HANDS DOWN EDUCATION · 6-WEEK UNIT STUDY PLANNER

Pirates unit study

A K-12 pirate homeschool curriculum: the real Golden Age of Piracy, ships and navigation, pirate articles, shipwrecks and Treasure Island, in a six-week plan.

GRADE BANDS K-2 · 3-5 · 6-8 · 9-12
FULL GUIDE https://handsdowneducation.com/homeschool/pirates

How to use this planner

The six weeks below are the guide's authored scope and sequence: one focus, one key activity and one portfolio output per week. Run the activity at the level your child is at (the grade band notes tell you how), keep the output, and by week six you have a portfolio that shows the unit end to end.

Pace is yours. A week here is three to five working sessions; a topic that is going well can take two calendar weeks, and one that has run dry can be closed early. Tick the box when a week's output is in the portfolio.

Six-week scope and sequence

Wk	Focus	Key activity	Portfolio output	Done
1	**Fact and legend**	Sort pirate claims into true and invented; the Golden Age on a timeline; the first treasure map; begin Treasure Island or the band's read-aloud.	A two-column fact-or-legend chart to be updated through the unit, and a treasure map with a key.	☐
2	**Ships and the sea**	Parts of a sailing ship; the foil-boat test with graphs; why ships float; sails and wind tested with a fan and a paper sail.	A labeled ship diagram and a boat-test write-up with a table or graph.	☐
3	**Navigation and maps**	Compass directions and coordinate grids; latitude and dead reckoning; the trade winds and treasure-fleet routes; plot a voyage and keep the log.	A plotted voyage on a real map with a five-day ship's log.	☐
4	**Pirate life and rules**	Roberts's articles; dividing plunder by shares; elected captains; comparing pirate, merchant and navy ships; privateers and letters of marque.	A crew's articles written by the child and a worked share calculation.	☐
5	**Real pirates and real wrecks**	Blackbeard, Bellamy, Bonny and Read, Kidd; the Queen Anne's Revenge and Whydah excavations; the links to the slave trade for older students.	Museum labels for three artifacts or a pirate biography card set.	☐
6	**The end of piracy and the legend**	Pardons, navies and trials; Treasure Island finished and compared with history; modern piracy for older students; final exhibit or paper.	A family exhibit with the completed fact-or-legend chart, or a source-based essay.	☐

Running it at your child's level

Grades K-2: maps, ships and floating

Young children love pirates for the ships, the maps and the treasure, and every one of those is a lesson. A K-2 pirate unit is following and drawing maps, learning the parts of a ship, testing what floats and what sinks, counting coins and listening to good stories, with real pirates introduced as people who lived long ago on wooden ships.

- Treasure hunt: draw a simple map of one room with a few landmarks, hide a box of 'gold' (buttons or coins) and have your child follow the map; then let them draw a map for a sibling or parent to follow, with a key for the landmarks.
- Sink or float: test ten objects from around the house in a tub of water, predict first and sort them into two piles; then make foil boats and count how many pennies each holds before it sinks.
- Parts of a ship: label a large drawing of a sailing ship — bow, stern, mast, sail, deck, anchor, crow's nest —

and play a 'captain says' game with the words (run to the bow, climb to the crow's nest).

- Count the treasure: sort a pile of mixed coins by type, count each pile, and share a pile of buttons fairly between three or four stuffed-animal pirates, talking about what to do with the leftovers.

  Reading: How I Became a Pirate by Melinda Long, illustrated by David Shannon, a funny read-aloud about a boy who joins a pirate crew and discovers what they lack, and Pirates Past Noon by Mary Pope Osborne for a first chapter book with real pirate history behind it.

Grades 3-5: real pirates, logbooks and treasure math

Upper elementary students can separate real pirates from storybook ones, place the Golden Age on a timeline and a map, and use real documents — a set of pirate articles, a picture of a ship's log — as raw material. This is the age for coordinate-grid treasure maps, dividing plunder by shares, keeping a voyage logbook and building a boat to test.

- Coordinate treasure map: draw an island on graph paper with labeled x and y axes, place the treasure, a reef and three landmarks at coordinate points, and write clues as ordered pairs for someone else to follow.
- Share the plunder: using Bartholomew Roberts's articles (captain and quartermaster two shares, officers one and a half, crew one), divide a chest of coins among a crew of twelve, then work out what changes if the captain demands more.
- Real or legend: research six famous claims — walking the plank, buried treasure, eye patches, parrots, the Jolly Roger, women pirates — and write one paragraph per claim giving the evidence and a verdict.
- Keep a ship's log: plot a voyage from Nassau to Charleston on a printed map, then write five daily entries with the date, wind, course, distance sailed and one event, in a plain logbook style.

  Reading: Pirate Diary: The Journal of Jake Carpenter by Richard Platt, illustrated by Chris Riddell, a cabin boy's illustrated diary with notes on what is historically accurate, and DK Eyewitness Pirate by Richard Platt for photographs of real weapons, flags and treasure.

Grades 6-8: the Golden Age as history, economics and science

Middle schoolers can study why piracy surged and collapsed: the end of the War of the Spanish Succession left thousands of sailors unemployed, the trade winds and the Spanish treasure fleets made the Caribbean a hunting ground, and pirate crews ran their ships by written articles while navies paid far worse. They can read Treasure Island and compare it with the record, and they can handle the darker facts — violence, executions and the slave trade — as part of the history.

- Read the articles of Bartholomew Roberts and compare them with life aboard a merchant or navy ship of the period: who made decisions, how plunder was shared, what happened to the injured. Write a page arguing whether a pirate ship was more democratic than a navy ship, and what that democracy did not include.
- Model the trade winds and currents: on a map of the Atlantic, draw the northeast trades, the Gulf Stream and the routes of the Spanish treasure fleets, and explain why pirates waited in the Bahamas and the Florida Straits.
- Read Treasure Island and keep a two-column list of pirate details Stevenson took from history (ship types, articles, marooning as a punishment) and those he invented or popularized (the treasure map, the parrot, the one-legged sea cook), citing chapters.
- Study the Whydah: research how a slave ship became Sam Bellamy's flagship, how it sank in a storm off Cape Cod in 1717, and how divers authenticated it in 1984; write a short museum label for three of its artifacts.

  Reading: Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson, read in full, alongside chapters of Under the Black Flag by David Cordingly, a historian's account of what pirate life was really like and where the myths came from.

Grades 9-12: sources, law and the end of piracy

High schoolers can work like historians: weigh A General History of the Pyrates (1724), a bestseller of uncertain authorship, against trial transcripts and colonial correspondence; study how pardons, naval patrols and mass hangings ended the Golden Age within a decade; and compare it with piracy elsewhere — the Barbary corsairs, Zheng Yi Sao's fleet in the South China Sea and modern piracy off Somalia and in the Strait of Malacca.

- Compare two accounts of Blackbeard's last fight at Ocracoke in 1718 — the General History and Lieutenant

Robert Maynard's report — and write an essay on where they agree, where they differ and which details you would trust and why.

- Research the 1718 King's Pardon and Woodes Rogers's governorship of Nassau, and write a policy analysis: why did some pirates accept the pardon and others refuse, and what combination of offers and force ended piracy in the Bahamas?
- Compare the Golden Age with modern piracy using the International Maritime Bureau's annual piracy reports: where attacks happen now, what ships are targeted and how navies and shipping companies respond.
- Write a research paper on one lesser-known pirate or pirate community — Zheng Yi Sao, the Barbary corsairs, Henry Every, the Madagascar settlements — with at least four sources and a section on the limits of the evidence.

  Reading: The Republic of Pirates by Colin Woodard, a narrative history of the Bahamas pirates and the governor sent to end them, with chapters of A General History of the Pyrates (1724) as the primary source to test it against.

A sample week, subject by subject

Reading & Writing

Read a chapter of Treasure Island or Pirate Diary aloud, then keep a ship's log for a three-day voyage: date, wind, course, distance run and one event per day, written in the plain style of a real logbook.

Math

Divide a chest of 600 coins using the shares in Bartholomew Roberts's articles — captain and quartermaster two shares, master, boatswain and gunner one and a half, everyone else one — for a crew of your choosing, and check that every coin is accounted for.

Science

Build boats from identical squares of aluminum foil, load each with pennies until it sinks, and compare which hull shape carried the most; then explain why a wide, flat hull displaced more water.

Social Studies

Mark the Spanish treasure fleet routes, the trade winds and the main pirate havens — Port Royal, Nassau, Tortuga, Madagascar — on a map of the Atlantic, and write why pirates gathered where they did.

Art

Design a pirate flag from the symbols real crews used (skulls, bones, hourglasses, raised swords) and write one sentence on the message each symbol was meant to send to a merchant ship.

Books, sites and kits

- How I Became a Pirate by Melinda Long and David Shannon (Book (K-2)) — A boy joins Braid Beard's crew and learns what pirates miss out on; the opening read-aloud for the youngest.
- Pirates Past Noon by Mary Pope Osborne (Book (K-3)) — Magic Tree House #4, with a companion Research Guide on pirates for the facts behind the story.
- Pirate Diary by Richard Platt and Chris Riddell (Book (3-5)) — A 1716 cabin boy's illustrated journal with notes on what is real; the model for the logbook activity.
- DK Eyewitness Pirate by Richard Platt (Book (3-8)) — Photographs of real weapons, navigational instruments, flags and treasure; the reference book to keep open all unit.
- Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson (Book (6-12)) — The 1883 novel that invented the modern pirate; free in the public domain and the literature spine for 6-8.
- The Republic of Pirates by Colin Woodard (Book (9-12)) — A narrative history of the Bahamas pirates — Blackbeard, Bellamy, Vane — and the governor sent to stop them.
- Queen Anne's Revenge Project (North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources) (Website) — Photographs, conservation updates and history from the excavation of Blackbeard's flagship off Beaufort, North Carolina.
- Royal Museums Greenwich (Website) — Free articles and collection images on pirates, privateers, navigation

instruments and life at sea.

Standards this unit covers

- D2.Geo.1.3-5 (C3) — Construct maps and other graphic representations of both familiar and unfamiliar places — the treasure maps and the plotted voyage.
- D2.Eco.1.3-5 (C3) — Compare the benefits and costs of individual choices — why a merchant sailor might join a pirate crew, and what it could cost him.
- D2.Civ.3.6-8 (C3) — Examine the origins, purposes and impact of constitutions, laws, treaties and international agreements — pirate articles read as a written constitution.
- D2.His.10.6-8 (C3) — Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources — legend against shipwreck evidence.
- D2.His.16.9-12 (C3) — Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past — the two accounts of Blackbeard's last fight.
- K-2-ETS1-3 (NGSS) — Analyze data from tests of two objects designed to solve the same problem to compare the strengths and weaknesses of how each performs — the foil-boat trials.
- MS-ESS2-6 (NGSS) — Develop and use a model to describe how unequal heating and rotation of the Earth cause patterns of atmospheric and oceanic circulation — the trade winds and the treasure-fleet routes.
- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.5.G.A.2 (CCSS Math) — Represent real world and mathematical problems by graphing points in the first quadrant of the coordinate plane — the coordinate treasure map.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1 (CCSS ELA) — Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text — Treasure Island against the historical record.

Common questions

What should a pirate unit study include?

Five strands: ships and the sea (parts of a ship, sailing, why ships float), navigation and maps (compass, latitude, dead reckoning, treasure-map grids), the history of the Golden Age of Piracy and the real pirates in it, the economics and rules of pirate life (articles, shares, privateering, why piracy ended), and legend against evidence — Treasure Island, films and the shipwrecks archaeologists have actually excavated. The six-week scope and sequence above runs one strand a week and ends with an exhibit or a paper.

Is a pirate unit study appropriate for young children?

Yes, if you choose what to put at the center. For K-2 the unit is ships, maps, floating and sinking, flags and adventure stories; the real dangers of life at sea can be mentioned simply. The violence of piracy, executions and the connection to the slave trade belong in the 6-8 and 9-12 bands, where they are part of understanding why piracy rose and fell. The grade-band sections above are written with that in mind.

How much of what we know about pirates is true?

Less than most children expect. Walking the plank is almost entirely a later invention; treasure maps marked with an X come from Treasure Island; most pirates spent plunder rather than burying it, though William Kidd did bury some on Gardiners Island in 1699. What is true is often more interesting: crews elected captains, wrote articles, paid compensation for lost limbs, and included men of many nations, among them Africans who had escaped slavery. Sorting the two lists is week one's main activity.

Can I run a pirate unit study with several ages at once?

Easily. Everyone reads or listens to the same story and works on the same map. A five-year-old follows the treasure map across the yard, a nine-year-old draws one with a coordinate grid and divides the treasure, a twelve-year-old writes the ship's log for a voyage plotted on a real chart, and a fifteen-year-old compares two primary sources on Blackbeard's last fight. The grade-band sections above give one row per child for the same week.

Does this unit work for secular and faith-based homeschools alike?

Yes. The content is maritime history, geography, economics and literature, and the activities are the same in any setting. Moral questions come up naturally — why people chose piracy, how they were punished, what justice looked like at sea — and the unit treats them as discussion questions for your family to answer in your own framework rather than supplying a verdict.

How much does a pirate unit study cost?

Almost nothing. Aluminum foil and pennies, paper and tea for aged maps, a compass, graph paper and a library copy of Treasure Island cover the core; a tub of water and a fan make a sailing test. The Queen Anne's Revenge project, Royal Museums Greenwich and the Whydah museum publish free photographs and histories, and A General History of the Pyrates is in the public domain.

How do I start a pirate unit study?

Start with a treasure map. Draw a map of your yard or living room on tea-stained paper, hide a small 'chest' and let your child follow the clues; then hand over graph paper and have them make one for you. That first afternoon covers maps, directions and grids. The next day, sort a stack of pirate 'facts' into true and invented and promise to check them over the coming weeks. Pick the row from the grade-band section above that fits your child, and the six-week scope and sequence carries the rest.

Is pirates a good homeschool subject?

It is one of the most motivating history units there is, because the hook is built in and the evidence is real: shipwrecks with bells and cannons, trial transcripts, logbooks and maps. Inside the unit the content maps onto geography, economics, civics, physical science, earth science and literature standards — grids and coordinates, division and fractions, buoyancy, the trade winds, a written constitution and a classic novel. The skills list above names each one with the strand of the standards it lands on.

Turn this into a full, standards-aligned curriculum

Generate a complete plan around pirates for your child's grade and pace — free to try, no account required.

https://handsdowneducation.com/curriculum/generate