



Oklahoma Alliance for Geographic Education

Teacher Training | Curriculum Development | Outreach Programs | and More!

Processing the Tulsa Race Massacre Through Literacy



Photo Credit: Sidedoor Podcast

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Grade Level: 6-12, with adaptations for younger grades

Purpose/Overview:

One of the darkest days in Oklahoma history has been an absent conversation in the classroom. As the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre approaches, our mission as educators to help students expand their worldview takes on even greater significance. These reading and writing exercises seek to help students process what they have learned about the event that changed a community forever.

National Geography Standards from *Geography for Life* Geographic Elements & Standards:

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/national-geography-standards-index/>

Geography Standard 17: How to apply geography to interpret the past

Oklahoma Academic Standards for Social Studies (2025)

<https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/standards-learning/social-studies/SS%20OAS%20July%202025.pdf>

United States History

USH.C.4.1 Examine the economic, political, social, and cultural transformations between the World Wars.

E. Describe the rising racial tensions in American society, resulting in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, violence typified by the Tulsa Race Massacre, and the continued use of poll taxes and literacy tests to disenfranchise African Americans, including responses by African American leadership, such as Marcus Garvey.

Oklahoma History

OKH.C.6 The student will examine Oklahoma's political, economic, and social history regarding race during the early decades following statehood.

OKH.C.6.3 Examine the evolution of race relations in Oklahoma.

E. Analyze the causes of the Tulsa Race Massacre, including its continued social and economic impact.

Oklahoma Academic Standards for Social Studies (2019)

<https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/literacy-policy-and-programs/oklahoma-academic-standards/2019-OAS-Social-Studies-Standards.pdf>

United States History

USH.4.1 Examine the economic, political, and social transformations between the World Wars.

B. Describe the rising racial tensions in American society including the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, increased lynchings, race riots as typified by the Tulsa Race Riot, the rise of Marcus Garvey and black nationalism, and the use of poll taxes and literacy tests to disenfranchise blacks.

Oklahoma History

OKH.5 The student will examine Oklahoma's political, social, cultural, and economic transformation during the early decades following statehood.

OKH.5.2 Examine multiple points of view regarding the evolution of race relations in Oklahoma, including:

E. Causes of the Tulsa Race Riot and its continued social and economic impact.

F. The role labels play in understanding historic events, for example "riot" versus "massacre".

Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts:

<https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/osde/documents/services/literacy-policy-and-programs/oklahoma-academic-standards/2021-OAS-English-Language-Arts-Standards.pdf>

Content Standard 1: Students will listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

- Students will develop and apply effective communication skills through active listening.
- Students will develop and apply effective communication skills to share ideas through speaking.

Content Standard 3: Students will apply critical thinking skills to reading and writing.

- Students will analyze, interpret, and evaluate increasingly complex literary and informational texts that include a wide range of historical, cultural, ethnic, and global perspectives from a variety of genres.
- Students will thoughtfully and intentionally write, addressing a range of modes, purposes, and audiences.

Geographic Themes: Movement, Place

Time Frame: 2-3 class periods, depending on age group and depth of complexity

Procedures

Engage:

1. Discuss the following with students as a whole group:
 - a. Is some place meaningful to you? Where is it? What makes it powerful?
 - b. What are the places you carry with you? What places have you left behind?
2. Distribute index cards to students, or use individual dry erase boards, notebook paper, etc. Have students make a simple chart with the terms "riot" and "massacre" at the top. Underneath each term, have students identify differences

between the two and discuss their observations. Define the terms, making a connection with modern events.

3. A presentation with slides is also provided here:

 OKAGE - Tulsa Race Massacre - 2025.pptx

Explain:

1. Convey to students that in 1921, a Tulsa neighborhood was attacked. The events of those two days have been largely known as the Tulsa Race Riot, but survivors refer to it as a massacre instead. Connect back to the opening discussion questions, pointing out that the attacks on this neighborhood displaced countless families from their homes and livelihoods.
2. Introduce or reinforce vocabulary:
 - segregation: the enforced separation of different racial groups in a country, community, or establishment
 - prosperity: a successful, flourishing, or thriving condition, especially in financial respects
 - entrepreneur: a person who organizes and operates a business or businesses, taking on greater than normal financial risks in order to do so.
 - reconciliation: restored friendly relations; coexisting in harmony to be compatible

Explore:

1. Show students the video clip, [“Greenwood and the Tulsa Race Riots”](#) to introduce the topic to students.
2. Invite students to explore the successful black entrepreneurship of the Greenwood District in the early 20th century. After reading [this resource from the History Channel](#) and [this piece in the Atlanta Black Star](#), use a graphic organizer to identify the various businesses and professions that flourished in the area.
3. Direct students to the informational article [“Hell Came to Tulsa”](#) from *Oklahoma Today*. Identify the root causes (i.e. underlying tensions) of the Tulsa Race Massacre.
4. Utilize [this timeline of events](#) to trace the most significant moments of the tragedy.
5. Select [a photo of the Tulsa Race Massacre](#) from the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum. Use the See-Think-Wonder strategy with students. They will write down what they notice about the photo, an observation, and questions they have about the image or its subjects.

Expand:

1. Have students examine [front pages of newspapers](#) at the time of the massacre. Challenge them to detect misleading or incomplete language in headlines of the primary sources. Then, students will create their own front page stories with information learned about the events of May 31-June 1, 1921, and their aftermath.
2. Imagine you are a Red Cross worker assisting victims immediately following the massacre. Reflect on the circumstances of your daily life in Tulsa. Compose a short journal entry outlining the challenges you might experience. Older students could consult the official [Red Cross Report from 1921](#) as a primary source.
3. Provide two texts to students: the poem "[recipe for a massacre: tulsa 1921](#)" and <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/17374308>. Discuss how being silent in the face of injustice is complicit.
4. Examine survivors' stories, such as [Professor Olivia Hooker's interview](#), [these recordings](#), and <https://greenwoodresources.org/curriculum-resources/meet-the-survivors/>. What do students define as being a "survivor"? Have students share what from these accounts has struck them the most. Identify reasons why these survivors may have been motivated to stay in the area after the massacre, and reasons why others chose to relocate.
5. [Explore Reconciliation Park virtually](#), and dig deeper into the symbolism of each portion of the Tower of Reconciliation. Compare this memorial with the Oklahoma City National Memorial. How do both sites honor victims and survivors? What symbols are used to commemorate the respective tragedies, while also looking toward the future?

Evaluate:

1. Students will reflect upon the following in a written response. Students could be assigned each writing prompt, or provided with a choice board of tasks to select:
 - Explain why "massacre" is a more fitting label for these events than "riot".
 - Can this be considered an act of terrorism against the city's African-American community? Explain your answer.
 - Write a poem about the events and the aftermath of the massacre. Formats may include cinquain, acrostic, rhyming or free verse.
 - What do you think would have happened if the technologies of today were present during this time? (television, social media, etc.)
 - Compare and contrast the racial tensions during the years leading up to the Tulsa Race Massacre to those that exist in the present-day United

States (US). Reflect on regional and state-level differences in race relations in the present-day US. What do you notice?

- Describe what you think race relations will be like in the United States in the year 2121. Justify your prediction(s). Suppose you and your classmates are putting together a time capsule with items centered around racial equality to be opened in Tulsa in the year 2121. What would you include and why?
- Explain this quote from the novel, Dreamland Burning: “The dead always have stories to tell. They just need the living to listen.” (Latham, 2017)

Resources:

- [6 Things You Didn't Know About 'Black Wall Street'](#), Atlanta Black Star
- [A Descriptive Poem of the Tulsa Riot and Massacre](#), A.J. Smitheran
- [Dreamland Burning](#),
- [Greenwood and the Tulsa Race Riot](#), PBS
- [Greenwood Cultural Center](#)
- [Hell Came to Tulsa](#), Oklahoma Today
- [Interview with Survivor, Olivia Hooker](#), Oklahoma Historical Society
- [John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park](#)
- [Meet the Survivors](#), John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation
- [Oklahoma Social Studies Framework](#)
- [Recipe for a Massacre: Tulsa 1921](#), Quraysh Ali Lansana
- [Red Cross Report](#), 1921
- [The Devastation of Black Wall Street](#), JSTOR
- [The Massacre of Black Wall Street](#), an online graphic novel by the creators of HBO's Watchmen
- [The Victory of Greenwood](#)
- [Timeline: 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre](#), Tulsa World
- [Tulsa Historical Society](#)
- [Tulsa Race Massacre](#), History Channel
- [Tulsa Race Massacre: Newspaper Coverage](#), Library of Congress

Extension and Enrichment/Simplification:

As with any sensitive subject or monumental event, teachers must be keenly aware of their students' experiences and traumas. However, we cannot allow our duty to inform to be overcome by fear. Students of all ages deserve to be empowered with knowledge of our past in order to create a better future for all. Take time for student discussion and provide opportunities to debrief. For elementary students, modify vocabulary and use grade-appropriate texts listed in the lesson plan resources.

- Explore [current updates](#) on efforts to locate mass graves in Tulsa.
- Listen to “[Confronting the Past](#)”, an episode from the Sidedoor podcast.
- Listen to the podcast “[Black Wall Street 1921](#).”
- [John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park](#) is part of the [African American Civil Rights Network](#), which “encompasses properties, facilities, and interpretive programs, all of which present a comprehensive narrative of the people, places, and events associated with the African American Civil Rights movement in the United States.” Discover other sites included in the network [here](#).
- [Civil Rights Trail](#) - This website allows you to explore the destinations important to the Civil Rights Movement, as well as plan your journey to cities along the trail. On this site, you’ll find places to see and things to do at each destination. Plus, you’ll find in-depth explorations crafted to allow you to experience the destination or event in a more comprehensive way.
- Literature recommendations:
 - “[Opal’s Greenwood Oasis](#)” by Quraysh Ali Lansana