

The History of Samurai

Lesson Plan

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This resource was developed by The Japan Society with support from Professor Oleg Benesch of the University of York and the Asia Department at the British Museum.

Learning Objectives:

- To understand the significance of samurai in Japanese history.
- To evaluate statements about samurai and consider whether they are true or false.

Curriculum Links:

National Curriculum in England for **History** in KS2. Pupils should:

- Understand historical concepts such as similarity, difference, and significance, and use them to make connections, draw contrasts, and frame historically-valid questions.
- Be taught about a non-European society that provides contrast with British and European history.
- Gain and deploy a historically grounded understanding of abstract terms.
- Know and understand significant aspects of the history of the wider world (such as characteristic features of past non-European societies).
- Gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national, and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious, and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf

Keywords:

- samurai – warriors that existed in pre-modern Japan
- emperor – the ruler of Japan is referred to as the emperor
- imperial court – the royal household
- shogun – the chief military leader
- shogunate – the military government

Resources:

Presentation: Lesson 6 – Samurai

Worksheets: Myth vs Reality Cards

Additional Resources:

Document: Background Notes for Teachers

Video: How to Make an Origami Kabuto – Samurai Helmet (available on The Japan Society website: <https://www.japansociety.org.uk/resource?resource=25>)

Activity Sheet: Design a Samurai Helmet template

STARTER

- **Slide 1:** Show the image on the screen and ask pupils to think about the questions on this slide as their starter activity. Some pupils might already know some facts about samurai or have seen them in films, manga, videogames, or other popular media.
- You could also return to these questions at the end of the lesson to check pupil understanding.
- **Challenge:** Ask pupils to think more about the painting itself. The image is of two skilled samurai warriors fighting – Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro's duel on Ganryuu Island in 1612. However, the painting was produced in the 1800s, about 200 years after the battle pictured took place. Can we consider this to be accurate or not? How do we know what really happened?

Estimated Time: 5 minutes

INTRODUCE LEARNING

- **Slides 3-4:** Introduce the Learning Objectives and key words. The key words will be explained throughout the lesson, but you could ask pupils to see if they already know what the words mean.
- **History of Japan - Slide 6:** Introduce the history of Japan timeline to pupils. Japan has a long and extensive history as a country, within which are numerous periods, similar to the numerous eras within British history. The timeline on this slide is a simplified version, not containing all Japanese periods.
- Make sure to explain what the word "Period" means. You could easily relate this to previous learning you may have done on a specific era in British history, such as the Victorian era.
- **Slide 7:** Ask pupils if they can guess when the samurai existed. When did the first samurai emerge? And do samurai still exist? Click on the slide to reveal the arrows using a transition.
- Samurai existed from around the Heian Period (794-1185) up until the end of the Edo Period (1603-1868).

Estimated Time: 5 minutes

ACTIVITY 1

- **Slide 8-12:** In pairs or small groups, ask pupils to discuss where they would place the world history events relative to the Japanese history timeline. **Slide 8** contains an example to help you explain the task. This activity will help pupils be able to contextualise these periods in Japanese history by relating them to events they already know.

- You could relate this to your previous learning in history and use events or topics that you have already learned for this activity instead. Try to challenge pupils as well to see if they know or can guess the year when each event happened.

Estimated Time: 5 - 10 minutes

MAIN LEARNING

- **The rise of the samurai warrior - Slide 14:** Show pupils the new timeline that highlights the periods that samurai existed in, as well as the key events that occurred during this time.
- **Slides 15-17:** These slides will provide pupils context for understanding how and why the samurai became so powerful - they ruled over Japan for hundreds of years.
- Ensure you highlight the two key words – shogun and shogunate. Japan was ruled by a shogunate (military government), led by a shogun (chief military leader) for nearly 700 years.
- **Slide 18:** Look at the images of the samurai. Ask pupils to discuss and think about what words they would use to describe the samurai, with reasons to support their answer. Write these words down somewhere to look at again later. Mention that you will look at these again at the end of the lesson and consider whether your initial impressions were accurate or not, based on what you have learned.
- **Myth vs Reality - Slide 20:** Samurai existed for a long time, and are iconic figures in not just Japanese history, but also in world history. There is still much we do not know about samurai, so there are many myths surrounding them.
- Get pupils to discuss either in pairs or groups what they think the word myth means. Once pupils understand what the word myth means, ask them to discuss and share their thoughts on why it is important we do not spread myths or false information.

Estimated Time: 15 minutes

ACTIVITY 2

- **Slide 21:** Introduce the lesson's main task. Hand out the **Myth vs Reality worksheet**. This task could be done independently, in pairs, or in groups. Pupils must sort the statement cards into two separate groups – myth and reality. There are **5 myth cards** and **4 reality cards**.
- You could provide some hints and guidance, but the aim of this activity is for pupils to think and evaluate the cards based on their own ideas of samurai.

- **Slides 22-31** reveal using a transition whether each statement card was a myth or a reality. Before revealing, ask pupils for their thoughts on whether they thought the statement was a myth or a reality. Were the answers what they expected, or were they surprised?
- **Slide 24:** This contains an image of samurai battling using different weapons – show this to pupils to see if they can identify which weapons they are using.
- Look back at the words you used to describe samurai at the start of the activity – are they accurate to your new impression of samurai?
- The main point to emphasise through this activity is that samurai were not necessarily always the strong, brave, courageous, and loyal warriors many perceive them as being. Additionally, samurai were not always men, nor were they always warriors who fought in combat, either – they played many different roles in society!

Estimated Time: 15 - 20 minutes

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

- **What happened to the samurai?** - **Slides 33-35** provide pupils with information about how the Meiji Restoration led to the fall and eventual abolition of samurai. There was no need for them in society anymore. However, even though samurai no longer exist, they undoubtedly played an important role within history, and remain as iconic historical figures and symbols in not just Japan but across the world.
- **Reflection** – **Slide 37:** You could ask pupils here to think about how they would define a samurai, based on what they have learned from this lesson. Ask pupils question to prompt answers – were all samurai men? Did all samurai fight in battles? Click on the slide for the transition that reveals each bullet point.
- **Slide 38:** As a part of today's learning, ask pupils to write down in their notebooks at least one or two key facts or "realities" about samurai or Japanese history that they found interesting or surprised them. Read the example on the slide so pupils know what kind of statement they would be expected to write - what was their initial impression, and what did they learn?
- **Slide 39:** Use this slide as an overall conclusion to the lesson; these are the key points that pupils should be able to take away and understand from this lesson.

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- **Slide 40:** To extend your learning about samurai, why not try making your own kabuto (samurai helmet) using origami? Follow our video tutorial available on The Japan Society website:
<https://www.japansociety.org.uk/resource?resource=25>
- All you need is a square piece of paper to make one! To make a larger, wearable kabuto, we recommend using a 60cmx60cm piece of paper.
- **Slide 41:** Or why not try designing your own samurai helmet using our template?