

The Life and Legacy of Sir Winston Churchill

How should we characterise Sir Winston Churchill?

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives

- To create a shared environment of open inquiry
- To enable students to share their knowledge and preconceptions of Sir Winston Churchill
- To encourage students to analyse and synthesise a range of information and grapple with the complexity of Churchill's character
- To challenge simplistic judgements and narratives

Introduction

Sir Winston Churchill is one of the most recognisable names in British history. Indeed he was voted 'the greatest Briton' in a 2002 BBC poll, largely due to his role in leading Britain through the Second World War. However, he is, simultaneously, derided by some as a white supremacist who defended a dying empire and oversaw brutal treatment of people in the colonies. British history in the time of Churchill and his role in that history can be better understood once we have an idea of who Sir Winston Churchill was, going beyond simplistic narratives and debates such as 'hero or villain'. This lesson aims to open up discussion around who Churchill was in order to create a more authentic understanding of the complexity of Churchill, and allowing students to learn about histories connected to his life in a balanced and representative manner.

This lesson can therefore form the basis to study Churchill's life and his role in significant elements of 20th century British history. It may be used in isolation, related to learning about Churchill, but has been designed as the first lesson in a scheme of work looking at Britain in the time of Churchill, including further lessons on his life and key themes of British history in the 20th century. The lesson encourages students to grapple with differing views and interpretations through independent and student centred teaching and learning to develop their historical understanding, but also to grapple with complexity and generate their own questions in their search for authentic understanding.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need adapting based on circumstances.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

Resources:

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
 - containing printable handouts:
 - Slide 6 – A5 – 1 per student
 - Slide 11 – A4 – 1 per student
- Accompanying 'pen portrait' audio files
- Accompanying [Film file](#)

Lesson Plan

Challenging Histories and a shared space for learning (5 minutes)

Before the lesson begins, it is important to set the foundations for the learning process ahead, including being aware of the potential challenges of discussing elements of British history. Explain that British history can be contentious and cause emotional reactions. Exploring the past can mean we encounter voices, ideas, and interpretations that we may disagree with or even find offensive. It is important to acknowledge this and feel able to express this in an appropriate way. Encourage students to be open to understand different perspectives, even if they may not agree with them.

Acknowledge and explain that how we look at the past depends on where we are in the present. Students might have knowledge, ideas, feelings, experiences, heritage related to a

given historical person, context, or event which inform or steer their judgements. To ensure a classroom in which historical study can be open and honest invite students to agree to the following guiding principles for historical learning (Slide 1):

- To be conscious that we each have a unique perspective based on our own circumstances, but that nobody has more or less importance in this class.
- To let the facts inform you and lead your learning, rather than finding facts to support a prior viewpoint.
- Avoid the use terms like 'we' to refer to historical figures, peoples – as historians it is necessary to be impartial so the language used is important.
 - i.e. refer to 'the British' rather than 'we'. This helps to separate ourselves from the study and avoids unintentional othering or subconscious bias.
- Accept that interpretations and feelings about what we study can and will differ. This is ok!
- Discussion should be based on the facts. Use evidence to support your points to avoid making unfair or inaccurate assertions.

It is also important that students show respect and acceptance of one another in the classroom in order for them to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas. To create a space of shared learning in which each member of the class is valued, invite students to agree to the ground rules outlined on Slide 2).

The aim is to encourage openness and create space for students to share their ideas and personal experiences, but without obligation and in an environment that is comfortable, supportive and non-judgemental.

Starter (10 minutes)

Provide students with the 'pen portraits' handout and explain to students that they are going to listen to two short descriptions of 'an historical world leader' (Slide 3). Explain that we do not need to know who this person is right now, but to consider the questions on the slide to give ourselves an idea of the person and what the descriptions say about them. Invite students to listen to the first audio pen portrait (Slide 4) and add notes to their handout as they do. After the first clip has been heard, invite comments from the class, using the questions on the board as initial prompts. Now play the second clip (Slide 5) and again,

invite comments. Following this feedback ask the group if either leader sounds like a good leader to them (you may wish to add feedback on Slide 6 to support note taking). Encourage students to explain their reasoning, and generate ideas of what the group collectively identifies as strong leadership characteristics.

Bringing this discussion to a close, explain to the students that these pen-portraits have been written to describe the same person. Ask the following questions:

- Is this a surprise to students and if so, why?
- If anyone might have an idea of who they are describing?
- Do they think both pen portraits can be accurate?

Now explain that these descriptions are about Sir Winston Churchill (Slide 7). Explain that Churchill was born in 1874 and famously went on to become British Prime Minister during World War Two and again after the war, but that this was only one aspect of his life and one way he has played an important role in British history. Whilst he has been celebrated and even won a BBC poll to decide 'the greatest Briton' in 2002, some others feel he was no hero at all. The job in this lesson is to explore his upbringing and some evidence of his beliefs and actions a little more and to begin to understand how it is possible that two such contrasting descriptions, as we have heard, could be levelled towards the same person, and how far such one sided descriptions are useful.

Click on to reveal the enquiry question and lesson title. Explain that over the coming lessons the class will be looking at how Britain was shaped by events that Churchill was a part of, and that in order to study this effectively we need to understand something of Churchill himself, as well as looking at some key events of British history that he was connected to.

What do you know about Churchill? (5 minutes)

Use the image on Slide 9 of the Churchill statue in Parliament Square to frame the question 'what do you know about Churchill'. Add comments to a whiteboard to garner preconceptions and ideas which can be used for further discussion and to measure developing understanding throughout the lesson.

This activity is designed to ascertain what students know or think they know and allow for open discussion, setting the tone for a shared learning experience. Do not feel obliged to correct or challenge misconception at this point. However, you may need to remind students to be open to different interpretations and encourage them to allow the facts to lead them in forming judgements.

Activity: Churchill's Early Life (15 minutes)

Introduce the [film clip](#): Churchill's early life. As they watch students should add key information to a mind map handout. Highlight the prompt questions on the board (Slide 10) and the handout to help students organise their thinking.

Following this conduct a class discussion, adding notes to the mind map on Slide 12, on what students felt was significant about Churchill's early life, the different experiences he had and how these might have helped to form his character and opinions.

Activity: How should we characterise Churchill? (12 minutes)

Remind students of the contrasting interpretations of the two pen portraits in the starter activity. Ask why they think the interpretations may have been so different (Slide 13 pt.1). Draw out that viewpoints depend on the viewer and their own contexts or beliefs, that whilst Churchill may have been a hero to some, to others his influence may have harmed them and therefore affected their opinion of him negatively, and that at different times and in different situations Churchill's views and actions can be perceived positively or negatively depending on the observer and their own beliefs.

Introduce the next activity by saying we will look at some snippets of evidence to help us develop our understanding further, and introduce different themes or aspects of Churchill's work (Slide 13 pt.2). Explain that each piece of evidence will reflect Churchill's attitudes or work in relation to one of five themes: Empire, Women, Workers, War, Leadership.

Students could use a mini whiteboard (or similar whole class feedback method) to show which theme they think each piece of evidence links to, then click on each slide to reveal the theme and discuss what they suggest about Churchill, his beliefs, attitudes and actions. For each theme there are two pieces of evidence offered to suggest contrasting viewpoints. Return to the discussion of why it might be possible for two contrasting interpretations to be true at the same time, and encourage students to consider what the evidence suggests about Churchill's character, what was important to him and how far they might help us understand him. Ask students to be ready to offer a description of Churchill based on the evidence (and any prior knowledge they may have).

Summary: How should we characterise Churchill? (13 minutes)

Give students 2-3 minutes to discuss the following questions in pairs (Slide 24):

- Having looked at some evidence, how would *you* characterise Churchill?
- How has your knowledge developed during this lesson?
- Has this changed since the start of the lesson?
- Is it possible to describe Churchill in a simple way

Having given the students time to discuss their thoughts, collect feedback from the group on these questions. This discussion also provides an opportunity to raise and question any misconceptions asserted in the earlier task when students could state what they 'know' about Churchill. You might raise the earlier point and use the information on a card to challenge it, asking students 'how does this correspond to your prior thinking on Churchill?'

Finally invite students to consider the Concluding question: Is it useful to describe Churchill as a hero or a villain? If necessary allow some paired discussion/take-up time before taking feedback.

It is important for students to recognise and accept that Churchill was involved in a lot of things and there are various interpretations on his role, character, and even motivations. Therefore, we can surmise that he was a complex individual who we may neither entirely support or oppose. It's also clear that he was involved in a range of significant aspects of British history that have shaped the world we live in, some of which are still celebrated and others that are questioned and challenged in the present. So rather than attempting to make simplistic judgements on the person, it is useful and more accurate to see him as a human – a complex and complicated individual who was capable of both positive and negative behaviours and actions within the context of a wider system and culture, and that his characteristics may be seen positively or negatively by people based on their own perspectives of context, time and space.

You may wish to ask students to write a response to the final question as a summary task following discussion.