Activities

Awesome Ancient Ancestors!

Grades: 3–5

Overview
Creating a personal timeline, imagining what to take along when going to a new unsettled land, tracing the origins of foods we eat today, making petroglyphs and other activities to acquaint children with people and civilizations of prehistoric times.
This Lesson Plan is part of a Unit which also includes the Lesson Plan Who Are You Calling a Woolly Mammoth.
Why Is America's History So Horrible?

“The word horrible comes from the Latin word ‘horree’, which means ‘to bristle or make your hairs stand on end,’ and it's the horrible parts of history that can keep you awake…and interested!” — Elizabeth Levy

Well, it's not really horrible, but it can be weird, gross, and downright surprising at times! Elizabeth Levy's books offer a zany but fact-filled journey before recorded history. From there, Levy invites readers to explore the evolution of North America and learn about our first ancestors. Levy wants kids to know that America never was a "new" world. At the time of the Greeks and Romans, in the Americas there were great cities, and even pyramids along the Mississippi. With cartoons, timelines, and "travel" guides to museum exhibits and other landmarks of pre-history, the engaging format of America's. Sassy sidebars and cultural facts throughout the books will have readers laughing while they learn.

Awesome Ancient Ancestors
This book shares theories on how humans came to settle in America — and what they did once they had arrived. When did humans first get here? Did all humans walk or ride across the Beringia Bridge? Why was corn so important to humans? What did people do for fun back then? Levy introduces readers to numerous ancient peoples — from the Olmecs to the Mound Builders to the Mayans. The author explains how people changed from nomadic hunters and gatherers to farmers living in permanent settlements. Her examination of myths, legends, fossils, artifacts, and art shows readers how American civilization, as we know it, got its start. And it was way before Christopher Columbus!
Before You Read the Books — Try This!

Timeline for the Ages
How can we understand history unless we understand the passage of time? We can't! Levy provides ongoing timelines in the book to help show when the prehistoric events she describes happen. But before diving way back in time into America's Horrible Histories, create and discuss a historical timeline based on the world you know today. Make your timeline on a piece of paper or across a blackboard.
First, think about key dates from your own life. When were you born? How old are you now? When were your parents or grandparents born? Mark these dates near the right side, or the end, of the timeline.
Next, think about the lives of other important American historical figures. Where would Abe Lincoln fit on your timeline? How about Christopher Columbus? Plot these dates onto your timeline. They should fall somewhere close to the right side (not in the center, as you might expect!).
Now, think about the books you're about to read, and the time when they take place. Where would 65 million years B.C.E. go your timeline? What about 8000 B.C.E? Now you're really ready — literally — to go back in time!

Survival I
It's millions of years ago and you are a human crossing the Beringia Bridge. What five things are you carrying and why? Where are you going?

Survival II
If there were an Ice Age version of the hit TV show, Survivor, the winner would be the bison! Why did he survive when other animals didn't?

Times and Places
Put yourself in the shoes of the first archaeologist who discovered Teotihuacan, the great ancient city located in Mexico. Think about what life in that city must have been like. Research it and describe it. Now, travel to Chaco Canyon. What do you see there? Why is this place so like the Emerald City of Oz in The Wizard of Oz?
Rituals
Levy describes how Mayans offered blood to the gods so crops would grow. What other rituals did they perform? There are many legends about the power of a Native American "rain dance." Can you think of some other rituals people today perform to get things done?

Myths and Legends
Ancient peoples often explain natural occurrences with myths and legends. Make up your own myth about how and why Pangaea came apart. How could you imagine what happened to Pangaea happening again to North America or any of the other continents? Will parts of the world ever crash into one another again?

Ancient Travel Brochures
• **Glacier Getaway with Free Woolly Mammoth Breakfast Every Morning!** Pretend you're a travel agent from the year 40,000 B.C.E. What would you feature inside your travel brochure to encourage prehistoric peoples to visit North America? What would the "hotels" be like? What food would be served? What would be your travel warnings? What would you advise visitors to pack? Where are some of the most popular destinations and why?
• **We Build It — You Come!** Now, prepare a special brochure especially for more "recent" ancient peoples. Try planning a "Visit to the Mound Builders." Then, imagine a "Trip with the Mayans." What's special about traveling back in time to visit these civilizations? What do the "visiting" settlements look like? Are tourists welcome at ancient Mayan Death sacrifices — or are the tourists the sacrifices? Yikes!

What's On the Menu?
• Hungry for...chocolate? In her books, Levy explains how ancient Americans ate and grew some very cool foods that the rest of the planet didn't even know existed! Take some time to research the history of some of these foods and how they (and we!) changed the world. Sometimes they made it better...sometimes not. Investigate!
Have a Good Day
Have you ever watched The Weather Channel? You can see how different temperatures and storm systems all over the country can affect where you live. How do we adapt our "settlements" (i.e. houses, apartments, farms) to fast changing weather patterns? We use lightning rods, tornado cellars, and flood walls, to name a few. Make lists of the ways that different parts of the country adapt their lives to deal with weather. Don't forget major weather events like El Nino and La Nina. What about global warming?

Don't Be Petrified by Petroglyphs
- Rock On!
  Materials you need: rough sandpaper (a few sheets), black spray paint, and a nail or sharp-tipped object (to scratch design).
- Apply black spray paint unevenly on your sandpaper so it looks like the surface of a rock. Let it dry.
- Cut sandpaper into several, equal-sized pieces.
• Prehistoric people used symbols on cave art to relate ideas and messages. Make up your own symbols and carefully scratch them into the pieces of painted sandpaper. Scratch the outline of a bison, or a fish, or maybe your little brother! Mix and match your rock art to make up different messages.

This Art's For the Birds
In Awesome Ancient Ancestors, Levy describes giant bird art created and rediscovered in a place called Poverty Point, Louisiana. Enormous ridges made the shape of a giant bird that could be seen from overhead. Make your own art based on this idea. What shape or symbol would you make and why?

Materials you need:
• Pencil, colored construction paper, white glue, and colored or beach sand.
• Put down a piece of paper and trace your design or symbol in pencil. Make a silly face, another giant bird, or "Stick Man."
• Drip a trail of glue over the pencil marks so now your symbol is outlined in glue.
• Sprinkle colored sand over the glue and let dry.

Getting A-HEAD of Prehistoric People
In Awesome Ancient Ancestors, Levy describes the creation of giant head sculptures by the Olmecs that stood more than 9 feet tall and weighed up to 50 tons each. What was the significance of these heads? You can make a slightly smaller version of your own with this simple paper-mache recipe.

Materials you need:
• Powdered wallpaper paste, water, one inflated balloon, strips of newspaper, and a pin. You'll also need some time — the mold will take time to dry between layers!
• Use your balloon to make the basic head shape.
• Make your paste solution mixing together the water and the powdered paste.
• One at a time, dip each strip into your paste, making sure it's completely covered, but not clumpy. Lay the strip over the mold and press it into place with your fingers. Not too hard—don't injure the balloon!
• Dip next strip and overlap the first. Repeat until balloon is covered.
• Let these strips dry, then repeat the procedure again, creating a second layer of paper over the first dried layer. As you build layers, begin to shape the newspaper into a nose, eyes, mouth and other head features.
• Once the paper has all dried into the mask shape you want, stick a pin through the paper into the balloon. It should pop and you have your own Olmec or Mayan head!

• Subjects:
  Archaeology, History, Reading, Maps, Science, Social Studies, Timelines, Research Skills, Writing, Habitat, Ecosystems, Fossils, Time