

Grade Seven – World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times

- *How did the distant regions of the world become more interconnected through medieval and early modern times?*
- *How did the environment and technological innovations affect the expansion of agriculture, cities, and human population? What impact did human expansion have on the environment?*
- *Why did many states and empires gain more power over people and territories over the course of medieval and early modern times?*
- *How did major religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism) and cultural systems (Confucianism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment) develop and change over time? How did they spread to multiple cultures?*

The medieval and early modern periods provide students with opportunities to study the rise and fall of empires, the diffusion of religions and languages, and significant movements of people, ideas, and products. Over this period, the regions of the world became more and more interconnected. Although societies were quite distinct from each other, there were more exchanges of people, products, and ideas in every century. For this reason, world history in this period can be a bewildering catalog of names, places, and events that impacted individual societies, while the larger patterns that affected the world are lost. To avoid this, the focus must be on questions that get at the larger world geographical, historical, economic, and civic patterns. To answer these questions, students study content-rich examples and case studies, rather than surveying all places, names, and events superficially. Students approach history not only as a body of content (such as events, people, ideas, or historical accounts) to be encountered or mastered, but as an investigative discipline. They analyze evidence from written and visual primary sources, supplemented by secondary sources, to form historical interpretations. Both in writing and speaking, they cite evidence from textual sources to support their arguments.

The thematic questions listed above relate to the following major changes that took place during medieval and early modern times:

- *Long-term growth, despite some temporary dips, in the world's population, beyond any level reached in ancient times. A great increase in agricultural and city-dwelling populations in the world compared to hunters and gatherers, whose numbers steadily declined.*
- *Technological advances that gave humans power to produce greater amounts of food and manufactured items, allowing global population to keep rising.*

- *An increase in the interconnection and encounters between distant regions of the world. Expansion of long-distance sea-going trade, as well as commercial, technological, and cultural exchanges. By the first millennium BCE, these networks spanned most of Afroeurasia (the huge interconnected landmass that includes Africa, Europe, and Asia). In the Americas, the largest networks were in Mesoamerica and the Andes region of South America. After 1500 CE, a global network of intercommunication emerged.*
- *The rise of more numerous and powerful kingdoms and empires, especially after 1450 CE, when gunpowder weapons became available to rulers.*
- *Increasing human impact on the natural and physical environment, including the diffusion of plants, animals, and microorganisms to parts of the world where they had previously been unknown.*

One of the great historical projects of the last few decades has been to shift from teaching Western Civilization, a narrative that put Western Europe at the center of world events in this period, to teaching world history. Decentering Europe is a complicated process, because themes, periods, narratives, and terminology of historical study was originally built around Europe. For example, the terms “medieval” and “early modern” were invented to divide European history into eras. Neither of the meanings of “medieval” – “middle” or “backward and primitive” – are useful for periodizing world history, or the histories of China, India, Southeast Asia, or Mesoamerica. Students can analyze the term “medieval” to uncover its Renaissance and Eurocentric biases, as a good introduction to the concept of history as an interpretative discipline in which historians investigate primary and secondary sources, and make interpretations based on evidence.

Themes and large questions offer cohesion to the world history course, but students also need to investigate sources in depth. For this, a useful concept is the site of encounter, a place where people from different cultures meet and exchange products, ideas, and technologies. A site of encounter is a specific place, such as Sicily, Quanzhou, or Tenochtitlán/Mexico City, and students analyze concrete objects, such as a porcelain vase or the image of a saint, exchanged or made at the site. As students investigate the exchanges that took place and the interactions of merchants, bureaucrats, soldiers, and artisans at the site, they learn to consider not only what was happening in one culture but also how cultures influenced each other. They also gain fluency in world geography through maps.

Although this framework covers the existing seventh grade content standards, it reorganizes the units. Each of the new units has investigative focus questions to guide instruction and concrete examples and case studies for in-depth analysis.