

Grades 9-12

## Learning about historical significance

### Overview

This lesson is one of a series that introduces six historical thinking concepts developed by Peter Seixas of the University of British Columbia. Each lesson supports teachers in using a video to introduce one of the concepts. The videos are available at <http://www.tc2.ca/videos.php>. The lessons are available in different versions for grades 6-8 and grades 9-12.

This lesson's written materials and seven-minute *Historical Significance* video offer an engaging way to introduce the concept of historical significance to students in grades 9-12. By comparing internment events during the First and Second World Wars, the video raises the question: *What and who should be remembered in history?*

### Historical significance

The past consists of everything that ever happened to everyone everywhere, but we cannot remember or learn it all. Consequently, at the core of the study of history are questions about what events and people from the past are important and why they are important. In other words, when considering historical significance we ask: *What and who should be remembered, researched and taught?* Historians, authors and educators must select what and whom to study, decide what details to include in their descriptions and determine how important these events and people are in relation to other aspects of the past.

### Objectives

Students will understand that:

- historical significance depends on three criteria:
  - how notable the event was at the time
  - how widespread and lasting the consequences of the event were
  - how symbolic or representative of historical issues or trends the event were<sup>1</sup>
- what is historically significant to one group of people is not necessarily significant to others

<sup>1</sup> These criteria reflect those presented in the video. In the 2014 edition of *Teaching Historical Thinking* they have been altered slightly in an attempt to simplify them. Teachers can choose which criteria they are most comfortable teaching.

This resource was developed with contributions from:



# Learning about historical significance

## Suggested activities

### BEFORE THE VIDEO

#### Consider personally significant events

Open by asking students to consider events of significance in their personal lives and/or school experience. Ask for a few examples from the class. A possible response might be something like, "When I started school, my parents got divorced and my family moved to a new city." With a partner, invite students to list five or six important events in their lives. Discuss with students what criteria or factors they considered. Possible responses include "had a big personal impact", "it changed things", "looking back it was a turning point". Record these factors or criteria for future consideration. Confirm that students understand that while many events have happened in their lives, not all events are equally important and that what is personally significant to one person, may not be to another.

#### Introduce the need for judgment

Explain to students that deciding on the importance or significance of historical events is a judgment made by historians, textbook writers, teachers and students. Ask students if the personal or school events they wrote in their notebooks should be included in a book of their lives or in the school yearbook. Ask for a few suggestions of what students would include and what they would exclude and why.

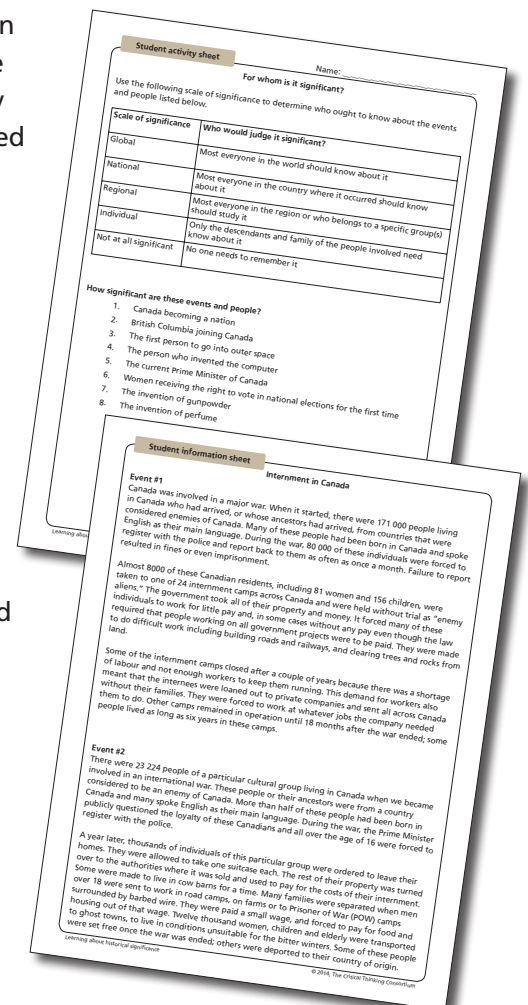
#### Consider different perceptions of significance

Help students understand that judgments about significance may depend upon who is considering the event. For example, people in a particular city, province or country may judge an event as very important, while people elsewhere may judge it to be unimportant. Ask students to think of events or people associated with their city or region that individuals living in the area might consider significant (e.g., when their city was founded, who was mayor) but that individuals in other provinces or countries may not. Introduce the following categories and ask students to consider the scale of significance of the events listed on the activity sheet, *For whom is it significant?*

- **Global:** Most everyone in the world should know about it
- **National:** Most everyone in the country where it occurred should know about it
- **Regional:** Most everyone in the region or who belongs to a specific group(s) should know about it
- **Individual:** Only the descendants and family of the people involved need know about it
- **Not at all significant:** No one needs to remember it

#### Learn about internment in Canada

Ask students to consider the significance of two historical events in Canada. Without revealing the identity of the events described (WWI Ukrainian internment and WWII Japanese internment), invite students to examine the descriptions on the student information sheet, *Internment in Canada*. As a class, read the passages. Check for student understanding as you read.



# Learning about historical significance

## Offer an initial assessment

Ask students to offer their initial thoughts about whether both events, one event or neither event are historically significant enough to be included in textbooks on Canadian history. Invite students to consider the criteria for judging historical significance that were discussed earlier, and to record their initial thoughts on the top half of the activity sheet, *Are they historically significant?*

**Student activity sheet** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Are they historically significant?**

**Before viewing video**

Is event #1 significant enough to be part of our national history? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Is event #2 significant enough to be part of our national history? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Reasons for your decision	Reasons for your decision

**During viewing video**

Record additional factors (criteria) and evidence in the video that are useful in deciding on the significance of the two historical events?

## DURING THE VIDEO

### Discuss each section

Arrange for students to view the video, *Historical Significance*. Pause the video at each of the three questions posed by the presenter (at approximately 2:44, 3:29 and 4:25 minutes). Discuss each question and review vocabulary if necessary. At each stage, encourage students to record additional thoughts on the bottom half of the activity sheet, *Are they historically significant?* Discuss new criteria that will help them decide the significance of the two historical events they've read about. Ask students to suggest which of the two written descriptions was about the internment of Ukrainians during WWI, and to provide evidence for their suggestion (Event #1). Event #2 describes the internment of Japanese during WW II. If possible, provide students with multiple opportunities to view the video.

## AFTER THE VIDEO

### Analyze a historical event

Using evidence from the video and the student information sheet, invite students to analyze the historical significance of Event #1, The WWI internment of Ukrainians, using the activity sheet, *Rating an event's significance*. Students may find it helpful to underline sections of the written description that address the criteria for historical significance.

**Student activity sheet** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Rating an event's significance**

**Event:** \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	Not at all significant	1	2	3	4	5	very significant
How notable it was at the time Was it noticed at the time as having importance? How long did it exist or operate?							
How widespread and lasting the consequences were How deeply felt was it? How widespread was it? How lasting were its effects?							
How symbolic it is: How has it been memorialized? Does it represent a historical issue or trend?							

Considering the ratings above, this event is:  
 Not at all significant: No one need remember the event  
 Individually significant: Only the descendants and family of the people involved should know about the event  
 Regionally significant: Most everyone in the region or who belongs to the specific group(s) affected should know about the event  
 Nationally significant: Every everyone in the country where it occurred should know about the event  
 Globally significant: Most everyone in the world should know about the event

**Reasons:** The internment of Ukrainians in WWII is the first time that 100% of Canadian men of Ukrainian descent were all across the country. Also, it was significant Canada's first treatment of minorities which is a part of our history and people are still studying about it.

### Form and share judgments

Ask students in pairs or small groups to discuss the question: Is the internment of Ukrainians in WWI worthy of inclusion in Canada's national history? Ask them to consider the reasons for their judgments and to share them with the class. Focus attention on the reasons presented rather than seeking agreement among students. If appropriate, share the reasonable but not definitive ratings and supporting evidence found on *Sample response: Rating an event's significance*.

**Student activity sheet** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Rating an event's significance**

**Event:** Ukrainian internment in World War I

Criteria	Not at all significant	1	2	3	4	5	very significant
How notable it was at the time Was it noticed at the time as having importance? How long did it exist or operate?							
How widespread and lasting the consequences were How deeply felt was it? How widespread was it? How lasting were its effects?							
How symbolic it is: How has it been memorialized? Does it represent a historical issue or trend?							

Considering the ratings above, this event is:  
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 Globally significant: Most everyone in the world should know about the event

**Reasons:** The internment of Ukrainians in WWII is the first time that 100% of Canadian men of Ukrainian descent were all across the country. Also, it was significant Canada's first treatment of minorities which is a part of our history and people are still studying about it.

# Learning about historical significance

## Rank significance

As an optional activity, invite students to use the sheet, *Ranking historical significance*, to analyze more than one event. You may wish to have students compare Ukrainian internment in WWI and Japanese Internment in WWII using evidence from the description. In groups invite students to rank the events' significance and to share their rankings with the class. Focus on the reasons students give for their rankings rather than reaching a common conclusion. Accept student responses that do not rank one event as more or less significant than another, provided justification is given.

## Assess for understanding

You may wish to ask students to use the rubric *Assessing understanding of historical significance* with this activity. This self-assessment can be used to help further identify what aspects of the concept students understand and what aspects need review.

## TAKING IT FURTHER

The following activities might be used to further develop the concept of historical significance.

- Invite students to research other Canadian internments (German, Italian internment in WWII) or internments in other countries (Aboriginal peoples in the United States). Invite students to assess the relative historical significance of these events.
- Regularly assess the relative significance of parallel events or people (for example, invention of the printing press and the computer; the industrial and digital revolutions; the Black Death and HIV/AIDS; Generals Wolfe and Montcalm; explorers Champlain and Cartier).
- Assess the significance of a current or recent event (for example, 9/11, death of a famous person) using the agreed-upon criteria.
- Ask students to analyse a section of their textbook (or other resource) to determine which events or people are more or less significant.
- Take note of the events included in a textbook account of a historical period, conduct independent research on several other important events from that period. Determine which, if any, of the supplemental events should be included in the textbook account.
- From a set of primary or secondary sources, ask students to select 5-10 significant events from a historical period (for example, Medieval Europe, ancient civilizations, New France). Ask students to use these events as the basis for a two-paragraph "textbook" account of the period.

The image shows two overlapping worksheets. The top one is titled "Ranking historical significance" and is a "Student activity sheet". It asks students to rank events in order of their historical significance on a scale from 1 (Not as significant) to 5 (very significant). It includes a table with criteria such as "How notable it was at the time", "How widespread and lasting the consequences were", and "How symbolic of historic issues or trends it is". The bottom worksheet is titled "Assessing understanding of historical significance" and is a "Self-assessment rubric". It asks students to rate their level of understanding for each aspect using a scale from 1 (Complete confusion) to 5 (Total understanding). It includes a table with aspects of understanding such as "I can determine the historical significance of an event, person or development based on the following criteria" and "I understand what it means to determine historical significance".

**For whom is it significant?**

Use the following scale of significance to determine who ought to know about the events and people listed below.

Scale of significance	Who would judge it significant?
Global	Most everyone in the world should know about it
National	Most everyone in the country where it occurred should know about it
Regional	Most everyone in the region or who belongs to a specific group(s) should study it
Individual	Only the descendants and family of the people involved need know about it
Not at all significant	No one needs to remember it

**How significant are these events and people?**

1. Canada becoming a nation
2. British Columbia joining Canada
3. The first person to go into outer space
4. The person who invented the computer
5. The current Prime Minister of Canada
6. Women receiving the right to vote in national elections for the first time
7. The invention of gunpowder
8. The invention of perfume

## Internment in Canada

### Event #1

Canada was involved in a major war. When it started, there were 171 000 people living in Canada who had arrived, or whose ancestors had arrived, from countries that were considered enemies of Canada. Many of these people had been born in Canada and spoke English as their main language. During the war, 80 000 of these individuals were forced to register with the police and report back to them as often as once a month. Failure to report resulted in fines or even imprisonment.

Almost 8000 of these Canadian residents, including 81 women and 156 children, were taken to one of 24 internment camps across Canada and were held without trial as "enemy aliens." The government took all of their property and money. It forced many of these individuals to work for little pay and, in some cases without any pay even though the law required that people working on all government projects were to be paid. They were made to do difficult work including building roads and railways, and clearing trees and rocks from land.

Some of the internment camps closed after a couple of years because there was a shortage of labour and not enough workers to keep them running. This demand for workers also meant that the internees were loaned out to private companies and sent all across Canada without their families. They were forced to work at whatever jobs the company needed them to do. Other camps remained in operation until 18 months after the war ended; some people lived as long as six years in these camps.

### Event #2

There were 23 224 people of a particular cultural group living in Canada when we became involved in an international war. These people or their ancestors were from a country considered to be an enemy of Canada. More than half of these people had been born in Canada and many spoke English as their main language. During the war, the Prime Minister publicly questioned the loyalty of these Canadians and all over the age of 16 were forced to register with the police.

A year later, thousands of individuals of this particular group were ordered to leave their homes. They were allowed to take one suitcase each. The rest of their property was turned over to the authorities where it was sold and used to pay for the costs of their internment. Some were made to live in cow barns for a time. Many families were separated when men over 18 were sent to work in road camps, on farms or to Prisoner of War (POW) camps surrounded by barbed wire. They were paid a small wage, and forced to pay for food and housing out of that wage. Twelve thousand women, children and elderly were transported to ghost towns, to live in conditions unsuitable for the bitter winters. Some of these people were set free once the war was ended; others were deported to their country of origin.

**Are they historically significant?****Before viewing video**

Is event #1 significant enough to be part of our national history?

Yes

No

Is event #2 significant enough to be part of our national history?

Yes

No

Reasons for your decision

Reasons for your decision

**During viewing of video**

Record additional factors (criteria) and evidence in the video that are useful in deciding on the significance of the two historical events?

Rating an event's significance

Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all significant ←————→ Very significant				
<b>How notable it was at the time:</b> Was it noticed at the time as having importance? How long did it exist or operate?	Significance 1	2	3	4	5
	Evidence:				
<b>How widespread and lasting the consequences were:</b> How deeply felt was it? How widespread was it? How lasting were its effects?	Significance 1	2	3	4	5
	Evidence:				
<b>How symbolic it is:</b> How has it been memorialized? Does it represent a historical issue or trend?	Significance 1	2	3	4	5
	Evidence:				

Considering the ratings above, this event is:

- Not at all significant:** No one need remember the event
- Individually significant:** Only the descendents and family of the people involved should know about the event
- Regionally significant:** Most everyone in the region or who belongs to the specific group(s) affected should know about the event
- Nationally significant:** Everyone in the country where it occurred should know about the event
- Globally significant:** Most everyone in the world should know about the event

Reasons:



## Rating an event's significance

Event: Ukrainian internment in World War I

Criteria	1      2      3      4      5					
	Not at all significant ←————→ Very significant					
<b>How notable it was at the time:</b> Was it noticed at the time as having importance? How long did it exist or operate?	<b>Significance</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Evidence:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people interred had ruined lives</li> <li>• over 8,000 interred</li> <li>• people supported it</li> </ul>				
<b>How widespread and lasting the consequences were:</b> How deeply felt was it? How widespread was it? How lasting were its effects?	<b>Significance</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Evidence:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it impacted the whole country</li> <li>• the camps and the internees were from all across Canada</li> <li>• families are still affected by what happened: the break-ups of families and the deaths of over 100 internees</li> </ul>				
<b>How symbolic it is:</b> How has it been memorialized? Does it represent a historical issue or trend?	<b>Significance</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Evidence:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it is remembered</li> <li>• Canada treating minorities badly in the past is something we are talking about today</li> <li>• this was the first time this happened to Canadians</li> </ul>				

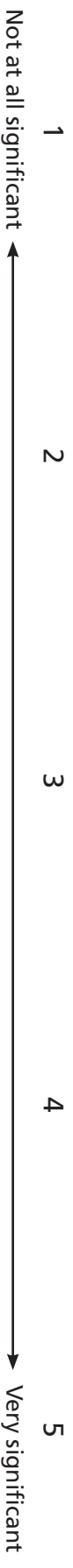
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- Nationally significant:** Every everyone in the country where it occurred should know about the event
- Globally significant:** Most everyone in the world should know about the event

**Reasons:** *The internment of Ukrainians in WWI is the first time that lots of Canadians were interned: it affected many people all across the country. Also, it can represent Canada's poor treatment of minorities, which is a part of our history that people are still thinking about.*

### Ranking historical significance

Rank the events in order of their historical significance. Give reasons for each rating as well as your final ranking.



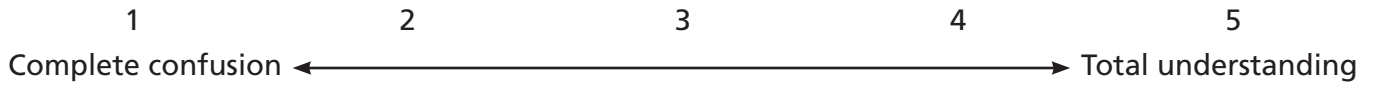
Criteria	Event:	Event:	Event:	Event:
How notable it was at the time	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:
How widespread and lasting the consequences were	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:
How symbolic of historic issues or trends it is	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:	1 2 3 4 5 Evidence:
<b>Ranking (1 through 4):</b> 1st – most significant 4th – least significant	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <sup>nd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <sup>rd</sup> <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <sup>th</sup>

Event: \_\_\_\_\_ is MOST significant because:

Event: \_\_\_\_\_ is LEAST historically significant because:

**Assessing understanding of historical significance**

Rate your level of understanding for each aspect using the following scale:



In rating your understanding consider the extent to which you are able to:

- accurately explain the relevant concept(s) in your own words
- give specific and informative examples and evidence to support your ideas

Aspect of understanding	Ratings
I understand what it means to determine historical significance.	Level of understanding: 1    2    3    4    5 Evidence/explanation:
I can determine the historical significance of an event, person or development based on the following criteria:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How notable it was at the time</li> </ul>	Level of understanding: 1    2    3    4    5 Evidence/explanation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How lasting and widespread the consequences were</li> </ul>	Level of understanding: 1    2    3    4    5 Evidence/explanation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How symbolic of historical issues and trends it is</li> </ul>	Level of understanding: 1    2    3    4    5 Evidence/explanation: