

# Seventh-Grade Students Explore History through the Study of Global Commodities

Seventh-grade humanities students develop their understanding of how connected their world has become. They arrive at this understanding through inquiry and authentic research projects that span multiple disciplines. This exploration leads to a question — How did the world become connected? Students unravel this story through document-based inquiry, studying the periods of exploration, colonialism, and imperialism that shaped the modern world.

### Commodity Project Overview

1. You will create a research paper that examines the driving factors and hidden impacts related to your commodity and its role in the world.
2. You will create an art project that will “make the invisible visible” in relation to your commodity and the findings from your humanities research.
3. You will create a chemical profile of your commodity in chemistry class.
4. You will examine data in math related to a social justice issue in one of the countries where your commodity is produced.
5. You will complete a creative writing piece related to your research findings from humanities, chemistry, and math.
6. On the evening of culmination, in addition to sharing all of your work, you will serve on an expert panel with students who have also chosen the same commodity as you. On this panel, you will answer questions related to your commodity and the research you have done.

## Projects and Highlights

During the fall, each student researches a commodity and charts its course from raw material to finished product — examining each country, shipping port, warehouse, and factory it passes through on its journey to the consumer.

History teacher Colin Tribble explains, “My hope is that examining world history through the lens of a commodity rather than a single country, or period of time, will challenge students to think about the human story in a truly global sense, dismantling the compartmentalized narratives of history that have defined the field for so long. Students have been working with some aspect of their commodity’s history in nearly all of their classes — art, math, science, and writing.”

## Historical Thinking Skills

Throughout the year, the seventh graders focus on developing key skills, specific to the discipline of studying history. Historians use these skills to answer complex questions about the past. They bring critical thinking to the foreground in the study of history. However, the skills are equally important for researching and discussing contemporary topics.

Major projects are assessed using a single-point rubric, focused on each of the four major thinking skills. “I find that using a single-point rubric prevents me from prescribing all of the ways a student can fall short, improve, or exceed my expectations. It puts no limit on the ways they [the students] can stretch and challenge themselves. There is no ceiling with this type of rubric. It allows me to provide feedback in an individualized way and establish personal learning goals for each student,” said Colin.

### Close Reading

- What claims does the author make?
- What evidence does the author use?
- What language (words, phrases, images, symbols) does the author use to persuade the document’s audience?
- How does language indicate perspective?

### Corroborating

- What do other documents say?
- Do the documents agree? If not, why?
- What are other possible documents?
- What documents are most reliable?

### Sourcing

- Who wrote this?
- What is the author’s perspective?
- When was it written?
- Why was it written?
- Is it reliable? Why or why not?

### Contextualizing

- When and where was the document created?
- What was different then? What was the same?
- How might the circumstances in which the document was created affect the content?

## Driving Factors and Hidden Impacts

As students research their commodities, Colin asks them to categorize their findings in terms of driving factors and hidden impacts.

This framework allows students to dive beneath surface-level understandings. Students are pushed to analyze relationships between politics, trade, and culture, considering the people and places connected to their commodity.

The framework of driving factors and hidden impacts leads students to deeper explorations of issues related to social justice, including workers’ rights, child labor laws, environmental impacts, education, and economic equality.

Students put their historical thinking skills into practice, engaging critically with their sources. As a result, they learn with greater depth and complexity.

## Spotlight on Spice

During the third week of November, the seventh-grade team welcomed Sana Javeri Kadri, founder of Diaspora Co., a local spice company that aims to “put money, equity, and power in the hands of Indian farmers, and to disrupt and decolonize a colonial, outdated commodity spice trading system that profits only the trader.”

Through her talk and the poignant questions that followed, students learned about what it means to directly source a commodity, and how this can contribute to “decolonizing” global trade.

Towards the end of the event, all students got to make their own ethically-sourced chai blend.



## Culmination and Next Steps

In the process of researching their commodity, students develop a deep understanding of trade, economics, culture, politics, and history. At culmination in December, students serve on expert panels with peers who have also studied their chosen commodity. The panel answers questions about the history, driving factors, and hidden impacts behind the commodity they researched.

