Writing Back: Who were these writers answering, and how?

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 1. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

From the 1870s to the 1920s, Canada and the United States passed laws and built schools meant to end Indigenous nations as nations. A few Indigenous writers answered in English, in the magazines and halls settlers paid for, using the colonizer's own language and readers to tell the story he did not want told.

What students do: Students build a context timeline (the Indian Act, 1876; the potlatch ban, 1884; 1885; residential and boarding schools; compulsory attendance, 1920), meet the unit's three historical writers, define “writing back,” set purposes for reading historical texts and plan reading strategies for before, during and after reading, and preview the summative tasks.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
A3.1	demonstrate an understanding of the challenges First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities face and have faced in controlling their own narratives and resisting colonialist views, as revealed in text forms studied in this course
C1.1	read a variety of student- and teacher-selected contemporary texts from diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources and historical texts, identifying specific purposes for reading
C1.2	select and use the most appropriate reading comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading to understand texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning about the historical context in which early Indigenous writers published. • We are learning to set purposes for reading and choose reading strategies for historical texts.	• I can explain what “writing back” means. • I can place the unit's writers on a timeline of laws and events. • I can set a purpose for reading a historical text. • I can choose strategies for before, during and after reading.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Writing Back deck.
- **Handouts:** Context Timeline (page 1), My Reading Plan (page 2).
- **Reader:** Writing Back Reader (Start Here folder).

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–10	**Hook**	Answering a story about you.	Discuss.	
10–30	**Context**	Timeline, 1876–1924.	Build the timeline.	Laws connected to lives.
30–45	**Three writers**	Johnson, Zitkála-Šá, Eastman.	Note.	
45–65	**Reading plan**	Purposes and strategies.	Plan.	Specific purposes set.
65–75	**The unit**	Summatives.	Preview.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** A partly completed timeline with key words given.
- **ELL:** Picture glossary for “Indian Act,” “treaty,” “boarding school,” “magazine.”
- **Challenge:** Find one other Indigenous writer published before 1930 and note where they published.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Context Timeline and Reading Plan	Narrative control (A3.1), purposes for reading (C1.1) and comprehension strategies (C1.2)

Writing back: key points

- **Writing back:** Answering a dominant story in its own language and forms, for its own readers.
- **Context:** Indian Act (1876), potlatch ban (1884), 1885 on the prairies, residential schools in Canada and boarding schools in the U.S., compulsory attendance in Canada from 1920.
- **Johnson:** Mohawk poet and performer, 1861–1913; poems and stories for Canadian, American and English audiences.
- **Zitkála-Šá:** Yankton Dakota writer and activist, 1876–1938; boarding school essays in the Atlantic Monthly (1900).
- **Eastman:** Santee Dakota physician and writer, 1858–1939; raised in exile in Manitoba; Indian Boyhood (1902).
- **Purposes:** Read for context, for the writer's argument, for style, and for what the text asks of its readers.

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Teacher notes

- Johnson, Zitkála-Šá and Eastman are historical writers (they died in 1913, 1938 and 1939). We read them as historical context: Indigenous writers who answered settler audiences a century ago. The course's contemporary voices are First Nations, Métis and Inuit creators chosen by the teacher.
- Zitkála-Šá (Yankton Dakota) and Charles Eastman (Santee Dakota) wrote in the United States. Dakota homelands cross today's border, and Eastman spent his boyhood in exile in Manitoba after the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. Their accounts of U.S. boarding schools are context for, not the same as, Canada's residential school system.
- Dates on the timeline were checked in November 2026: the Indian Act became law on April 12, 1876; the potlatch ban was enacted in 1884 (lifted in 1951); in 1920 Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, made residential school attendance compulsory for First Nations children aged 7 to 15 (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation timeline).
- The 2008 federal apology and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–2015) belong to this history's present. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008–2015) heard from more than 6,500 witnesses and issued 94 Calls to Action; Calls 62 and 63 address education.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.
- Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.

Coming up

Lesson 2, Two Audiences.

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