

Grade 6: **Unit 2**

Before Columbus: Introduction

Purpose: Why This Unit?

Before Columbus by Charles C. Mann is a fascinating book that challenges the traditional historical narrative about the development of civilizations in the Americas. During the next few weeks, you will help your scholars analyze this powerful work of nonfiction.

Your job, though, is first and foremost that of a reading teacher. You must ensure that your students enlist the basic tools of great readers — envisioning, reading with fluency, engaging in word attack, and, of course, using plot, setting, and character development — to understand the book’s provocative ideas. You must know your scholars’ Fountas & Pinnell levels and ensure that they are swiftly growing as readers. You must ensure that your scholars are reading and writing at home and that your scholars’ parents are invested in their learning.

You are also a teacher of writing. You must ensure that your scholars are deeply invested in improving their writing and that they give you their best work. Always set sky-high expectations and settle only for scholars’ best effort. It is your responsibility to dramatically improve your students’ writing capacities. You will need to study the Top 5 Writing Tactics and ensure that students know how to be critics of their own writing.

In particular, you are responsible for the following outcomes:

- First and foremost, you must get 100% of your scholars independently reading at least four books per month.

- You are responsible for 100% of your scholars completing nightly literacy homework that will develop them as readers and writers.
- You are responsible for getting minimally 90% of your students on or above grade level in reading, as measured by the Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessment.

You will not achieve 100% without setting clear expectations for your scholars AND their parents, and driving relentlessly toward these goals. If you hold scholars and parents accountable and are an absolute stickler at the beginning, you will make it easier for yourself and frankly for your students and their parents. The worst thing you can do as a teacher is let students slide and then get tough. You will breed resentment and distrust, whereas clear expectations and utter consistency breed trust and respect.

Themes in *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*

In order to successfully teach this unit, you must be intellectually prepared at the highest level. This means reading and studying the entire book before launching the unit, and understanding the major themes that Charles C. Mann communicates through the book. By the time your scholars finish reading *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*, they should be able to articulate and explain these themes.

The table below outlines the major topics and themes highlighted in *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*. Note that you should NOT review these with scholars before they begin reading the book. Rather, scholars will uncover themes organically through their reading. As a teacher of reading, your job is to facilitate rich conversations about the meaning of each chapter. You will do this by posing the discussion questions provided in each seminar. As scholars read the text, you will press them to analyze how the author uses events in the book to communicate the major themes.

While there is not one correct thematic statement for each major topic discussed in the book, there are accurate (evidence-based) and inaccurate (non-evidence-based) interpretations of what the author is arguing. Therefore, we have provided exemplar thematic statements in the table below.

Topic	Theme
Fate vs. Free Will	Oftentimes, fate, or circumstances beyond human beings' control, has a larger impact on the outcome of situations than free will.
Power in Conflict	Many variables — such as genetics, technology, and geography — impact the outcome of a conflict between groups. The larger group does not necessarily have the advantage.
The Role of Geography in History	The landscape and climate of various regions of the world have significantly shaped the course of history.
The Role of Religion in History	Many social and political practices, decisions, and outcomes are heavily influenced by religion.