

PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Organize Instruction Around a Guiding Question

What is it?

This is a unit-level strategy to organize instruction that will guide students' thinking throughout a social studies unit. Teachers plan instruction and select reading materials to address content standards. Social studies texts are often conceptually dense and students often struggle to identify key ideas necessary for identifying and building arguments, an important disciplinary literacy skill. Establishing a guiding question to drive the unit does more than organize content; it sets up a clear purpose for reading, builds a coherent thematic throughline, and gives students an authentic reason to continually refine their understanding through reading and other disciplinary tasks. High-quality guiding questions present a debatable topic, with multiple perspectives on how to answer it. A guiding question draws students to use disciplinary skills, like sourcing evidence and constructing arguments and counterarguments.

How do I use this in my classroom?

1. Examine the unit objectives, lessons and materials to identify an overarching, unit-level issue that will be the focus of the question.
2. Create a guiding question that will serve as a unifying thread that runs through the unit. The question should be open-ended, with no clear right or wrong answer. Throughout the unit, plan to return to the question daily and create opportunities for students to discuss the question.
3. In lessons throughout the unit, create peer discussion opportunities for students to purposefully examine text evidence related to answering the question.
4. Build peer discussion prompts throughout the unit that require students to build on previous discussions, examine multiple perspectives on the guiding question, and build arguments and counterarguments.
5. At the culmination of the unit, prepare a writing prompt for students to answer individually or within their peer group to guide them in answering the question using multiple perspectives to build a

cohesive argument. A suggested practice is to organize a class-wide debate for students to take sides in orally answering the question as a pre-writing activity.

Curriculum Example:

from Pompeii

In this unit on the ancient city of Pompeii and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, students are first introduced to the overarching unit-level question, “Was it irresponsible of the people of Pompeii to live next to Mt. Vesuvius or were they victims of an unexpected disaster?” Notice that in the first lesson, students are introduced to the question as they build background knowledge about volcanoes and the ancient Roman Empire. In subsequent lessons, they read about a group of friends who are discussing Pompeii and identify their perspectives on the topic. Later, they read more deeply about the civilization of Pompeii and the volcanic eruption before moving on to discussing, debating, and writing about the guiding question.

Unit Introduction (15 minutes)



Whole Class Activity

Materials: [InstaPompeii](#) and [Map](#)

Discuss Prior Knowledge

💬 What do you know about volcanoes? What do you know about the country of Italy today? Why might people live in dangerous places, like Pompeii, right next to an active volcano?

Introduce Topic

💬 In this unit, you'll learn about the beginning of the Roman Empire, which lasted for over 1,000 years. Much of what made the Roman Empire so successful had to do with geography. One question we will discuss this week is: Was it **irresponsible** of the people of Pompeii to live next to Mt. Vesuvius or were they victims of an unexpected disaster? Think about **compelling**, or convincing, **arguments** for living in certain places. Does it ever make sense to live in a dangerous place? Even next to a volcano?

Introduce Springboard

Introduce the InstaPompeii page and the Map of Present-day Italy. Provide a purpose for viewing InstaPompeii by having students discuss what they see and think with a partner or with their squad. Next, students should write their responses. Make it clear that there are no wrong answers here, these are questions to get them thinking about the unit topics:

💬 InstaPompeii is a collection of posts from people who have visited modern day Italy and Pompeii. It will help you prepare to learn more about the ancient Roman Empire because many tourists take pictures of Pompeii and ancient Roman structures as they look today. Notice what you see about the land and climate in Pompeii. It will help you to think about what life might have been like for people who lived there many years ago. As you look at the images and what people wrote about their visit to Pompeii, think about two things:

1. What do you think the ancient city of Pompeii looked like before it was buried in ash?
2. How do you think people in ancient Pompeii might have made a living?

Session Introduction (15 minutes)



Whole Class Activity and Partner Work

Feedback Based on Class Check from Session 1

See instructions above.

State Purpose for the Session

Remind students that throughout the unit we will prepare for an essay and debate where they will answer the unit question.

💬 In preparation for the upcoming debate, we will be practicing skills that are applied by real historians when debating a topic. Historians prepare for both sides of an argument. They try to understand what other people think or why they would act a certain way.

💬 Turn to your partner and tell them what the unit question is.

Discuss Prior Knowledge

Activate students' background knowledge by reviewing what they learned from the InstaPompeii and remind students that throughout the they we will be preparing for a debate on whether it was **irresponsible** for the people of Pompeii to live near a volcano and an essay on whether it is **irresponsible** for people today to live in areas prone to natural disasters.

Students will use the Reader's Theater script, "Shaken by Studying Pompeii" to identify characters' perspectives on the central debate question.

💬 In preparation for the debate, we will be practicing skills that are applied by real historians when debating a topic. One thing that historians do is they study different perspectives by putting themselves in another person's shoes in order to try to understand why a person thinks and acts a certain way, whether one agrees with that person or not. It's part of evaluating knowledge and being open to different points of view.

Pompeii: An Irresponsible Decision or an Unexpected Disaster?
→ Session 2

Two Different Claims

→ Was it irresponsible of the people of Pompeii to live next to Mt. Vesuvius?

☐ **Claim 1:**
The people of Pompeii were being **irresponsible** when they decided to live next to Mt. Vesuvius.

☐ **Claim 2:**
The people of Pompeii were not being **irresponsible** when they decided to live next to Mt. Vesuvius.

Identify which claim each character supports and tell why:

Max would support

☐ Claim 1
 ☐ Claim 2

Why? Use evidence from the Reader's Theater.

Natalia would support

☐ Claim 1
 ☐ Claim 2

Why? Use evidence from the Reader's Theater.

Brittany would support

☐ Claim 1
 ☐ Claim 2

Why? Use evidence from the Reader's Theater.

Andre would support

☐ Claim 1
 ☐ Claim 2

Why? Use evidence from the Reader's Theater.

Pompeii: An Irresponsible Decision or an Unexpected Disaster?
→ Session 3

Respond to the question below in your **THOUGHTS**.

Evidence that living in Pompeii was irresponsible	Evidence that living in Pompeii was not irresponsible
Fact #1:	Fact #1:
Fact #2:	Fact #2:
Fact #3:	Fact #3:

Why are Guiding Questions Effective?

Research supports the use of guiding questions to improve students' engagement and overall comprehension of academic text.

- Research supports the use of peer discourse in developing academic language and understanding of argumentation to support, both of which are central to disciplinary literacy in social studies. Organizing peer discussion around a guiding question can also improve students' text comprehension and acquisition of content knowledge (Duhaylongsod, et al, 2015; Vaughn, et al., 2017).
- Social studies text activities guided by a central question set up a problem or dilemma. Students read with purpose to find text evidence in search of solutions. (Vaughn, et al., 2015; Vaughn & Wanzek, 2024).
- By creating a guiding question tied to the unit goal, the unit becomes a quest to answer the question or resolve a dilemma. In this way, students practice disciplinary literacy skills as they select and evaluate evidence, build arguments, and examine multiple perspectives. (Lesaux, et al., 2010).

References:

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