

Lesson Plan  
**Thanksgiving**  
**Fact v. Fiction**

**Time Required:** Approximately 20-30 minutes.

**Purpose:** Illustrate to students that simply because something is printed in a textbook does not mean it is historically accurate. Changes occur over time, new evidence is uncovered, new interpretations arise, context must be considered, authors have bias, a point-of-view. All of these variables mean that what we “know” is often a best guess, not a factual certainty. This is not only true where written records don’t exist, but even when eyewitnesses and participants leave documentation behind.

**Materials Needed:** Transcribe or photocopy as many different *textbook* accounts of the first Thanksgiving for the number of groups you wish to form. Prepare an equal amount of copies of Edward Winslow’s 1621 account of the gathering (either the original account from *Mourt’s Relation* or a modern translation can be used).

**Additional Materials:** The lesson can be expanded to include Emmanuel Altham’s 1623 description of the gathering along with William Bradford’s account from his 1621 portrayal in his book, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. To further students’ skepticism of textbooks, the Wampanoag oral tradition of the first Thanksgiving may be used to provide a Native American view of the event (source: <http://www.plimoth.org/media/olc/hpteachg.html> or from the hardbound version of “Investigating ‘The First Thanksgiving,’ An Educators Guide to the 1621 Harvest Celebration.”

**Lesson:**

Create groups and handout appropriate number of photocopies of the textbook accounts of the first Thanksgiving (one account is included). Allow enough time for the groups to read the brief accounts and devise a basic summary of them. Those summaries may be written on the board or a student from each group may be assigned to write their group’s summary on the board. Distribute Edward Winslow’s 1621 account and explain that he was an eyewitness and provides the earliest report of the gathering. Allow groups to read and summarize it. Then provide the groups with Emmanuel Altham’s and William Bradford’s depiction and allow them to add to/amend their description. Lastly, give the groups the Wampanoag oral tradition of the first Thanksgiving. Be sure to explain that Native Americans histories are oral traditions. Discounted for a long time, many historians now treat oral traditions as accurate sources.

Having read all known primary sources, students have a complete description of what actually occurred. They should now produce a second portrayal of what took place. Again, those summaries may be written on the board or a student from each group may be assigned to write their group’s summary on the board.

**Conclusion:** Engage in a compare and contrast with the students to point out that the textbooks should often be read with significant skepticism. Point out that the context of the textbook should not simply be accepted at face value. It should also be pointed out that textbooks frequently contain text designed to instill patriotism, devotion and pride in one's nation. Most historians agree that the modern traditions of Thanksgiving most are familiar with began in the early twentieth century.