

Organizing for Integrating Instruction Thematically

Spring is a great time to start thinking about the upcoming school year: you are still in the middle of things, all your materials are right there, and a little pick-me-up is in order. If you are interested in integrating instruction across all curricular areas there is a lot of planning and prep work needed initially. The bad news is it can take a considerable amount of time. The good news is it's fun, clarifying, and once you've done it you have a great base to start from hereafter (unless you are like me, teaching a different grade level each year). And if you're working on it while you still have students with you, you can get their feedback, ideas, and recommendations; they are, after all, the reason for the work.

The type of thematic instruction I'm talking about is focused around themes created by science and social studies content. These themes are broken out and then reorganized according to how the content builds upon itself and relates to other areas of the curriculum. This month I'll share some of the steps I use in building unit plans for the entire school year. Of course, you don't have to completely integrate everything. You may want to develop a single unit, or purchase a unit that you are interested in trying out. Whether you are developing a thematic unit that lasts for one day, or working to develop units to run throughout a year, the process is the same. Here are the steps in a nutshell (and open to revision at a later time!):

- [Locate a list of objectives](#) to be taught at your grade level.
- Identify science and social studies themes to be taught during the year.
- Identify language arts themes.
- Identify math themes.
- Identify art, music, and PE themes.
- Set up an organizational plan.
- Outline the units for the year.
- Develop the individual unit plans.

Selecting and Organizing Themes for Integrating Instruction

The first step in organizing your curriculum for integrating instruction is to know what it is you are to teach. If you have been relying on your textbooks to provide this structure for you, you can still do so, but a little more knowledge will be helpful to you in the long run. Some school districts have their own "Continuum of Objectives", a list of items that you are expected to cover each year. All states have these, usually available online and often called [frameworks, standards, continuum, or sequence of objectives](#). All textbook series come with their own list. Find the type most relevant to you. You'll need one for each subject area.

You will start by looking at the science and social studies themes listed for your grade level(s). What you are looking for initially are the subcategories in each area. Here's what I found when I began working on my plan for teaching a class of fourth and fifth graders in California. (You would only look at one grade level if that's what you are teaching. I want to show how integrating instruction thematically makes it much easier to teach combination classes as well.) You may use these [planning pages](#) to help you if you wish.

<p>Science Themes</p>	<p>Fourth Grade</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electricity • Magnetism • Interactions within Ecosystems • Rocks • Processes of Landforms • Scientific Process 	<p>Fifth Grade</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements & Matter • Human Systems • Plant & Animal Systems • Water Cycle • Weather • Solar System • Scientific Process
<p>Social Studies Themes</p>	<p>Fourth Grade</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Geography • Native People • Exploration • Spanish Era • Gold Rush • Statehood • Agriculture & Industry • Government 	<p>Fifth Grade</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native People • Explorers • Colonial Period • Revolutionary War • Constitution • Westward Expansion • Names and Capitals of States

Now that you can see all the themes you'll be working on you can organize them in a way that is supportive and cumulative. Here's what I came up with for my class of fourth and fifth graders:

<p><u>The Land</u> Elements & Matter Rocks Landforms Water Cycle Weather</p>	<p><u>Plant and Animals on the Land</u> Ecosystems Plant and Animal Systems Human Systems</p>	<p><u>Native People</u> US California Solar System</p>
<p><u>Exploration and Colonialism</u> Exploration Geography Colonial Era US California</p>	<p><u>Becoming</u> Revolutionary War California Statehood Government Constitution State and Capitals</p>	<p><u>Expanding</u> Westward Expansion Gold Rush Agriculture & Industry</p>
<p><u>Physical Science</u> Electricity Magnetism</p>		

I came up with seven themes to work with over the course of a year. I started off with the basic elements, including gold, which make up rocks, the rock cycle, and the land. Landforms are created by forces of nature such as volcanoes and earthquakes and are later eroded by weather and the water cycle.

The second unit focuses on plants and animals that live on the land and soil caused by erosion. The plants and animals we will focus on will be the ones most used by the native people of the United States and California. Human systems are included in this unit because they are related to animal systems which can be studied together and compared.

The third unit is about native people of the United States and California. How they interact with the ecosystems and the plants and animals previously studied will be the focus. The solar system is included in this unit because of the super abundance of native myths about the universe, an opportunity to compare myth with fact.

Although I grouped exploration and colonialism together, already I can see that I need to separate them into two separate units. Easy to do. In Exploration fifth graders will focus on the

east coast and fourth graders will focus on the west coast. In Colonialism the fifth graders will focus on English and other European colonists while the fourth graders will focus on the Spanish. Yes, I definitely will separate them into separate units. Good thing I have extra spaces.

The next unit is called "Becoming" because it will focus on the issues involved with becoming a state and a nation. This will put the time line a little out of sync for one of the grades, but I will remedy that with a wall time line built by the students to clarify the sequence of events.

The westward expansion will include the gold rush, the development of different regions and trace a little of the change from agriculture to industry.

The last unit is the leftovers: physical science activities that I can't fit in very well, but which are fun units for the end of the school year.

There you have it. I have organized the themes in a way that makes sense to me. To help emphasize the integration I will have the class paint a huge mural on the wall, changing it throughout the year. We'll begin with flat ground, paint hills, mountains, rivers and lakes as we learn how they are made, add plants and animals, a native village, colonial towns, farms and factories. It will be a background for mini museums we create as we travel through time and will help to make the changes seen in the land over time more concrete and comprehensible to the students. Didn't I tell you this is Fun!

Organizing Themes for Integrating Instruction

Yesterday we listed out the science and social studies themes for the year and organized them in a way that allows the content to build upon itself. The next step is to tackle language arts.

Using your district's, state's, or textbook's list of [standards and objectives](#), identify the key skills you'll be teaching next year. You can find planning pages [here](#). Here's some of mine for the same 4/5 grade class:

Fourth Grade	<p><u>Reading</u> Word Analysis Fluency Vocabulary Comprehension Analysis</p> <p><u>Literature:</u> Narrative analysis</p>	<p><u>Writing</u> Organization & Focus Penmanship Research Technology Evaluation Revision</p> <p><u>Genres:</u> Narrative Literature responses Informational reports Summaries</p> <p><u>Conventions:</u> Sentence structure Grammar</p>	<p><u>Speaking</u> Organization and Delivery</p> <p><u>Genres:</u> Narrative presentation Informational presentation Summaries Poem recitation</p>	<p><u>Listening</u> Comprehension</p>
Fifth Grade	<p><u>Reading</u> Word Analysis Fluency Vocabulary Concept development Comprehension Structural features Analysis Expository critique</p> <p><u>Literature:</u> Structural features Narrative analysis Literary criticism</p>	<p><u>Writing</u> Organization & Focus Research Technology Evaluation Revision</p> <p><u>Genres:</u> Narrative Literature responses Informational reports Persuasive compositions</p> <p><u>Conventions:</u> Sentence structure Grammar Punctuation</p>	<p><u>Speaking</u> Organization and Delivery Analysis/Evaluation of oral and media communications</p> <p><u>Genres:</u> Narrative presentation Informational presentation Literary responses</p>	<p><u>Listening</u> Comprehension</p>

(Take a good look at that folks! This is one of the reasons why going through this process is so liberating—there is hardly any difference between what you have to teach at fourth grade and at fifth grade! Teaching a combination class doesn't mean you have to present two different lessons, the students are learning the same things! If you use novels and trade books you can group the students according to their reading levels, or better yet, **interests**, rather than by grade.)

Now that you see what you have to cover all laid out for you clearly, neatly, and simply, make a list of genre studies that would help students learn these skills. Start with a brainstorm list so you aren't limiting yourself to the themes you've created. You want to make new and fresh connections.

poetry	contemporary fiction	tall tales
historical fiction	nonfiction	fables
limericks	magazines	animal stories
myths	newspapers	folk tales
legends	skits	fairy tales
mysteries	role playing	travel books
thrillers	figures of speech	debates
science fiction	picture books	speeches
fantasy	biographies	dance
	autobiographies	

Now go back to your list of themes and plug a literary genre (or two) into each of your themes. You can use this [planning page](#) if you want to.

Now think about some fun products to create that will fit with the genre studies you plugged in above. Again, make a brainstorm list of your ideas, then plug them into your plan.

photo essay	movie	pop up books
poetry book	website	craft booklets
autobiography	blog	radio broadcast
historical fiction	encyclopedia	cook book
narrative	dictionary	lots of the above, too!
play	myth	

Theme	<u>The Land</u> Elements & Matter Rocks Landforms Water Cycle Weather	<u>Plant and Animals</u> Ecosystems Plant and Animal Systems Human Systems	<u>Native People</u> Solar System	<u>Exploration</u> Exploration Geography
	Genre: Adventure Product: Play, written and produced by student groups	Genre: Animal Stories Fables Products: Fables related to each ecosystem Ecosystem photo essay Ecosystem magazine	Genre: Native American myths Space travel Science fiction Picture book myths Product: Myth Science fiction narrative Museum display	Genre: Biography Historical fiction Product: Biographies pop up Informational report Re-enactment Debates
Language Arts				
Math				
Art				
Music				
PE				

You are going to continue to do the same thing for each of the remaining subject areas, starting with your district's, state's, or textbook's objective matrix, and then plug the skills in where they best seem to fit. This is your idea chart. Things will naturally change as you make more plans. You'll see I've included the same genres in different themes because they would work equally well there. I will make changes as I go. I will also present alternatives to the class at the time of the unit and let them make some choices, too. Laying it all out will help ensure that you cover everything at one time or another.

Putting it All Together

After you have laid out the language arts curriculum with your themes you are ready to do the same thing with the rest of the subject areas. Starting with your district's, state's, or textbook's [standards matrix](#), plug in the skills where they best seem to fit. This is not cast in stone. You can make changes and adjustments at any time. I have found, though, that what I work out here generally seems to last. You are in a kind of overview state-of-mind and it works well at this point. I do find that I always have to make some changes once I start developing the individual units. Bear in mind that you may also have to move things around due to school schedules or special events. I like to provide several product ideas to facilitate student choice and about half the time I allow the students to invent their own language arts and theme products. Genre studies are often finalized during the unit development. That's why you see a genre in more than one spot. Planning pages can be found [here](#).

Subject Area Skills Alignment for Grade 4/5

Theme	<u>The Land</u> Elements & Matter Rocks Landforms Water Cycle	<u>Plant and Animals</u> Ecosystems Plant and Animal Systems Human Systems	<u>Native People</u> Solar System	<u>Exploration</u> Exploration Geography
Language Arts	Genre: Adventure Product: Play, written and produced by student groups	Genre: Animal Stories Fables Products: Fables related to each ecosystem	Genre: Native American myths Space travel Science fiction Picture book myths Product: Myth	Genre: Biography Historical fiction Product: Biographies pop up Informational report Re-enactment
Math	+, -, X, / Number sense Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Fractions Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Decimals Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Time Money Reasoning Problem Solving
Art	Color wheel, using color Using tempera paints	Print making Digital image creation	Native American arts and crafts	Cartography as art
Music	Peer Gynt Grand Canyon Suite		Native music Native dance Native instruments	
PE/Health	Disaster Preparedness Healthy Living Conflict Resolution	Nutrients Food Labels		Disease Prevention

I've left some areas blank because I don't have any ideas I really like yet. Once I begin to plan the individual units I'll get lots more good ideas.

Subject Area Skills Alignment for Grade 4/5

Theme	<u>Colonization</u> Colonial Era Spanish Era	<u>Becoming</u> Revolutionary War California Statehood Government Constitution State and Capitals	<u>Expanding</u> Westward Expansion Gold Rush Agriculture & Industry	<u>Electricity and Magnets</u>
Language Arts	Genre: Historical Fiction Product: Historical Fiction narrative	Genre: War Stories Products: Ecosystem magazine	Genre: Westerns Product: Museum display	Genre: Science Fiction Product: Science fiction narrative
Math	+, -, X, / Geometry Measurement Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Algebra and functions Statistics, Data Analysis Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Probability Reasoning Problem Solving	+, -, X, / Reasoning Problem Solving
Art	Art of John White Early images of America Crafts: quilting, embroidery, stenciling		Art Evaluation from periods studied	Impressionist Painters
Music	Music and instruments of colonial America and Spanish California	Revolutionary War Songs	Folk dancing and music Songs of the old west	Jazz
PE/Health	Risk Evaluation Injury Prevention	Bullying Conflict Resolution		Household safety

You are well on your way to integrating instruction across all subject areas! Tomorrow we'll look more closely at language arts materials.

Planning Individual Thematic Units

Planning an individual thematic unit is not much different than regular lesson planning, and because of the work you've already completed in selecting and organizing the themes, and listing the resources you have available, you can just start filling in your plan book. Decide on the main topic for each day and then select corresponding materials in each subject area that support that main topic. Here is an example for a unit I am writing on the origins of the American colonies.

1. Brainstorm the primary topics you want to cover. This will be influenced by the state frameworks and your own desires. Here's what I want to include:
 - why they wanted to leave Europe
 - what their lives were like in Europe
 - how they came to America
 - what they found when they arrived
 - how did they transition to life in the wilderness
 - what interactions did they have with native people
 - how did they provide for basic needs
 - food
 - clothing
 - shelter
 - what native plants did they use and how did they use them
 - what did they do for fun
 - who were some of the important people
 - what was each colony known for
 - what was the founding purpose for each colony

This is a three week unit; it doesn't include the Revolutionary War period, which will be a separate unit dealing with many other issues. (Of course, you can set things up anyway you choose. This is a unit students really enjoy and I want to be sure there is enough time for them to recreate period artifacts thoughtfully, creatively, and realistically.)

2. Organize the topics and list them as headings on a planning sheet that looks just like your lesson plan book. Then start putting in the resources you have (trade books, textbooks, library books, internet sites, maps, art prints, etc.) according to the topic with which they best fit. You can use the skill instruction and practice exercises in the reading text that supports the research work the students will do during the unit, or you can teach the research skills directly in the context of the project, which is what I prefer to do. That way the skills are learned in context and transfer becomes a non-issue. Here is an example:

Settling the New World

Date _____

Notes	Day 1: Getting Started	Day 2: Leaving the Old World
	<p>Introduction: Introduce them using KNW chart. Read my intro to students. Read & discuss student intro in Student Study Guide.</p>	<p>Review: historical fiction, KNW Introduce: Why did the colonists want to leave their homes in the Old World? How did they get to the New World? What were their travels like?</p>
	<p>Thematic Activity: Overview. Decision One: Choosing a colony. Gathering materials.</p>	<p>Thematic Activity: Research information regarding why people from the selected colony left the Old World and what they brought with them.</p>
	<p>Math: Introduce "Eureka!" game. Read legend. Complete worksheet. Introduce science center: volume</p>	<p>Math:</p>
	<p>Reading: Skimming for info. Locate chapter in SS text using Contents. SQRRR to identify main ideas.</p>	<p>Reading: Reading for information. Students will read historical sources located yesterday to find specific answers to questions about why their colony was started.</p>
	<p>Literature: Introduce historical fiction. Research books by doing searches online. Make book selection. Prepare reading log.</p>	<p>Literature: Predicting Make predictions regarding the novel. Begin reading. Character Development: Identify protagonist and his/her strengths.</p>
	<p>Language Skill: Communication types of the era; style of talking, names of people, manners. Compare to today.</p>	<p>Language Skill: Oral Speaking Review rubric for oral presentations. Groups will prepare first presentation (explaining answers to today's questions).</p>
	<p>Writing: Introduce research report. Collect sources. Set up a group research plan. Choose a subject.</p>	<p>Writing: Research Identify reasons why colonists left the Old World. Choose an historical figure to impersonate.</p>
	<p>Read Aloud: Begin <u>A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</u> by Kathryn Lasky.</p>	<p>Read Aloud: Continue <u>A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</u> by Kathryn Lasky. Identify protagonist's strengths/weaknesses.</p>
	<p>Art, Music, PE:</p>	<p>Art, Music, PE:</p>



Settling the New World

Date _____

Day 3: Life at Sea	Day 4: Arrival	Day 5: Native People
<p>Review: Why colonists left.</p> <p>Introduce: Sea travel in the 1600s. Introduce fate cards.</p>	<p>Review: Life at sea</p> <p>Introduce: The role the land played in the lives of the settlers.</p>	<p>Review: Arrival in the New World</p> <p>Introduce: How the interactions between the colonists and the native people affected each group.</p>
<p>Thematic Activity: Paint a life sized diagram of the top deck of the <i>Mayflower</i> on the playground.</p>	<p>Thematic Activity: Students will make a wall map of the colonies, record information about the trip on paper boats for the map, and write fate cards.</p>	<p>Thematic Activity:</p>
<p>Math: Students will use a scaled diagram of the top deck of the Mayflower to draw a life sized "deck" on the playground.</p>	<p>Math:</p>	<p>Math: Three Dimensional Model Students will work in teams to build a three dimensional model of a town using a class set of building blocks. They will share and explain their models.</p>
<p>Reading: Using a Bibliography Students will begin to catalog materials used for research using a Bibliography form. Read and take notes about life at sea.</p>	<p>Reading: Reading for Information Students will read historical sources to find specific answers to questions about the role the environment played on the colonists' lives.</p>	<p>Reading: Reading for Information Students will read historical sources to find specific answers to questions about the colonists and native people interacted.</p>
<p>Literature: Character Development List characters and make a chart of their strengths and weaknesses, and personality traits. Predict how those will affect their success in the wilderness.</p>	<p>Literature: The Setting Students will identify key aspects of the setting and how it affects the lives of the characters. They will create an illustration of the setting for their narrative.</p>	<p>Literature: Literary Themes Students will identify common problems and themes explored in historical fiction of the colonial period.</p>
<p>Language Skill: Oral Presentations Student teams will present their information on the colonist's lives in Europe and why they decided to come to America.</p>	<p>Language Skill: Oral Presentations Student teams will present their information on the sea voyage and its impact on the colonists lives.</p>	<p>Language Skill: Oral Presentations Student teams will present their information on the colonist's arrival in the New World.</p>
<p>Writing: Designing a character Students will fill in a worksheet to help them begin to develop the traits of the historical figure about whom they will write an historical fiction narrative.</p>	<p>Writing: Designing a Setting The students will develop a setting for the historical fiction piece they are preparing.</p>	<p>Writing: Developing primary and secondary problems. Students will list out problems encountered by the historical figure and trace resulting secondary problems.</p>
<p>Read Aloud: Continue <u><i>A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</i></u> by Kathryn Lasky. Discuss, "What have we learned about the colonists so far?"</p>	<p>Read Aloud: Continue <u><i>A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</i></u> by Kathryn Lasky. Discuss, "How did the land affect the people in this book. What were some characteristics of the land?"</p>	<p>Read Aloud: Continue <u><i>A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple</i></u> by Kathryn Lasky. Discuss the interactions with native people portrayed in the novel.</p>
<p>Art, Music, PE: Prepare oral presentation on life at sea. Include visuals, drama, and action to make it interesting.</p>	<p>Art, Music, PE: Student teams will prepare oral presentations on arriving in the New World, including visuals, drama, and action to make it memorable.</p>	<p>Art, Music, PE: Student teams will prepare oral presentations on interactions between colonists and native people including visuals, drama, and action to make it memorable.</p>



This shows the first five days of the unit. I will continue to do the same thing for the rest of the daily topics which are:

- Setting up a Town
- Housing
- Clothing
- Furniture
- Household Items and Tools
- Leather Work
- Crafts
- Food
- Put it all Together
- Museum Day

It is fine to leave some items blank if you don't have specific ideas for those subjects. You can always come back and fill those in when you finalize the lesson plans.

You may not be able to plug in math units in their entirety. You may only be able to supplement the main math program with activities as they fit in your themes. You could start the day with a separate math period, and then integrate everything else for the rest of the day. Some themes lend themselves to much greater math integration, you just have to evaluate each theme and decide how to handle the math. These lesson plans do not show the primary math lessons for the day, only the supplemental items that fit with the unit. It is best, though, to include math in all the planning stages, because some units strongly support certain math areas. This unit requires a lot of measurement when the students are making their period artifacts (sewing, building furniture, constructing a classroom cabin, etc.) so measurement would definitely be a good math choice during this thematic unit.