

Activity 1A: Beginning Your Investigation



Sequence

1A.1:
Asking Questions

Students are introduced to the concept of history as inquiry and analyze a historical podcast about a place. They are introduced to the unit and the unit project—writing the script for a podcast about a place in their community.

1A.2:
A Place in Your Community

Students model the process of historical inquiry by formulating questions based on their observations of places in several photographs. Students consider locations in their own community that would be interesting to research and form pairs to choose the place that will be the subject of their unit projects.

Understandings

- Historians follow a process of investigation that begins with asking questions and thinking about sources for answers.
- Every community has a history that has connections with larger periods and themes in American history.



Materials Needed

- **Handout 1: Journal Assignments**
- **Handout 2: Unit Overview**
- **Assessment Checklist: Historical Podcast**
- **Handout 3: Places**
- Optional: Historical artifacts from your community, such as farm implements, tools, vintage clothing or furniture, or old signage or architectural debris
- **Handout 4: Choosing a Place**
- Slide show or handout presenting local places
- Note cards

1A.1: Asking Questions

1. Introduce history as a process of asking questions.

Display the word *history*, and beneath it the word *historía*. Explain that the origin of the word *history* is the Greek *historía*, which means “inquiry, or learning or knowing by inquiry.”

Call on a volunteer to give a synonym for *inquire*.

Suggest to students that the study of history is essentially learning by asking questions.

Tell students that they are beginning a unit on conducting historical research, or “learning by asking questions.” Explain that, for the unit project, they will work in pairs to choose a place in their community to research and then create a script for an audio podcast. The first step is to think about the kinds of questions historians ask when they conduct similar investigations.

Note: If necessary, explain that a podcast is an audio or video media file that can be downloaded from a Web site. Podcasts are often parts of series. Ask students to mention some podcasts they have listened to.

2. Have students analyze a podcast about a place.

Tell students you are going to play a podcast about a place. Distribute **Handout 1: Journal Assignments**. Have students read over Journal 1. Tell them to listen carefully as you play the podcast, and then answer the first set of questions. When they have finished, ask:

- What did you learn about this place from the podcast?
- What questions might the historian have asked in order to discover this information?

Based on student responses, start a list of Questions Historians Ask About Places. Keep this list posted prominently in the classroom, and tell students they will add to it throughout the unit.

Play the podcast again and have students answer the second two questions:

- Did you find the podcast interesting? What did you like about it? What didn't you like?
- What would have made the podcast more interesting? What other questions could the historian have asked?

Discuss student responses. Help students reword any additional questions to apply more generically to all places. Then add these questions to the displayed list.

Teacher's Notes: Possible Answers for Union Station Podcast

What did you learn about this place from the podcast?

The podcast describes Union Station in Los Angeles as the last great railroad station built in America. The station was built in 1939, designed by the architects John and Donald Parkinson, in a style that combines Spanish Colonial revival and Art Deco styles.

It presents details of what the station looks like (representing Southern California with Spanish tiles, rounded arches, terra cotta, and inlaid marble floors) and compares it to other railroad stations in other cities. It also mentions the unique feature that the station walls are made of sound absorbing oak, so there is no echo.

The podcast compares the station's past, when it had long-distance trains with names like Superchief, the Sunset Limited, and El Capitan, with the present, when it is home to modern lines such as Amtrak and Metrolink, as well as buses and subways.

What questions might the historian have asked in order to discover this information?

- What does this place look like, and what are its special features?
- Why was it built, and what was it (or is it) used for?
- When was it built and by whom?
- What is its significance to the city?
- What connections does it have to events, periods, or movements in American History?

Did you find the podcast interesting? What did you like about it? What didn't you like?

Answers will vary greatly. Some students might find the information interesting or like the upbeat narration and sound effects, including the "All aboard" of a train conductor and the train whistles. They might appreciate the inclusion of the perspective of Linda Dishman, executive director of the Los Angeles Conservancy, with a long quotation that begins: "They wanted people to get off the train and know after their long journey from Chicago that they had truly come to the promised land of Southern California."

Some students might find the podcast boring because it only presents the positive side of the place and doesn't include stories of people who actually use it.

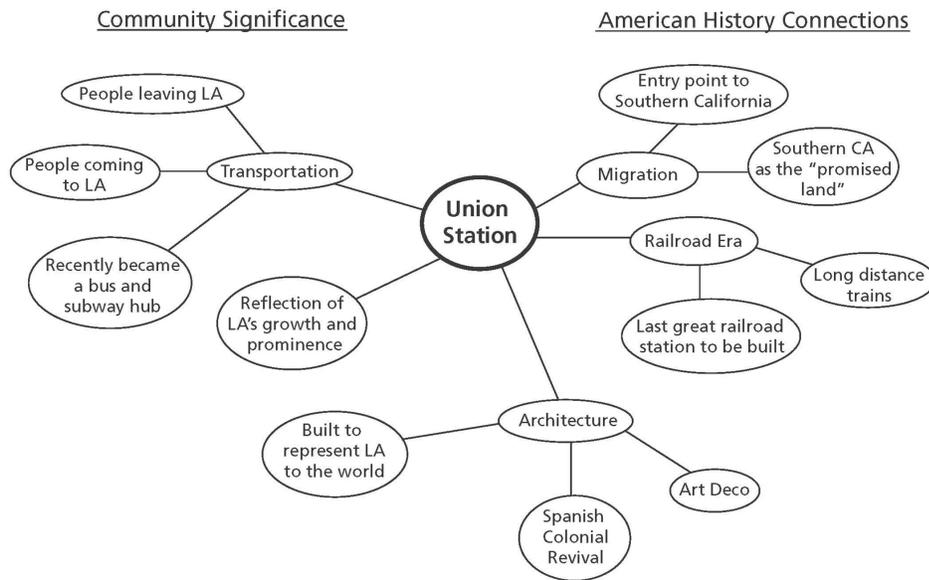
What would have made the podcast more interesting? What other questions could the historian have asked?

Anecdotes or personal stories about Union Station would have made the podcast more interesting, including quotations from people who used the station, rode the trains, or remembered it from an earlier time. Other possible questions include:

- Who used the trains in the past and who uses them today? What are their stories?
- Are there any surprising or funny stories associated with the station?
- Is there anything mysterious or controversial about the construction of the station or its use?
- What was on the station site before it was built?
- Have there been any great changes to the station since it was built?

3. Create a concept map that highlights the place’s local significance and connections to historic periods or themes.

Have students think about how the place in the podcast is important in its community and how it connects to broader periods or themes in American history. Begin a concept map like the one shown here.



Connections to themes and events in community and American history.

Use questions such as the following to elicit student responses:

- Why was this place created? What is its significance to the people who live nearby?
- What are some connections between this place and events, periods, or movements in American history?

As necessary, prompt students with additional questions such as:

- Can you tell from the story what was happening in the country at the time the place was built?
- Were people settling the area or migrating here from elsewhere?
- Was it associated with a new era or industry?
- Did the place undergo any changes that paralleled changes happening in the country?

Display the completed concept map with all of the connections students identified as well as any you might add. Tell students that they will create a similar concept map when they research the subject of their podcasts.

Note: If you are teaching this unit at the year's beginning, students may not yet know much about American history. Encourage them to make educated guesses as a real historian might, which they could follow up with research.

Teacher's Notes: Listening to Podcasts

Facilitate students listening to additional historical podcasts throughout the unit, either individually or as a class, to expose them to a variety of examples. If time permits, play and analyze a second podcast now that takes a very different approach. The Erie Canal story from an episode of *This American Life* is an example of a place's history made into a song. The *Bowery Boys* series presents longer podcasts (30 minutes) that are informal and funny, and often reveal a more controversial history. See *Media & Resources* for links to these podcasts and for suggestions for many other examples of historical podcasts and media projects.

4. Introduce the unit and the unit project.

Tell students that they will create a script for a podcast that has many of the features of the story they just listened to, focusing on the local significance of a place and its connections to periods or themes in American history.

Distribute **Handout 2: Unit Overview and Assessment Checklist: Historical Podcast**. Answer any questions students may have. Tell them they will follow the steps presented in the table under Unit Project Description to complete an audio story script.

Point out the two questions under the Unit Project Description. Tell students that these questions will provide the thematic framework for their research. Add the questions to the list Questions Historians Ask About Places. Explain that the Assessment Checklist includes the criteria they will need to address in the podcast.

Note: Adapt or expand the Assessment Checklist, as you see fit, to allow for more in-depth communication with students on each criterion.

Point out the vocabulary list and tell students they can refer to it as new words are introduced throughout the unit.

Teacher's Notes: Scheduling Project Tasks

You may wish to present the complete schedule of due dates in advance, so that student pairs can fill in the first columns of their charts when they receive their Unit Overviews. Encourage pairs to track their progress by filling in completion dates as they finish each task.



Handout 1: Journal Assignments

Journal 1

Listen to the podcast, then answer the first set of questions below:

- What did you learn about this place from the podcast?
- What questions might the historian have asked in order to discover this information?

Listen to the podcast again. Then answer the second set of questions.

- Did you find the podcast interesting? What did you like about it? What didn't you like?
- What would have made the podcast more interesting? What other questions could the historian have asked?

Journal 2

Observe your location. Write two or three paragraphs describing what you see, hear, or absorb through other senses. Use the following questions to guide you. (Keep in mind that some of the questions may not pertain to your location.)

- What is your place like? Are there buildings? A lawn? Gardens? A vacant lot? Describe the setting in terms of appearance, sounds, smells, or other senses.
- What size, shape, and color are the structures at your location?
- What materials are they made of?
- What special features does your location have? Describe them.
- Are there any hints as to the age of the place? If so, when would you guess it was built?
- Who uses your location and/or who used to use it?
- Do any structures look original, or do you think they have been renovated or rebuilt? How can you tell?
- Is there anything at the site that gives more information? What did you learn?
- Did anything at your location point to other sources of information or potential interviewees? If so, what are they?
- What other questions came to mind through your observations?

If you think it would be helpful, sketch your impressions of the place and its features or take photographs to help you remember the details of what you observed.





Journal 3

Now that you have begun to explore your source materials and answer some of your research questions, it will be helpful to refocus on the project's overarching questions. Review how much you have found out about the significance of your place to your community and its connections to American history by creating a concept map similar to the one you created as a class for the example podcast.

Write the name of your place in the center of a journal page. On the top of the page on the left-hand side, write "Community Significance." On the top right of the page, write "American History Connections." Fill in the concept map with all of the information you have discovered so far under those two categories.

Use the following questions to help you think about connections with American history:

- What was happening in the country at the time your place was created or was in its most important period?
- Were people settling the area or migrating here from elsewhere?
- Was your place associated with a new era, industry, or government policy?
- Did your place undergo any changes that paralleled changes happening in the country at the same time?

When you have finished your concept map, meet with your partner. Compare maps and combine information. Discuss how well the two of you together have answered the questions about your place's local significance and connections with American history. Identify where there are still gaps in information. These gaps are some of the areas where you should focus your remaining research.

Journal 4

Divide your page into four sections and label each as shown. Reflect on the work you have done in this unit by responding to each prompt using specific examples and details.

What I found most interesting or surprising about my site is . . .	The parts of the research process I enjoyed most were . . .
The most challenging thing about this project, and what made it challenging was . . .	The most useful thing I learned about doing research is . . .





Handout 2: Unit Overview

Podcasting the Past

What is your community's place in history? Have your family members or the families of your friends been here for generations, or is your city or town characterized by immigration and movement? Are your streets and neighborhoods relatively new, or have they been here for decades and seen many changes? Who were the people who built your town, and what is their legacy?

History is not just one story, but many different stories woven together, each person and place presenting a unique perspective. In this unit, you will act as historians in your own community, learning to ask questions, track down the answers, and make sense of your findings in the context of American history.

Audio tours are becoming popular for introducing tourists to the history of an area. For your project, you will work with a partner to write a script for a podcast of a local place. Then you and your classmates will combine your podcasts into a virtual tour for newcomers to get to know your community! As you discover history close to home, the connections you find to larger historical themes will bring a relevance to your studies throughout the year.

Here are some of the questions you'll explore in this unit:

- *What makes a place historical?*
- *From what viewpoint is history written?*
- *What methods do historians use in conducting and documenting research?*

What You Will Do in This Unit

Learn how questions launch a historical investigation. Study photographs and other artifacts and consider the questions they raise.

Delve into local historical records. Discover the secrets of a local place. Where do you look for information and who can help you?

Interview fascinating people. Talk to people with first-hand knowledge of your place, or those who know your community's history.

Write a script for a podcast about a place in your community. Bring together your research to tell the story of a favorite place.





Unit Project Description: Creating a Historical Podcast Script

For the unit project, you will work with a partner to develop a 3- to 5-minute script for an audio podcast about the history of a place in your community. Your script will address two primary questions:

1. How is the place you have chosen significant to your community?
2. How does the history of your place connect to broader events, movements, or periods in American history?

In creating your scripts, you and your partner will complete the tasks in the table below. Work with your teacher to determine due dates for each task and use the table to keep track of your progress.

Date Due	Task description	Date Completed
	Choose a place as the basis for your project.	
	Generate questions about your place.	
	Develop a list of primary and secondary sources and potential interview subjects to answer your questions.	
	Conduct and document your research.	
	Gather information from people with different perspectives about your place.	
	Outline the ideas for your podcast.	
	Write and revise a script.	
	Present your final project and reflect on your work.	



Vocabulary Used in This Unit

Archive: A place in which public records or historical documents are preserved.

Artifact: An object remaining from a particular time period or event. Examples of artifacts include the tools, implements, and clothing used by a group of people in a particular time.

Bibliography: A list of works used by a researcher in conducting an investigation or an author in creating a book, or a list of materials on a related subject.

Evidence: Information that supports ideas or conclusions or serves as proof of a theory or argument.

Oral history: Spoken memories or personal recollections of historical significance, usually obtained through recorded interviews.

Plagiarism: The act of using someone else's words, work, or ideas without giving them credit, or presenting as new and original an idea taken from an existing source.

Podcast: Multimedia files, usually in the form of a recording, distributed over the Internet to be downloaded or played back.

Primary sources: Primary sources are original materials from a time period or event, which have not been compiled or interpreted. Examples of primary sources include letters, diaries, newspaper articles, original objects or artifacts from a place or time, photographs, and live video recordings.

Secondary sources: Secondary sources are compilations or interpretations of primary sources and are written after the fact. Examples of secondary sources include textbooks, journal articles, Web sites, and biographies. Historians often use secondary sources for an overview of a topic and to find references to primary sources or people to interview.

Site: The position or physical location of something, or the area or plot of ground on which a building or other structure is, has been, or will be located.





Assessment Checklist: Historical Podcast

Use this assessment to help you develop the script for your historical podcast. Make sure to include all the requirements. Your teacher will use this assessment to evaluate your work.

Requirements	Percentage of Total Grade	Comments	
Historical Podcast		Student Comments	Teacher Comments
Sources. Uses documented information and evidence from at least 2 secondary and 2 primary sources, in addition to direct observation of the location.	20%		
Perspectives. Includes at least two different perspectives, taken from interviews, oral histories, or other sources.	20%		
Community Significance. Offers detailed information about how the place is significant to the community.	25%		
American History Connections. Shows clear connections between the place and events, movements, or periods in American history.	20%		
Structure. Has an engaging beginning, an informative middle, and a satisfying ending.	15%		
Total	100%		

