

This classroom activity introduces students to the context of the performance task. This ensures that students are not disadvantaged in completing the skills the task intends to assess. Contextual elements include understanding the situation of the task, potentially unfamiliar concepts associated with the situation or setting, and key terms or vocabulary students will need to understand in order to engage with the performance task. This classroom activity is also intended to interest the students in the task they are to complete. This activity should be easy to implement and contains clear instructions.

Please read through the entire classroom activity before beginning the activity with students. This will ensure that all classroom preparation is completed before the activity begins.

Resources Needed:

- Chart paper, whiteboard, or chalkboard
- Markers or chalk
- Pencils
- Blank paper

Learning Goals:

- Students will understand what the Middle Ages were
- Students will be able to describe characteristics of life within the Middle Ages
- Students will understand the key terms:
 - **Narrative:** a story that tells a written account of events that are connected
 - **Short story:** a narrative that is shorter than a full book or novel
 - **Setting:** a place where the events in a story happen
 - **Fiction:** a story that is made up and that is about imaginary people and events
 - **Nonfiction:** a story that is about real people, places, and events
 - **Middle Ages:** the period of time between approximately 500 and 1500 C.E.; also called the Medieval Era
 - **Medieval:** pertaining to the Middle Ages

Definitions are provided here for the convenience of facilitators. Students are expected to understand these key terms as they arise in the context of the task, not to be able to recite the definitions.

[**Purpose:** The facilitator's goal is to give students an introduction to the Middle Ages and their characteristics.]

[Note: The following classroom activity can be modified to accommodate various teacher-student interaction types such as a teacher-led discussion with the entire class, teacher-student discussion for remote locations with a single student, or small groups.]

[Divide students into small groups of 3-4. Hand out a piece of paper to each group.]

Facilitator says: "Today, we will get ready for the Medieval Life Performance Task. You will gain an understanding of the Medieval Era that will help you write a story set in this era."

Facilitator says: "This period of time is difficult to define because it was so long. The Middle Ages began around the year 500, which was when the Roman Empire finally fell once and for all. It ended around 1500, which was when the Renaissance began. What do you think life was like in the Middle Ages?"

[Allow students to give their answers.]

Facilitator says: "It is true that many people call this period in time the Dark Ages. The Roman Empire was a time of great growth and knowledge. The Renaissance, which came after the Middle Ages, gets its name from the French word for 'rebirth.' This is because a new interest in learning developed that had not been seen since the Roman Empire. However, it is not fair to say that nothing good at all happened during the Middle Ages."

Facilitator asks: "Your group has received one piece of paper. On your paper, brainstorm a list of everything that you think of when you think of the Middle Ages. Think about how people lived, where they lived, what kind of government they had—anything that comes to mind."

[After 3-5 minutes, have the students meet as a class to share their list of ideas.]

Facilitator says: "Now, each group will choose one representative to come before the class and give a brief description of the list their group has made."

[List each response on the board.]

Possible student responses (*unscripted*):

- knights; chivalry; jousting
- castles and manors; walled cities
- feudalism; peasants, serfs, farms
- lords and ladies
- kings and queens; monarchy system of government
- The Black Death and other plagues
- weapons and armor
- The Crusades and other wars
- fighting dragons and other monsters; fantasy elements

Facilitator says: "These are all things that people commonly think of when they think of the Middle Ages. Do you think this would be the type of time and place where you would want to live?"

[Allow students to answer.]

Facilitator says: "It is true that life was hard for everyone during the Middle Ages—especially for the very poor. Even the lords who lived in mighty castles did not live as comfortably as most average people do today. But the so-called 'Dark Ages' were not as unpleasant as many people might think. It was during the Middle Ages that Europe's first universities were founded. It became easier for many people to get an education and even to read and write. Great buildings such as the Gothic cathedrals of Europe were built. Some of the inventions of the time included the mechanical clock, the windmill, and even the printing press. In the late Middle Ages, Europeans began exploring faraway lands. This Medieval exploration culminated in 1492, when Christopher Columbus first set foot in what we now know as the Bahamas."

Facilitator asks: "The Middle Ages fascinate many people. How would you prepare to write a story set in the Middle Ages?"

[Allow students to answer.]

Facilitator says: "Like many stories, a writer would first have to research the time period. They would have to learn what was going on, including the major events and places of the time. They would have to learn how people and environments were different than those of today, so that they can include realistic characters and settings in their stories."

Facilitator says: "In your performance task, you will be learning more about the Middle Ages so that you will have the knowledge to write a story that takes place during this time in history. The work you did today should help you prepare for the research and writing you will be doing in the performance task."

[Collect all notes from students and remind them they cannot be used during the performance task.]