

The Columbian Exchange

Course: World History Studies **Grades:** 9–12 **Time:** ~50 min standard · ~90 min block **Work mode:** Independent · pencil only Social Studies

Start Here

This is a **paper history investigation** about the **Columbian Exchange** — the worldwide movement of crops, animals, people, and diseases between the **Americas, Europe, and Africa** that followed the voyages beginning in **1492**. You will read short summaries written for this packet, study a diagram of the exchange, and answer questions using a pencil. You do **not** need a computer, a textbook, or the internet — **everything you need is printed in this packet**. Work by yourself and do your best thinking. Write in complete sentences where you are asked to explain. If a question is hard, skip it, keep going, and come back. Reading the passages quietly aloud to yourself is allowed and encouraged. Part of this history includes serious human costs — **disease and forced migration**. Treat those facts **seriously and respectfully**, and keep your answers **non-partisan and grounded in the historical evidence** — analyze what the sources show, not which modern side you favor.

Standard (~50 min): do Sources A–B and Questions 1–10, then the CER in Question 11. **Block (~90 min):** also read **Source C** and complete the block add-ons marked **[BLOCK]**, including the extended writing in Question 11.

Start Observe a Source 5 min

The **Columbian Exchange** is the transfer of living things and diseases between the Americas and the rest of the world after 1492. Warm up before you read.

1Read this short public-domain excerpt, then answer below.

Public-domain excerpt — from the journal kept during the first 1492 voyage across the Atlantic, as recorded and later published (translated from Spanish): "They brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things... They willingly traded everything they owned... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword... I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies."

Type: primary source, public domain (an explorer's voyage journal, later published) · Creator: attributed to the expedition's commander · Date: 1492 · Only short portions of the entry are shown; the rest is left out (...). Spelling and wording are modernized in translation.

Notice: Write **one thing you notice** about how the writer describes the people he met — what does he pay attention to?

Predict: When two peoples who had never met begin trading and traveling between continents, **predict one thing** — living or nonliving — that might travel from one side of the ocean to the other.

2Before reading the sources, why do you think connecting two worlds that had been separate for thousands of years might change what people ate, how many people there were, or which lands they lived on? Give **one reason** in your own words.

Build Read the Sources 10–15 min

Source A — What caused and defined the Columbian Exchange (written for this packet)

For thousands of years the **Americas** had developed apart from **Europe**, **Africa**, and **Asia**. The plants, animals, and diseases on each side of the Atlantic Ocean were largely different. After transatlantic voyages began in **1492**, regular ships tied these worlds together, and living things — and germs — moved in both directions. Historians call this two-way movement the **Columbian Exchange**.

Causes. Sustained **ocean voyages** across the Atlantic connected continents that had been separated. European kingdoms sought **trade, wealth, and land**, and they built **colonies** in the Americas. Ships carried people back and forth, and with the people traveled seeds, farm animals, and — unintentionally — **diseases**.

Crops and food. From the Americas, foods such as **maize (corn), potatoes, tomatoes, cassava, beans,** and **cacao** spread to Europe, Africa, and Asia. From the Old World came **wheat, rice, sugarcane, bananas,** and **coffee**. New calorie-rich crops such as the potato and maize let some regions grow more food, which over the long run helped **populations rise** in parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Animals. The Americas gained **horses, cattle, pigs, sheep,** and **chickens**. Horses, in particular, reshaped hunting, travel, and warfare for many Native American peoples of the plains.

People and disease — the human cost. The exchange also moved people, sometimes by force. Millions of **enslaved Africans** were carried across the Atlantic against their will to labor on American plantations. And **diseases** new to the Americas — such as **smallpox** and **measles** — spread rapidly among Indigenous peoples who had no prior immunity. These epidemics caused **catastrophic loss of life** across the Americas. These are sober facts of the period and should be treated seriously.

Type: original explanatory summary · Focus: causes and global effects of the Columbian Exchange, after 1492

Source B — A market and field description (written for this packet)

This is an **original summary**, not a real quotation. It restates changes that historians commonly describe in the century or two after the exchange began:

"Within a few generations, fields in West Africa grew American maize and cassava, and villages in Ireland and northern Europe came to depend on the American potato. In the Americas, herds of Old-World cattle and horses grazed lands where none had existed before. Sugarcane brought from across the ocean spread on American plantations worked by enslaved laborers. Foods and animals that no one on either shore had known a lifetime earlier had become part of everyday life."

Type: original summary of typical changes · Creator: not a real person · Focus: agricultural and social change after the exchange · Not a genuine primary quotation.

Source C — Direction-of-exchange summary [BLOCK]

Read Source C only if you are doing the **~90-minute block** version. This is an **original data summary** written for this packet using well-established history: it sorts a few well-known items by the direction they mainly traveled. "Old World" here means Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Direction	Examples that moved this way	Main effect
Americas → Old World	maize, potatoes, tomatoes, cassava, cacao	new calorie-rich foods; populations later rose
Old World → Americas	wheat, sugarcane, coffee; horses, cattle, pigs	new crops and livestock reshape farming and travel
Old World → Americas	smallpox, measles (diseases)	catastrophic loss of Indigenous life
Africa → Americas	enslaved people (forced migration)	forced labor on plantations; lasting human cost

Type: original data summary (illustrative, sorted by direction) · Focus: directions of the Columbian Exchange · Items are well-documented examples; the list is not exhaustive.

Word Bank

Columbian Exchange

the two-way movement of crops, animals, people, and disease between the Americas and the rest of the world after 1492.

Old World

Europe, Africa, and Asia — the lands connected before 1492.

New World

the Americas, from the viewpoint of Old-World writers of the time.

Indigenous

the original, native peoples of a place, such as the peoples of the Americas.

colony

a territory settled and controlled by a distant country.

epidemic

a disease that spreads quickly to many people in an area.

immunity

the body's ability to resist a disease it has met before.

migration

the movement of people from one place to live in another; "forced" migration is against a person's will.

plantation

a large farm growing one main crop, often worked by forced labor.

cause

a reason something happens; it comes before an effect.

effect

a result or consequence of a cause.

point of view

the perspective or position from which a source was created.

fact

a statement that can be checked and shown true or false.

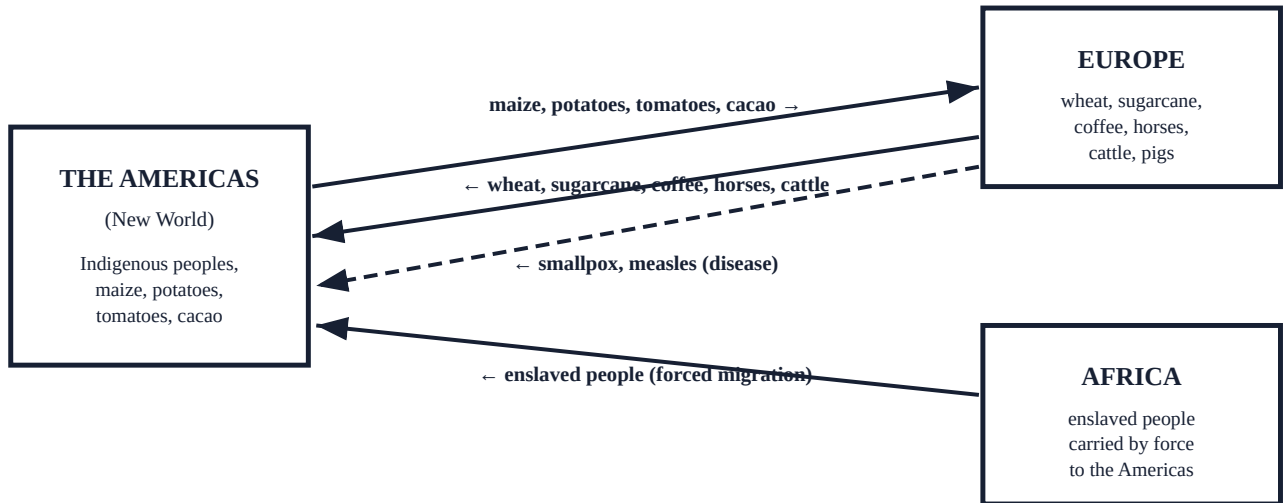
interpretation

an explanation of what evidence means; reasoned from facts.

opinion

a personal belief or preference; not proven by evidence.

The Columbian Exchange after 1492: Directions of Exchange



Solid arrows = crops, animals, and people. Dashed arrow = disease. All labels black on white for grayscale.

Figure 1. A diagram of the Columbian Exchange showing the directions items moved between the Americas, Europe, and Africa after 1492. The dashed arrow marks disease; solid arrows mark crops, animals, and people. All boxes, arrows, and labels are black on white so the figure reads clearly in grayscale.

3Using the diagram (Figure 1), name **two things that moved from the Americas** to the Old World and **two things that moved to the Americas**.

From the Americas: _____ . _____

To the Americas: _____ . _____

Apply Analyze the Sources 20–25 min

4**Source analysis.** Look back at the **1492 journal excerpt in Question 1** and fill in what you can tell about it.

Creator: _____

Date: _____

Type of source (primary or secondary? public domain?): _____

Purpose & point of view: Who created it, and how might that shape what it notices or leaves out? Answer in one sentence.

5**Cause → exchange → effects chain.** Use Source A to complete the chain. Write one item on each blank so the arrows read from *cause* to *the exchange* to *effects*.

Causes (name two)	→ The Columbian Exchange	→ Effects (name two)
a) _____	Ships carry crops, animals, people, and disease across the Atlantic in both directions	c) _____
b) _____		d) _____

Hint: causes might include ocean voyages, the search for trade/wealth/land, or colonies; effects might touch population, agriculture (food), economies, or societies — including the loss of Indigenous life and the forced migration of enslaved Africans.

6From cause to effect. In 2–3 sentences, trace **one** complete chain: pick a cause from Source A, explain how it drove the exchange, and name one effect it had on **population, agriculture, economies, or societies** in a specific place (the Americas, Europe, or Africa).

7Corroborate or contradict. Compare **Source A** (the overview) and **Source B** (the market-and-field description). Do they mostly **corroborate** (agree/support) or **contradict** each other about how crops and animals spread? Circle one and explain with one detail from each source.

Corroborate / Contradict

8Fact, interpretation, or opinion? Write **F** (fact you can check in the sources), **I** (interpretation reasoned from facts), or **O** (opinion / personal belief).

- _____ a) Potatoes and maize spread from the Americas to Europe, Africa, and Asia.
- _____ b) New calorie-rich crops probably helped some Old-World populations grow over time.
- _____ c) The Columbian Exchange was the most interesting event in all of world history.
- _____ d) Diseases such as smallpox spread among Indigenous peoples who had no prior immunity.

9Evaluate a claim using the sources. A student claims: "*The Columbian Exchange only moved crops — it had nothing to do with people or disease.*" Do the sources support this claim?

- Yes — Source A says only crops were exchanged.
- No — Source A describes the exchange of crops **and** animals, **people** (including enslaved Africans by force), **and** disease (such as smallpox), not crops alone.
- The sources never mention crops at all.

Explain your choice using one detail from Source A:

10[BLOCK] Read a data source. Skip this if you are doing the standard version. Using **Source C**, name **one item that moved from the Americas to the Old World** and **one that moved toward the Americas**, then explain in one sentence why sorting items **by direction** helps you understand that the exchange went **both ways**.

Explain Claim–Evidence–Reasoning 10–20 min

Question 11 — Build a historical argument.

Of the Columbian Exchange's effects on population, agriculture, and societies across the continents, which do you think was the most significant? Write a **claim** that names one effect, support it with **two pieces of evidence** from the sources or diagram, then explain your **reasoning**. There is no single "right" effect — your job is to argue from the evidence, and to handle the human costs (disease, forced migration) factually and respectfully.

Sentence stems you may use: "The most significant effect of the Columbian Exchange was _____ because..." · "One piece of evidence is... (from Source A / B / C or the diagram)." · "A second piece of evidence is..." · "This evidence supports my claim because..."

Claim

Evidence (two pieces)

Reasoning

[BLOCK] Extended writing — add a second source and a counter-consideration:

If you are doing the ~90-minute block, extend your argument on the lines below. (1) Bring in a **second source** you have not yet quoted (for example **Source C** or a specific arrow from the diagram) as added evidence. (2) Add

a **counter-consideration**: name one reason someone might argue a *different* effect was most significant, then explain why you still hold your claim — or how your claim changes.

Close ACE Wrap-Up 5 min

Articulate

In your own words, explain what the **Columbian Exchange** was, as if teaching a friend who missed today.

Connect

Point to one item in a source or on the diagram that shows a **cause** of the exchange *and* one that shows an **effect**. Name both.

Extend

Name one food you might eat today that traveled across the ocean in the Columbian Exchange, and give one reason it connects to this history.

Continue Early Finisher optional • ~15 min

If you finish early (no new materials needed):

Sort an effect by continent. On the back of this page, pick **one** effect named in the sources (for example: new foods, population change, the spread of disease, or forced migration). Then name **which continent** — the Americas, Europe, or Africa — you think it changed the most, **and why**. Use only the sources and diagram, and support your choice with one detail. Handle the human-cost effects seriously and respectfully.

Turn in: Hand in this whole packet with your name, class period, and date filled in. Make sure questions 1–11 and the ACE box are answered (skip the items marked [BLOCK] if you did the standard ~50-minute version). The early-finisher task is optional but turn it in too if you did it.

HS_WHIST_ColumbianExchange_01 — The Columbian Exchange Student Packet