

Native American Research Project

Teacher Guide: research, writing, hands-on projects, and a walk-through museum

Grade levels	Grades 3–6 (adapt the writing expectations for your students)
Time	Full Unit: 5–6 weeks (recommended) Quick Track: 9–10 days
Grouping	Cooperative learning groups of 7–9 students with mixed achievement levels
Students produce	Research notes, typed paragraphs, a home model, a craft, a food sample, an optional science demonstration, Museum Exhibit Cards, a class presentation, and a walk-through museum
Downloads	• Note-Taking Chart • Paragraph Rating System • Presentation Rubric and Rating Form • Museum Exhibit Card • Demonstration Ideas • Unit Test

Overview

Students research a Native nation or region, write organized paragraphs from their notes, and show what they learned through hands-on projects. They present to their classmates, and the unit ends with a walk-through museum for families and the school.

Along the way, students learn that Native nations are many different peoples, each with its own language, government, and traditions, and that these nations are still here today.

Three Guiding Ideas

Share these with students before research begins. They come up again in the paragraph rubric.

1. **Be specific.** Say “the Seminole” or “the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois),” not “the Indians.” Each nation is different.
2. **Past and present.** Use past tense for history (“In the 1700s, Cherokee families lived in...”) and present tense for nations today (“The Cherokee Nation has its own government.”). Don’t write as if Native people lived only long ago.
3. **Respect what is sacred.** Some objects, designs, and ceremonies are religious. Students can learn that they exist and why they matter, but they should not copy, wear, or perform them. See the craft list under Task 6.

Pacing Options

Full Unit (recommended)	About 5–6 weeks. Groups complete every task for one region, then repeat the whole process for a second and a third region. The repetition is where the writing improves. Many students need to go through the process more than once before they fully understand what is expected.
Quick Track	About 9–10 days, for teachers pressed for time. Each group completes the tasks once, for one region.

Regions and nations

These match the student report pages on the website.

- **Eastern Woodlands:** Algonquian and Great Lakes nations, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), Cherokee, Seminole
- **Southwest:** Pueblo nations, Apache, Navajo (Diné)
- **Plains:** Lakota, Cheyenne, Comanche, and other Plains nations
- **Northwest Coast:** Tlingit, Haida, Makah, and other Northwest Coast nations
- **Arctic:** Inuit
- **California and Intermountain:** Pomo, Shoshone, Paiute, and other nations of California and the Great Basin

For the Full Unit, one option is: Round 1, Eastern Woodlands. Round 2, Southwest. Round 3, Northwest Coast, Arctic, and Plains.

Teacher Preparation

1. **Form groups** of 7–9 students. Include students of different achievement levels in each group.
2. **Make the fact sheets.** For each group, label one sheet of colored paper for each category below. Under each label, copy the prompts from the Note-Taking Chart so students know what facts to look for. The colors also make the peer evaluations easier to sort later.



Paper color	Category
Blue	Introduction: name, location, land, and climate
Green	Homes
Pink	Clothing
Yellow	Food
Orange	Daily Life, Games, and Celebrations
Tan	Tools and Transportation
Gray	Art and Trade
White	Famous People
Lavender	This Nation Today

3. **Gather sources.** Mix books, approved websites, and at least one source created by the nation itself. See Resources near the end of this guide.

Student Tasks

Task 1: Research and take notes

- Students write facts on the group's shared fact sheets **in phrases, not sentences**. Notes should be clear enough for a classmate to understand without the original source, but not copied word for word.
- Any student may add to any category, but each group uses only one set of sheets. Students read what others have written so facts aren't repeated.
- Students write the source next to each fact (book title or website name).
- **One device per student:** each student uses a different source and adds facts to all the sheets.
- **Shared device:** assign rotating roles: device operator, reader, writer, and materials organizer. Rotate so every student does every job.

Task 2: Write paragraphs

1. Assign each student one category, for example "Haudenosaunee Homes" or "Seminole Food." If a group has fewer than nine students, combine two categories or let a strong writer take two.
2. Students put their facts in a logical order, then write one or more paragraphs with **a topic sentence, supporting details, and a conclusion**.
3. Students exchange paragraphs within the group for editing and proofreading.

Task 3: Type the paragraphs

Each student types his or her paragraphs.

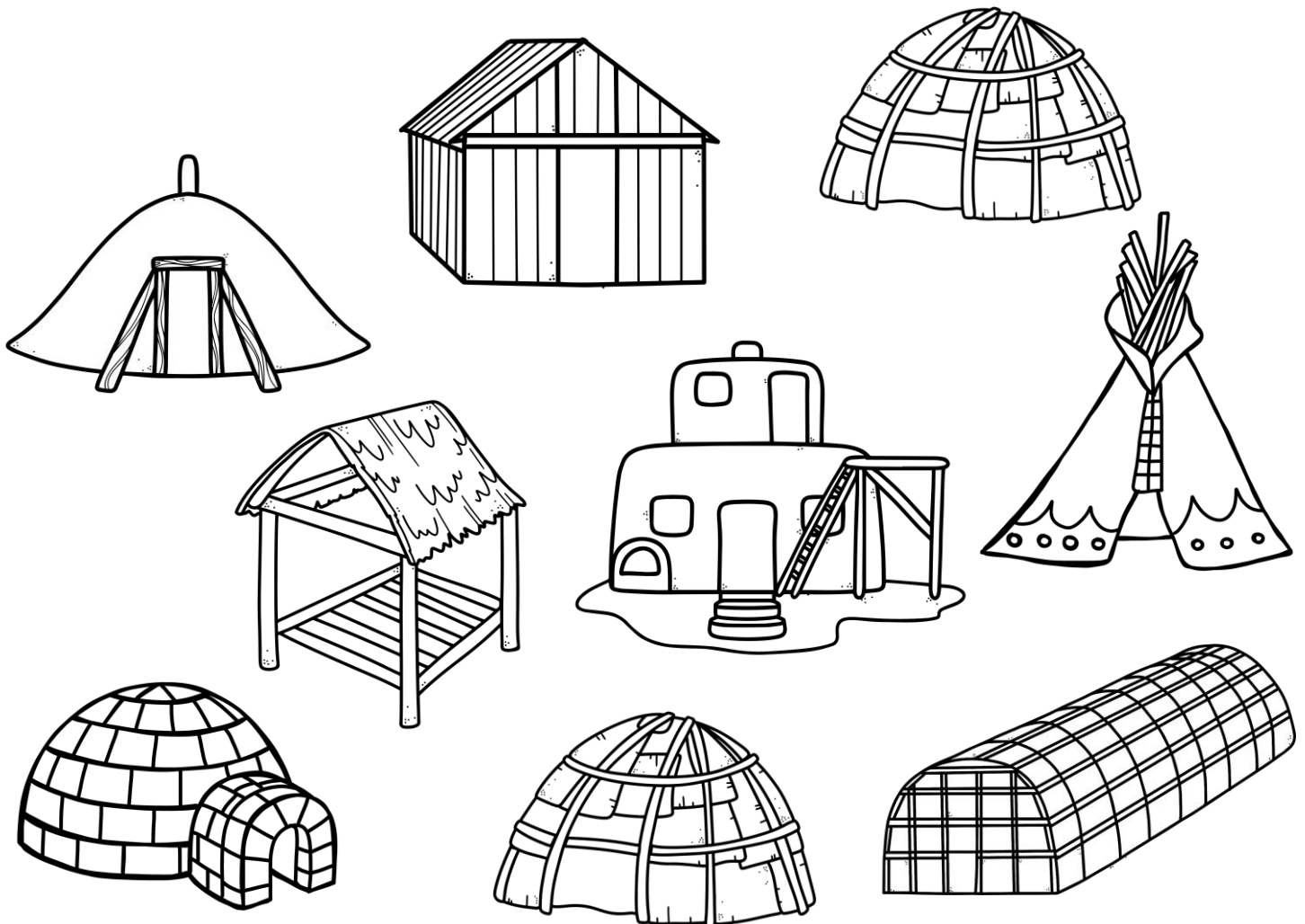
Task 4: Peer evaluation

1. For homework, each student rates every paragraph in the group using the **Paragraph Rating System** form. Copying the forms on the same colors as the fact sheets makes sorting easier.
2. Each writer reads the six to eight evaluations and revises. The teacher then rates the revised paragraph using the same form.

Task 5: Build a model of a traditional home

Each group builds a model of a home from its nation or region. For consistency, build them in cardboard trays (the kind soft drinks are delivered in), using natural materials such as dirt, sand, twigs, bark, and grass.

Add a **label card** that names the nation, the materials, and whether this kind of home is still built or used today. Several are. Taos Pueblo has been lived in for more than 1,000 years. Seminole and Miccosukee builders still build chickees in Florida. Many Navajo families still have a hogan, often used for ceremonies and family gatherings.



Task 6: Make a craft

Each student or small group makes one craft that represents the nation or region. Choose from the list below.

Good choices: everyday objects and art forms	Avoid: sacred or ceremonial items
• coil pots (Pueblo and other Southwest pottery) • weaving on a cardboard loom (Navajo) • paper patchwork designs (Seminole) • a parfleche made from paper-bag "hide," painted with geometric designs (Plains) • a birchbark-style container from brown paper (Great Lakes) • a soap carving of an animal (Inuit stone carving) • a model kayak, canoe, or travois • An original crest using Northwest Coast shapes (ovals and U-shapes). It should be the student's own design about his or her own family, not a copy of a real crest. • a traditional game to teach the class, such as a ring-and-pin game	• dreamcatchers • Kachina (katsina) dolls • masks of any kind • headdresses, war bonnets, or feathered headbands • totem poles (their carvings show crests that belong to specific families and clans) • sandpaintings • medicine bags, amulets, or pipes • drums and rattles (many nations consider these sacred) • eagle feathers (sacred, and protected by federal law)

Not sure? Ask whether the object is used in ceremonies or prayer. If it is, teach about it, but don't make it.

Task 7: Share a food

Students find a recipe for a food from their region and bring samples to share during the presentation. Good choices include dishes made with the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), wild rice, salmon, or blue corn. Check for food allergies before serving.

If students choose frybread, share its history. Many Navajo people trace it to 1864, when the U.S. government forced the Navajo to march to Bosque Redondo, New Mexico, and gave them rations of flour, lard, and sugar. Today frybread is both a beloved food and a reminder of hard times. *Fry Bread* by Kevin Noble Maillard (Seminole Nation, Oklahoma) is a good companion book.

Task 8: Demonstration (optional)

Teach this task alongside a science unit: plants, simple machines, food preservation, homes and climate, animals, or astronomy. Each group prepares a short demonstration for its presentation. See **Demonstration Ideas** for examples.

Task 9: Presentation

1. Each group presents its paragraphs, home model, crafts, food samples, and demonstration to the class.
2. **In place of costumes**, each student makes a **Museum Exhibit Card** for one topic. Clothing works especially well. The card includes a labeled drawing or photo, facts, a “then and now” comparison, and sources. The cards become the exhibits for the museum.
3. Encourage visuals: maps, photographs credited to their source, timelines, and diagrams.

Why not costumes? Dressing up as a member of another culture turns real people's clothing, some of it with religious meaning, into a costume. A labeled drawing teaches the same information more accurately and respectfully.

Why not artifacts? Skip objects such as arrowheads. Collecting artifacts from public land is illegal, and removing them separates them from their history.

Task 10: Evaluate the presentations

Each student rates every presentation with the **Presentation Rating Form**. The teacher uses the **Presentation Rubric**.

Culminating Project: Walk-Through Museum

- For the Full Unit, each student plans an exhibit for one of the nations studied, using his or her Exhibit Cards, models, and crafts.
- Set up the museum in the cafeteria, the gym, or a classroom. Invite families and other classes.
- Students serve as museum guides and explain their exhibits to visitors.
- A team of students photographs the exhibits (follow your school's photo-permission rules). Reports and photos can be shared on a class or school website.

More Ideas

- **Reading:** Teach the Native American reading unit, built around traditional stories by Native authors, during your reading block.
- **Museums:** Plan a field trip to a museum in your community, or take a virtual visit to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.
- **Guest speakers:** Contact a local tribal office, Native cultural center, or university Native American studies program. Offer an honorarium, and let your guest decide what to share. Don't ask for performances or ceremonies.
- **Native news today:** Read an article from a newspaper published by a Native nation, such as the *Cherokee Phoenix* or *The Seminole Tribune*.

Language Guide

Share this with students before they begin writing.

Instead of...	Try...
"the Indians" or "Native Americans" when you mean one nation	The nation's name: Seminole, Navajo (Diné), Haudenosaunee, Lakota
"Eskimo"	Inuit
"costume"	clothing, traditional dress, or regalia (for ceremonial clothing)
"brave," "papoose"	man, baby or child
"chief" for any leader	leader, or the nation's actual title for the position
"legend" or "myth"	traditional story
"Native Americans lived in teepees."	"Plains nations such as the Lakota lived in tipis."
"The tribe disappeared."	Most nations are still here. Check before writing that a nation is gone.

Many Native people use "American Indian," "Native American," or "Indian," and these words appear in laws and in the names of organizations. Still, the nation's own name is always the most accurate choice.

Resources

A full, current list of links for each nation is on the Teaching Materials page of the website. These are good places to start.

For teachers

- **Native Knowledge 360°** (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian). Lessons and background on Native histories and cultures.
americanindian.si.edu/nk360
- **American Indians in Children's Literature** (Dr. Debbie Reese, Nambé Pueblo). Reviews of children's books; check titles here before you use them.
americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com

Created by Native nations and organizations

- Seminole Tribe of Florida: semtribe.com
- Cherokee Nation: cherokee.gov
- Haudenosaunee Confederacy: haudenosauneeconfederacy.com

- Navajo Nation: navajo-nsn.gov
- Indian Pueblo Cultural Center (the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico): indianpueblo.org
- Sealaska Heritage Institute (Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian): sealaskaheritage.org
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami: itk.ca

Standards

Sample alignment with the Common Core State Standards (grade 4 shown). Adjust for your grade level and state.

- **W.4.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas clearly.
- **W.4.5** With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing by planning, revising, and editing.
- **W.4.7** Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- **W.4.8** Gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes, categorize information, and provide a list of sources.
- **SL.4.4** Report on a topic in an organized manner, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
- **Social studies:** Identify Native nations of North America, explain how geography and climate shaped their ways of life, and recognize that these nations continue today.

Assessment

1. **Paragraphs:** students rate each other's paragraphs with the Paragraph Rating System, revise, and then the teacher rates the paragraphs with the same form.
2. **Presentations:** students complete the Presentation Rating Form for each group; the teacher uses the Presentation Rubric.
3. **Unit test:** the Native American Unit Test, available on the Teaching Materials page.
4. **Growth:** in the Full Unit, compare each student's first-round and third-round paragraphs.