

Code Talkers

Joseph Bruchac tells the powerful story of the Navajo code talkers of World War II

About the Story

Lexile® Measure 890L

For qualitative complexity factors, go to Scope Online.

Learning Objective: to identify key ideas and details in a narrative nonfiction article

Featured Skill: key ideas and details

Additional skill covered in this lesson plan: figurative language

Essential Questions:

- Why should stories about war be remembered?
- How do people preserve culture?
- How are language and culture linked?

Standards:

The article and its suite of support materials support these Common Core Anchor Standards: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.5, W.2, SL.1, SL.2, L.4, L.5, L.6

For more standards information—including TEKS—go to Scope Online.



Your Teaching Package

Find your full suite of support materials at scope.scholastic.com.

Audio:

- Author read-aloud
- Text-to-speech
- Vocabulary

Video:

- Behind the Scenes

Differentiated Articles:

- Lower-Lexile version
- Spanish language version

Connected readings from the Scope archives:

- “Fancy Dancer”
- “More Than a Game”
- “The Vanishing Beasts”
- Special Collection: Stories of World War II and the Holocaust

Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Do Now: Decode a Secret Message
- Video Discussion Questions
- Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice
- Close Reading and Critical Thinking Questions
- Featured Skill: Key Ideas and Details
- Choice Board
- Core Skills Workout: Summarizing*, Text Features, Text Structure*, Nonfiction Elements
- Word Study
- Lesson Plan Slide Deck
- Quiz*

*Available on two levels

Step-by-Step Lesson Plan

1. Prepare to Read (20 minutes)

Teacher's note on terminology: "Native American," "Native Peoples," "Native," "American Indian," "First Nations," "Indigenous," and "Indigenous Peoples" are terms in use today to describe people indigenous to North America. Not every Indigenous person identifies with all of these terms, and it is important to refer to people using the terms they prefer. In many cases, Native people prefer to be called by their tribe/nation.

Do Now: Decode a Secret Message (5 minutes)

- Project the prompt below on your whiteboard or share the printable version found in your Resources tab.

Can you translate this coded message?

MOASI NE-AHS-JAH LHA-CHA-EH DZEH GAH DZEH MOASI DZEH TKIN
A-KEH-DI-GLINI DZEH LHA-CHA-EH

MOASI	= Cat
LHA-CHA-EH	= Dog
DZEH	= Elk
TKIN	= Ice
NE-AHS-JAH	= Owl
GAH	= Rabbit
A-KEH-DI-GLINI	= Victor

- The message is "code received." To decode, substitute each word in Diné, the native language of the Navajo people seen in the left-hand column, with its corresponding English word on the right. Then string together the first letters of the English words to spell the words in the secret message. Tell students that today they will learn about this Navajo code that helped the U.S. and its allies win World War II.

Optionally, after reading, visit the National Museum of the American Indian's website for a Navajo dictionary and more translating tasks:

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/code-talking/>

Watch the Video (10 minutes)

- Watch the **Behind the Scenes** video in which author Joseph Bruchac introduces students to the Navajo code talkers and offers insights into the writing process. Have students respond to the **Video Discussion Questions** (available in your Resources tab) in small groups or pairs.

Preview Vocabulary (10 minutes)

- Project the Google Slides version of **Vocabulary Definitions and Practice** on your whiteboard. Review the definitions and complete the activity as a class. Highlighted words: *allies, declassified, enacted, fronts, indispensable, oasis, platoon*. Audio pronunciations of the words and a read-aloud of the definitions are embedded on the slides. Optionally, print the PDF version or share the slideshow link directly to your LMS and have students preview the words and complete the activity independently before class.

2. Read and Discuss (45 minutes)

- Invite a volunteer to read the As You Read box on page 4 or at the top of the digital story page.
- Read the article once as a class. (*Differentiation: Share the lower-Lexile version or the Spanish version of the article.*) Optionally, have students listen to author Joseph Bruchac read his article aloud while they follow along. The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Divide students into groups to read the article again and respond to the following **Close-Reading and Critical-Thinking** questions, also located in the Resources tab.

Close-Reading Questions (25 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **In your own words, what was the purpose of so-called Indian boarding schools? What was the effect of these schools on Native peoples and their communities?** (key ideas and details) *Boarding schools were meant to eliminate Native cultures and replace them with “mainstream American” ways of life. These schools caused families to lose contact, children to die,*

and traditional languages and cultures to disappear. The trauma inflicted by these schools continues to be felt in Native communities today.

2. **Why was being a United States Marine complicated for Chester Nez? Why was he eager to join the war effort?** (key ideas and details) *Joining the United States Marines was complicated for Nez because it was the United States government that had required Nez and hundreds of thousands of other Native children to attend boarding schools where they were stripped of their language, cultural traditions, and contact with their families. It was the United States government that had waged war on his ancestors, forcing them off their lands and killing thousands. Despite this painful history, Nez saw the United States as his country too and believed that it was worth protecting.*
 3. **Why was the Navajo code more effective than the codes American forces had previously used?** (key ideas and details) *Previous codes consisted of letters and numbers, making them easy to break, especially by the Japanese, who were expert code breakers. Diné, however, was a language with many tones and complex grammar that was extremely difficult to learn; no one but the Navajo people could speak it well. Additionally, previous codes required machines on both ends that encoded and decoded the numbers and letters, a process that could take hours. Two pairs of Navajo code talkers could send and receive messages in just minutes.*
 4. **Bruchac writes, “And it would be Diné, the language he was told to forget, that would one day help turn the tide in World War II.” What does Bruchac mean by “turn the tide”? How did Diné turn the tide in World War II?** (figurative language, key ideas and details) *To turn the tide is to reverse the trend or course of events. For example, if a team is losing and then a player scores a point and the team starts winning, you could say the player turned the tide for the team. The United States Marines had been battling the Japanese Imperial Army for control of the island of Guadalcanal for months, and things were not looking good. Once the Marines began using the Diné code, they were finally able to take control of Guadalcanal. After that, more code talkers were trained and eventually all crucial radio messages in the Pacific were sent using the Navajo code. This unbreakable code helped American forces take control of more and more islands.*
 5. **Besides using their language for secret communication, how did Navajo culture help Nez and the other code talkers survive the war?** (key ideas and details) *The Navajo men’s way of life prior to joining the Marines provided them with superior strength, endurance, and marksmanship. They also depended on their cultural and spiritual traditions to help them survive, like Nez and Begay’s corn pollen prayer. When the men returned home, ceremonies such as the Enemy Way that was performed on Nez helped heal the spiritual and psychological wounds of war.*
- As a class, discuss the following question.

Critical-Thinking Question

(5 minutes)

The following question can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. Respond to the statement in the **As You Read** box: Think about why the work of the Navajo code talkers was so important. *The work of the Navajo code talkers was important not only because it played a significant role in helping the U.S. and its allies win World War II, but also because it inspired Native nations whose languages had been in danger of disappearing to preserve and restore them.*

3. Write About It: Key Ideas and Details (45 minutes)

- Have students complete the **Featured Skill Activity: Key Ideas and Details**. This activity prepares them to respond to the writing prompt on page 10 in the printed magazine and at the bottom of the digital story page:

Imagine that the U.S. Postal Service wants ideas for who to feature on a new series of stamps. Write an essay explaining why it should choose the code talkers. Support your ideas with information from the article.

- Alternatively, have students choose a task from the **Choice Board**, a menu of culminating tasks. (Our Choice Board options include the writing prompt from the magazine, differentiated versions of the writing prompt, and additional creative ways for students to demonstrate their understanding of a story or article.)

Support for Multilingual Learners

These questions are designed to help students respond to the text at a level that's right for them.

Yes/No Questions

Ask students to demonstrate comprehension with a very simple answer.

1. Was Chester Nez allowed to speak Diné at boarding school? *No, he wasn't.*
2. Did Nez want to join the Marines? *Yes, he did.*
3. Did the U.S. ever take control of the island of Guadalcanal? *Yes, it did.*
4. Did Japan ever break the code created by the code talkers? *No, it didn't.*
5. Was Nez honored for his service in the military? *Yes, he was.*

Either/Or Questions

Encourage students to use language from the question in their answer.

1. Do the United States and the Navajo Nation have a peaceful history or a painful history? *The United States and the Navajo Nation have a painful history.*
2. During World War II, did the U.S. fight Japan in the Pacific Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean? *The U.S. fought Japan in the Pacific Ocean.*
3. Is Diné a simple language or a complex language? *Diné is a complex language.*
4. Did Japan win World War II or did they surrender? *Japan surrendered.*
5. By the end of the war, how many code talkers were there: more than 400 or 29? *By the end of the war, there were more than 400 code talkers.*

Short-Answer Questions

Challenge students to produce simple answers on their own.

1. What made the Navajo language ideal for a code? *The Navajo language was ideal because only the Navajo people spoke it well, and the language had never been fully written down.*
2. Why was the code talkers' work important? *The code talkers' work helped the United States and their allies win the war. It also inspired members of other Native nations to preserve and restore their languages.*

Language-Acquisition Springboard

Create your own code to better understand how the top-secret Navajo code worked.

After reading the article, ask students to think about how letters in English were replaced with Diné words: A was replaced with the Diné word for *ant*, and B was replaced with the Diné word for *bear*, for example.

Build on this idea by thinking of an animal for each letter of the alphabet: cat, dog, elephant, fox, etc. After writing down all the animal names you can, choose a language (or more than one) that your students speak. Next to each animal name, write its translation.

Once you have a non-English word to represent each letter of the English alphabet, have students write short messages to each other in your new code. They'll understand how the Navajo code's two layers of encryption made it so difficult to break, and they'll enjoy decoding the messages too.

Connected readings from the Scope archives

Other articles and stories centered on Native peoples and cultures:

- Fiction: [“Fancy Dancer”](#) and [“Meet a Real-Life Fancy Dancer”](#) (Cree)
- Short Read: [“More Than a Game”](#) (Haudenosaunee)
- Paired Texts: [“The Vanishing Beasts”](#) and [“Return of the Buffalo”](#) (Fort Peck Assiniboiné and Sioux)

Other articles and stories about World War II:

- [Special Collection: Stories of World War II and the Holocaust](#)