

NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION FOR ALL RESOURCES

Partnership of IllumiNative and the National Indian Education Association



ILLUMINATIVE



Grade Level

6-8

Subject

Social Studies

Lesson Title

The Cultural Significance of Naming

Activity Description: This activity explores the Native American tradition of naming a person and the cultural meaning behind sacred names. This activity features an example from a historic Lakota Sioux chief, a Navajo elder, and a well-known Mexican American writer. After exploring the significance of naming, the activity encourages young people to write a reflection or acrostic poem of their own name.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- WiFi access (recommended)
- Paper and pen/pencil
- YouTube video [“How Navajo People Get their 'Indian Names”](#)
- Digital or hard copy version of [A Boy Called Slow by Joseph Bruchac](#) (can be purchased online as well)
- Digital or printed copy of [“My Name” an excerpt by Sandra Cisneros](#)
- Digital or printed copy of the [Acrostic Poem activity sheet](#)

STEPS

Traditionally a person born into a tribe would receive a sacred name that could be based on their characteristics, future expectations, abilities, or other things that their parents or elders recognize. This was to help guide a person as they grow, and sometimes these names would change as they matured. Explore the sources below to learn more about naming and then write a reflection of your own name(s).

Activity Steps:

1. Listen to Navajo historian Wally Brown discuss [“How Navajo People Get their 'Indian Names”](#) on YouTube
2. Listen to a YouTube reading of [A Boy Called Slow by Joseph Bruchac](#)
3. After listening to both of those presentations, think about the deep tribal significance of a sacred name. Do you have a sacred name? If not, what do you think your family would name you?
4. Next, read the [short excerpt “My Name”](#) from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
 - a. How does the narrator feel about her name? How does each paragraph explain a characteristic of her name?
 - b. Think about your own name such as your given name, scared name or nickname. What does it mean to you? How do you feel about it?

Writing Activity:

To write your own reflection use Sandra Cisneros’ “My Name” as a model and, follow these steps:

1. Write one paragraph about your name’s meaning and/or definition. You can ask your family for their thoughts.
2. Write one paragraph about the color your name represents or symbolizes.
3. Write one paragraph about how your name sounds to you or others.
4. Write one paragraph about why you want to keep your name, or if you would change it, what your new name would be and why.

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HELPFUL TIPS

Parents and caregivers: During this activity, your child may ask the meaning of his or her own name or the names of other family members. Sometimes this may include nicknames as well. Encourage your child to discuss the importance of naming a person and the pride that a person carries with that name. This activity encourages young people to write a short reflection on their own name, but if that is challenging, encourage your child to try an acrostic poem using his or her name instead. This [activity page Acrostic Poems](#) from explains how to write an acrostic.

If no WiFi is available, here are the basic steps for writing an acrostic poem.

1. Think about the things that make you who you are (emotions, culture, appearance, talents, dreams, etc.)
2. Vertically write the letters of your name on a page with one letter on each line.
3. Starting with the letter on each line write a phrase, sentence, or description about yourself.
4. If desired, add color or illustrations to your acrostic poem.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Families and educators: The significance of naming is a value across many cultures, and a person's name can have great meaning, especially sacred names. Many people today even have nicknames given them by friends and family that are significant. For more examples of cultural naming, visit these links below:

- To learn more about Sitting Bull, [read this article "10 Things You May Not Know About Sitting Bull."](#)
- To learn about the Lakota naming of NBA star Kyrie Irving, read ["Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Welcomes Brother and Sister Back Home"](#)

Activity Resources:

- "How Navajo People Get their 'Indian Names'" YouTube video by Navajo Traditional Teachings https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvPAXWyW_kj
- Listen to a reading of *A Boy Called Slow* by Joseph Bruchac https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Zltz8ZdSmU
- "My Name" excerpt by Sandra Cisneros from *The House on Mango Street* <http://www.napavalley.edu/people/LYanover/Documents/English%2085/English%2085%20My%20Name%20by%20Sandra%20Cisneros.pdf>

Additional Resources:

- "Acrostic Poems" activity page by the Nashimy School District <https://www.neshaminy.org/cms/lib6/PA01000466/Centricity/Domain/439/Early%20Man%204%20-%20HANDOUT%20CNN%20Acrostic%20Directions.pdf>
- "10 Things You May Not Know About Sitting Bull" by Evan Andrews on *History* <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-sitting-bull>
- "Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Welcomes Brother and Sister Back Home" on *Indianz.com* <https://www.indianz.com/News/2018/08/23/standing-rock-sioux-tribe-welcomes-broth.asp>