial Age

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Welcome to American History Activators

Early Nineteenth Century through the Industrial Age

Immerse students in living history as you introduce eight major milestones in American history. Whether used as lead-ins to upcoming lessons or as wrap-up activities, these mini-simulations provide your students with experiences that will shape their historical perceptions and positively enhance their understanding of past, current, and future events. Each of the eight units is brief, requires little preparation, and includes a ready-to-use lesson, background essay, narration, and postscript. Each unit concludes with a corresponding Common Core–based historical investigation activity, which utilizes students' historical thinking skills and provides a driving question with primary and secondary sources for analysis.

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Introduction

Purpose

These simple-to-use Activators supplement your U.S. History classes and immerse your students in “living history” situations. Students get up from their desks, move around in different classroom configurations, and find themselves drawn into history that becomes compellingly real. For a variety of reasons, students seem to function better and learn more when actively engaged. American History Activators provide brief, clever, and exciting experiences for your students.

What Are Activators?

Activators possess three common elements, which embody a philosophical foundation.

1. Activators are simple and brief and require little background reading or preparation. Most Activators take one to two class periods.
2. Duplication requirements are minimal. Brief essays read and visual schematics displayed can provide all the background information students need.
3. Activators involve most, if not all, of your students, even those of limited English fluency.

Special Lessons

American History Activators provide experiences that shape students’ historical perceptions and positively enhance their understanding of past, current, and future events. As you introduce the units to your students, help them to understand that we re-create history because doing so has an inherent value.

- **Be Prepared.** Be sure to read the **Setup, Directions, and Lesson Plan** options thoroughly before introducing the Activator to your students. Enlist students’ help in setting the scene within the classroom.
- **Reinforce Student Response.** During the action of an Activator, your students are involved in issues and events. When students make personal comments, either in class or during the **Debriefing**, praise them for their astute remarks. Your reinforcement of their experiences emphasizes for all students that history is real because it touches them. Above all, express your pleasure that students are so involved.



Teaching tip

Every student in your class will be standing, walking, marching, crawling, lying down, negotiating, plotting, and perhaps even “flying” as participants at crucial turning points in the development of our country.



Teaching tip

An Activator provides memorable experiences that your students will retain long after other school events fade.

Introduction

Activating History

Lessons in the traditional social studies classroom embody mainly visual and auditory learning. However, many students learn more effectively in kinesthetic situations. Activators emphasize the use of body movement, or the kinesthetic learning style often seen in skilled athletes, dancers, and actors. Perhaps students respond so positively and energetically to classes in physical education, shop, art, or home economics, not to mention extracurricular activities, because they can move around and socialize as they learn. Kinesthetic learning can be underutilized in social studies, yet this form of active learning generates highly effective and often indelible lessons.

Ability Levels

Activators are appropriate to use for various grade and ability levels and appeal to a wide variety of student learning styles. Activators follow the thesis: "Keep it simple and get kids up and moving."

Gifted Students. Most gifted students love to play roles. They will probably ad lib dialogue with great success. Some gifted students are natural directors.

Drama Students. Tap your drama students to play the pivotal roles. Allow them time to rehearse, and document the performance by filming it.

Middle School Students. Spend some time before and after the action of the Activator explaining the whys of the event dramatized. Also, it is suggested that you tap your best and brightest to perform the key roles.

Lower Ability and Limited English Students. These two groups of students appreciate and respond well to the kinesthetic learning of Activators. Rehearse two or more times. Do not proceed with the action of the Activator until everyone knows exactly what will occur and when.

Grouping Students

Activators promote the concept of "students as workers and teachers as managers and facilitators." Activators allow students to participate in their learning in ways that are often unfamiliar to them. Consider the following when planning the action of an Activator:

- **Student Directors.** You may select four or five student directors early in the school year to rotate responsibilities for a series of Activators. Allow each director three or four days to prepare for his or her Activator. Meet with the cadre before and after the action of the first Activator. Review your standards and expectations for the Activators. Grant enough latitude so they may apply their talents—and their time—fully.
- **Small Group Responsibility.** Divide your students into six groups of five or six. Put each group in charge of an Activator scheduled during

the academic year. Allow each group three or four days to prepare for their Activator. Meet with the class before and after the action of the first Activator. Review your standards and expectations for the Activators. Select, or allow each group to select, the director.

Time Allotment

Activators vary somewhat in length—from one to two or more class periods, depending on the extent of your preparations and **Debriefing**. Other variables include class ability, grade level, the Activator itself, which **Lesson Plan** option you choose to use, and time for rehearsals. Whatever you decide, Activator lessons are worth the time spent and pay dividends later.

Room Arrangement

Most Activators require that you move your classroom furniture around to accommodate the action. Experience proves that changing the room's configuration offers students a fresh perspective and provides a welcome change to the daily routine. If you are a teacher who uses cooperative learning teams, your students are probably veteran furniture movers. Project the provided **Schematic** as a guide, and have students quickly move the desks, tables, and chairs.

Teaching Options

Most Activators include two or more options for how to conduct each **Lesson Plan**. Study the options carefully, and decide which one or combination will work best with your students, time constraints, classroom configuration, and administrative support.

Debriefing

A debriefing discussion of the action of the Activator is crucial to help students place the Activator lesson in the context of your course content and to ensure that they grasp the relevance of their experiences. Each Activator includes short and long debriefing suggestions. Study these options carefully and select one or more that reinforce your teaching objectives, or develop your own debriefing topics.

- Consider dividing your class into cooperative learning groups to sort out the debriefing points you decide are appropriate. Take into account individual ability, gender balance, maturity, and ethnic diversity in setting up these groups.
- For closure to the Activator lesson, an essay encompassing the event would be appropriate.

Lesson Plan

Overview

Few would deny that gunpowder, the printing press, the airplane, television, personal computers, and smart phones, among many other inventions, changed history and our lives. Two other transformative inventions—at least for the United States—were the cotton gin and the development of interchangeable parts, both of which are attributed to American gadgeteer Eli Whitney, a Yale-educated Yankee who helped launch the early Industrial Revolution in the United States.

It is now 1808 and panic and stress have hit Whitney's armory in New Haven, Connecticut. According to his ambitious contract with the U.S. Army, signed years before, Whitney's armory must mass-produce ten thousand muskets, but, unfortunately, production is way behind schedule.

Whitney is depending on your students to fulfill his government contract by working feverishly on the line in his armory-factory to assemble these muskets using mass-produced identical parts. Under the watchful eye of armory management, your student "mechanics" will have to work hard and fast to please the "boss" with superior muskets at the end of the assembly line.

Setup

1. Duplication

- **Background Essay**—*class set*
- **Postscript**—*class set*
- **Inside the Armory**—*one copy* to read aloud
- **Prototype Musket**—*20 copies* to distribute along both assembly lines so workers can view the completed musket
- **Musket Outline**—*about 30–40 of each page* (15–20 for each line to "assemble"). Suggestion: Find used paper and print these on the blank side.
- **Musket Parts**—*10 copies of each page* distributed along both assembly lines so workers can memorize their individual drawing tasks.

2. **Schematic, costumes, props:** Carefully scrutinize the **Schematic** page and note that it calls for a different configuration of desks—essentially two lines of workers with room for supervisors to go up and down the lines to cheer their teams on. No costumes or props are necessary

unless you want to display some signs, placards, or banners (e.g., WHITNEY'S ARMORY).

3. Roles

- a. There are only armory workers and a few supervisors along the assembly line in this Activator. This activity accommodates mainstreamed and special needs students since it requires small, easy, repetitive tasks. Therefore, any of your students can be a supervisor or worker.
- b. This Activator might benefit from assembly-line competition.
- c. The supervisors, as a flourish, might walk up and down their lines with clipboards and stopwatches (even though the latter had not been invented yet).

Directions

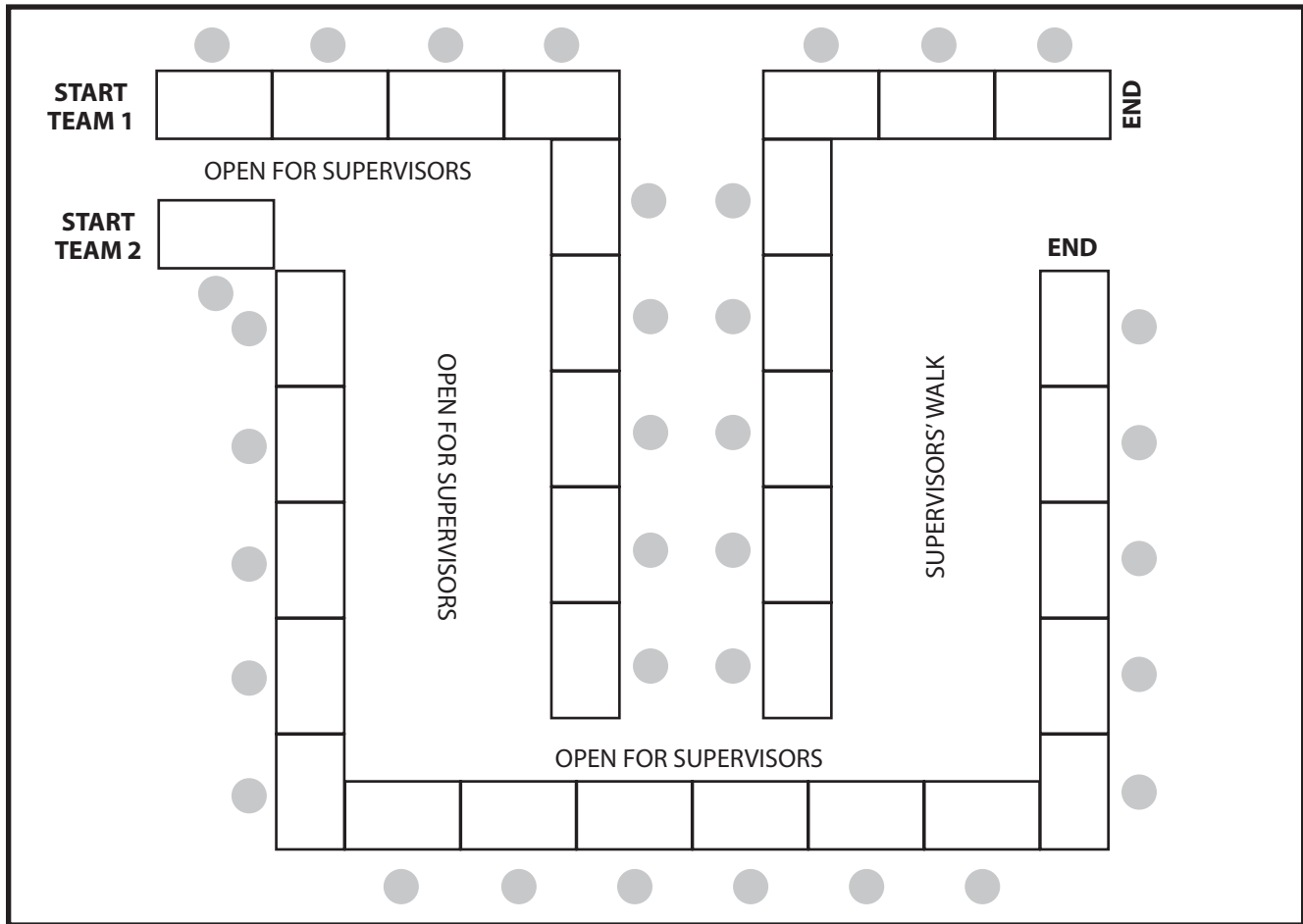
1. Either hand out the **Background Essay** as homework the day before class or pass it out now. If you have assigned it as homework, conduct an informal discussion of the main points. If you are passing it out now, have students read it silently before prompting the discussion.
2. Rearrange the room according to the **Schematic** if you are implementing **Option A**. **Option B** requires one long assembly line.
3. Select those students who will act as supervisors and quality checkers. Give them a day to find clipboards and stopwatches.

You have at least two different ways you can conduct this Activator:

Option A

1. Establish two competing assembly lines.
2. Display the **Prototype Musket** page to further explain the activity.
3. Point out the responsibilities of each worker and the supervisors. The idea is to produce as many muskets as possible, using the division-of-labor and interchangeability-of-parts concepts in an assembly-line format. Students will draw/trace only their specific musket part over and over—one single step each—until the muskets are completed at the end of the line.
4. Have students sit along the assembly line with several **Prototype Musket** sheets distributed along the line to help students focus on their tasks.

Schematic



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Suggestions

- It is suggested that the teacher make a prototype musket and put it on a cardboard backing.
- This schematic is for **Option A**—two separate assembly lines. Adjust for **Option B**.
- Speed up/slow down lines to achieve goals.
- Put prototype pages along the lines.
- Run activity for 10–15 minutes, checking for quality control two or three times.

- Adjust worker tasks as needed.
- #17 should “clean up” sloppy work from #1–16 and print the words NEW HAVEN on the bottom half of the lock (firing mechanism).

Characters needed

- 2–3 supervisors
- 2 quality control workers (can be supervisors)
- 15–32 workers-armorers
- Eli Whitney

Postscript

When people mention Eli Whitney today, his name ultimately is connected to his invention of the cotton gin, a machine that increased cotton production and the number of slaves needed in the fields. Few, if any, remember (or were taught) the association he had with interchangeable parts and the mass production of army muskets.

His famous demonstration in early 1801, with Vice President Jefferson looking on, was impressive enough for Whitney to be given a contract with the U.S. government. Overstating what he could actually produce, Whitney's efforts (and his armory workers) would not generate enough muskets to fulfill the original contract. In Whitney's defense, the processes of inventing and building his machines (mostly milling machines) to make the muskets were slow and laborious. As if he had a contract with destiny as well, on January 23, 1809, Whitney informed the secretary of war that the last of the ten thousand contracted muskets were delivered and ready for inspection.



Eli Whitney

The timing was perfect. Within three years, the United States went to war with Britain (the War of 1812). Because of Whitney's skill and persistence, and the government's patience, the soldiers fighting the "Second War of Independence" carried and fired "spiffy" new American-made muskets from Connecticut's Whitney Armory at Mill River. Thanks to the inventor himself, his many armory workers, and the government's financial support, the Whitney Armory's production was a stunning success. In the next four years, his armory produced fifteen thousand more muskets! It has been suggested, however, that Whitney himself made just \$2,450 profit from his contract.

Forever the clever inventor, Whitney next tackled the need to make milling and filing machines that would cut more precise metal for parts than could be cut by hand. This he did, making it possible for the muskets' more intricate pieces to snap into place quickly and thus almost guarantee a fire-ready and accurate weapon. This time Whitney chose not to apply for a patent for his new milling machine, as he had for the cotton gin. Instead he made his invention available to other armories making muskets. Sadly, the inventor of the cotton gin and pioneer of mass manufacturing in America died on January 8, 1825.

While historians acknowledge his contributions with the cotton gin, not all agree that Whitney blazed a trail by originating the concept of interchangeable parts in mass producing army muskets. Others in Europe were also using standardized parts for production. Yet, Whitney appears to have conceived his version independently of the others. Independent invention by widely separated people is uncommon but not unique.

Image Source: Courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery, via Wikimedia Commons.