



## Manifest Destiny and the Power of Perspective

### Grade Level(s):

6 - 12

### Subject Area(s)

Language Arts - Reading and Writing, Civics, Geography, U.S. History

### Estimated Time

One to two 45-50 minute class periods

### Overview

Manifest Destiny was an extremely powerful idea in the 19th century United States. The essence of Manifest Destiny was that North America was intended by God to be populated and governed by Anglo-Saxon Americans. This meant that the spread of U.S. democracy and industry was part of the Divine plan. Of course, there were other people on the North American continent who disagreed with this notion. In this lesson, students will explore the idea of Manifest Destiny.

### Summary

Manifest Destiny represented the forward-looking outlook of a young expanding nation, the United States. However, some of the other inhabitants of North America (specifically, the Mexicans and the Indians) saw themselves and the world around them in very different terms. In this activity, students will examine the power of the different perspectives among the Americans, the Mexicans and the Indians. After exploring this topic through readings and video clips, students will write essays on Manifest Destiny from the perspective of the Mexicans and Indians.

### Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about an idea that was one of the driving forces of the young United States.
- Explore other ideas that were at the core of the Mexican and Indian cultures.
- Analyze some of the differences in the perspectives of these cultures.
- Apply their understanding of these different perspectives by writing an essay.

### Materials Needed

This activity can be completed using a computer lab where students can access the [video clips](#) and handouts themselves via "The U.S.-Mexican War" website. It can also be done by using one classroom computer with a projection device. In the second scenario, you will need to provide the students with the following handouts:

- [Power of Perspective worksheet](#)
- [Manifest Destiny: An Introduction](#)  
([http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/prelude/md\\_introduction.html](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_introduction.html))
- [Video Clips Library](#) ([http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video\\_library.html](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html))



### Video clips used:

- “Two nations’ identities: Looking forward and looking back”
- “Mexico in the shadow of its own history”
- “The American Indians: Protecting sacred land”
- “Manifest Destiny and American continental expansion”

### Procedure

Pre-viewing Activity: Introduce the idea of Manifest Destiny and explain a bit about its importance in the 19th century United States. Discuss with students the idea that a nation or a culture can have beliefs that help its people understand their worlds. Have the students brainstorm sets of beliefs that may be prevalent among modern-day nations and/or cultures.

Have the students read the following short article from the U.S.-Mexican War site, [Manifest Destiny: An Introduction](#). Ask the students to discuss some of the differences between the 19th century U.S. and Mexico as described in the article.

For additional background, you can reference the other [excellent articles on Manifest Destiny](#) on the 'U.S.-Mexican War' site.

Go over the questions on the [Power of Perspective worksheet](#) with students before they watch the video clips.

**Viewing Activity:** Tell students to go to “The U.S.-Mexican War” website to access the video clips “Two nations’ identities: Looking forward and looking back,” “Mexico in the shadow of its own history,” “The American Indians: Protecting sacred land,” “Manifest Destiny and American continental expansion” (or display the videos with a projection device in your classroom). Explain to students that the clips will give them some insights into the origin of the idea of Manifest Destiny, but that the clips will also help them better understand the perspectives of the Mexicans and the Indians who lived in North America in the 19th century. Have the students use the [Power of Perspective worksheet](#) to guide them through the videos. Have students make notes on the various questions on the worksheet in preparation for the upcoming group activity.

(Also, inform students there are a couple of names mentioned in the third clip that they may have not encountered yet. "Kearny" is Col. Stephen Kearny who led the U.S. Army of the West that marched across the western half of North America, claiming land for the United States. "Emory" is Lt. William Emory who led Kearny's search parties.)

**Post-viewing Activity:** After students have watched the videos, have them discuss their responses to what they have learned. Try to focus the conversation on the differences among the Americans, Mexicans and Indians in terms of how they looked at the world generally (and it's probably a good idea to remind the students that they are discussing generalities here). If the students have difficulty with the comparisons, simplify things a little for them: the Americans looked forward; the Mexicans looked to the past; the Indians looked to the land.



Ask the students to explore what these perspectives might have meant in terms of what these people valued and how they actually lived their lives.

Now that the students have a grasp of these differing perspectives, remind them again of the meaning of Manifest Destiny: it is the belief that North America was meant by God to be settled and governed by Anglo-Saxon Americans. Then have the students write a short one or two-page essay on Manifest Destiny from the perspective of either the 19th century Mexicans or Indians. Tell the students that the perspective from which they are writing should be made clear in their essays, meaning that they should incorporate what they have learned about the Mexican or Indian perspectives rather than simply treating Manifest Destiny from a generic outlook.

When the students are done writing, have them share their essays with the class; then have the students offer each other feedback on their work.

### Classroom Assessment

To assess the students' work, consider the following:

- Did the students show an understanding of the material about Manifest Destiny and the perspectives of the Mexicans and Indians (consider giving them a short quiz on the topics from the worksheet to find out)?
- Did the students present their ideas clearly in their essays?
- Did the students show their understanding of the Mexican or Indian perspective in their essay on Manifest Destiny?
- Did the students show their understanding of the material in the feedback they offered their classmates?

### Extensions and Applications

Have the students explore the relationship between American romanticism and Manifest Destiny by reading the following article on the U.S.-Mexican War site: [A Go-Ahead Nation](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_go-ahead_nation.html) ([http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/prelude/md\\_go-ahead\\_nation.html](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_go-ahead_nation.html))

Have students examine this connection in the literature of the time, for instance in the "Leatherstocking" novels of James Fenimore Cooper.

Another possibility would be to look at the original article by journalist John C. O'Sullivan, in which the term "Manifest Destiny" was first coined: <http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/HIS/f01/HIS202-01/Documents/OSullivan.html>. This article, written in the language of the time, may be challenging for many students, so you might consider reading it (or parts of it) in class as a group activity.

**For younger students:** This activity can also be adapted for younger students. Rather than having the students write essays, have them spend more time actually writing out answers to the questions on the worksheet. Then explore the three historical perspectives in a classroom discussion as you review the students' answers. Use the simplified concrete examples cited above: the Americans looked forward; the Mexicans looked to the past; the Indians looked to the land.



## LESSON PLANS

### National Standards

McRel K-12 Standards Addressed:

#### Language Arts

- Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
- Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.
- Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
- Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

#### Civics

- Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government.
- Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.
- Standard 25: Understands issues regarding personal, political and economic rights.

#### Geography

- Standard 6: Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.
- Standard 9: Understands the nature, distribution and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.
- Standard 12: Understands the patterns of human settlement and their causes.
- Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface.

#### U.S. History

- Standard 9: Understands the United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.
- Standard 11: Understands the extension, restriction and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.

### Online Resources

Below are the links for sites referenced in this activity:

- The U.S.-Mexican War (1846 - 1848)  
<http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/>
- O'Sullivan's article which first used the term "Manifest Destiny"  
<http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/HIS/f01/HIS202-01/Documents/OSullivan.html>



## Power of Perspective Worksheet

Use this worksheet to focus your learning as you watch the video clips. Make notes on each question as you watch. You will use these notes in the upcoming classroom activity. (And of course, the questions are meant to be answered in a general way; for example, not all 19th century Americans valued exactly the same things, but there was something of a consensus generally.)

1. What are some of the major components of the idea of Manifest Destiny?
2. What did the 19th century Americans value? Where did they look for their national identity?
3. How would you describe the Mexican perspective described in the clips? What did the Mexicans most value? Where did they look for their national identity?
4. What was the Indian perspective? What did the Indians value? Where did they look for their national identity as a people?
5. Think about ways that these different perspectives may have contributed to conflicts among these peoples.