The Humanities

An overview of the three-year cycle as designed for the adolescent aged 12-15 (grades 7-9)

The Montessori School of Winston-Salem—Adolescent Program
Overview of the Humanities

The goal of the Humanities course of study is the development of historical and cultural literacy. Within this thematic and cross-curricular approach, Maria Montessori called for historical studies which focused on the achievements and progress of mankind, rather than its wars and atrocities. She directs us to pursue studies of the ways inventions and ideas have shaped societies as well as the ways their ideals, morals, religious beliefs and patriotism furthered the development and preservation of said societies. The humanities, after all, are more simply understood as the study of the story of humankind and our understanding of our place in the universe. Diving deeply into our collective story aids the developing adolescent in forming a sense of his or her place in the sweep of human history, and in furthering a sense of self and identity.

The Humanities as a course of study in the Adolescent Program of The Montessori School of Winston-Salem involves taking a holistic approach to investigating the scope of human history through four thematic lenses:

- Early Agriculture and City Life
- Classical Civilizations
- Societies in Transition
- The Age of Ideas and Science

These historical studies are integrated throughout with related academic disciplines:

- Geography
- Political Science
- Religious Studies
- Economics
- Arts and Cultural studies

In the Adolescent Program, these studies form the basis for a highly integrated and interdisciplinary approach to learning in areas such as mathematics, language arts, and occupations (science). Units of study and work in the humanities follows the three-period cycle (also called the “Three-Period Lesson”). The three-period cycle consists of:

- A first period in which key lessons are presented by the guide to convey essential information and spark interest in the subject
- A second period in which students are given extended time for individual and group work and research
- A third period in which students engage in creative and informative sharing of completed work

Throughout the cycle, students may engage in formal and informal Socratic seminars, open discussion, and/or supplementary lessons. Individual lessons may be introduced to tailor the study to students’ specific interests within the historical period or culture under investigation.
The Adolescent’s Tasks in Achieving Historical and Cultural Literacy

- To understand the overall scope, sequence and meaning of history and the reasons it is preserved and studied
- To understand the meaning and importance of human culture
- To develop a growing understanding of the world’s geography and how geographic locales have influenced various societies’ lives and contributions
- To develop an introductory understanding of the key worldviews, political philosophies, and economic systems that have driven human interaction for centuries
- To interpret and analyze historical written documents; primary, secondary, fiction, non-fiction, etc.
- To interpret and analyze non-written historical documents; art, music, editorial cartoons, architecture, maps, films, etc.
- To develop a capacity to recognize and analyze the relationship between cultural activity and historical events
- To develop habits of critical thinking (think, respond, question, argue, verify, debate, etc.)
- To develop a capacity to understand cause and effect
- To develop an ability to recognize change and continuity between the past and present
- To develop an ability to recognize and understand key turning points in human history
- To develop an ability to use the past as a tool for understanding the present
- To develop a greater capacity for seeing the world through the eyes of another
- To collect, organize, analyze, and synthesize an array of information from various sources on a single topic
- To present research findings and information to peers and adults with confidence and professionalism
- To develop a sense of curiosity, respect, and wonder about humanity and human history

Ways that Historical and Cultural Literacy is Achieved

- Frequent key lessons delivered by adult guides on topics relevant to the theme being explored
- Frequent one-on-one lessons based on individual student needs
- Assigned background readings related to themes being explored
- Formal Socratic seminars on key topics or readings
- Written and oral responses to historical documents, artworks, architecture, etc.
- Formal and informal group discussions about research materials and documents
- Explorations of world geography through maps and Google Earth
- Guidance and coaching throughout student-driven research projects
- Frequent formal and informal sharing by students of relevant information uncovered by their research
- Visits to cultural and historic sites, centers, and museums in surrounding neighborhoods, cities, and states
- Personal, telephone, or digital (Skype, etc.) meetings with specialists and experts willing to share their knowledge and experience
Forms of Assessment and Evaluation

The Montessori adolescent program approach fosters the students’ own interest in evaluating their growing mastery of subject matter. As is consistent with the Montessorian approach in the Upper and Lower Elementary programs at TMS, students actively participate in their own assessment and evaluation. Frequent self-evaluations, peer and guide coaching sessions, and personal accountability practices are woven throughout the year, allowing students time to reflect on their own efforts and understandings and chart their own path moving forward. Guides will also provide feedback and constructive criticism based on rubrics and other holistic forms of assessment to provide an adult perspective and foster the adolescent’s confidence in engaging in constructive dialogue about strengths and challenges in his or her work. There is a continued de-emphasis on letter grade; however, the students do receive feedback in the form of percentages. In the Ninth Year, end of course letter grades will be awarded to record progress for students’ high-school transcripts.

- Self-evaluations, including the use of rubrics and guiding questions
- Guide evaluations, using rubrics with specific standards
- Peer editing and conferencing
- Ongoing coaching, discussion and feedback
- Feedback on notes and essay drafting
- Comprehension and vocabulary quizzes
- Evaluation of assigned questions and reflections
- Formal and informal reading responses
- Demonstration of mastery over subject matter as expressed through a variety of written and oral presentations, artistic expressions, or other culminating projects
Overview of The Four Lenses: Historic Themes and Topics

The term “humanities” encompasses the entirety of human history and culture; the Adolescent Program course of study focuses this broad category into distinct phases through four thematic lenses. These lenses are explored in the context of different eras and civilizations throughout the three-year cycle, and provide a framework for **four central thematic studies each year**. The following are examples of themes and topics within the four-lens framework:

1. **Early Agriculture and City Life**
   
   Defined as societies in the early stages of forming social groups organized around agricultural communities or urban centers of production or exchange. These societies are characterized by the formation of permanent settlements, rapid population growth, and large-scale governmental structures. This thematic unit will include discussions of why, where, and when agricultural communities do or do not develop.

   *Examples*: Native North Americans, Pre-Columbian Societies of Mesoamerica and South America, Mesopotamia, Indus Valley (Ancient India/Pakistan), Ancient Egypt, Ancient China, Ancient Africa

2. **Classical Civilizations**
   
   Defined as entrenched societies at the height of their cultural, artistic, and intellectual development. In such societies, agriculture has developed to a point where leisure time is available for greater acquisition of knowledge in a portion of the population. These societies are innovative artistically, politically, religiously, and technologically. Study of these societies includes increasingly sophisticated ideas about the rights and responsibilities of the individual.

   *Examples*: U.S. Nationhood, The Roman Empire, Greece, Alexandria, Classical China, Byzantium, Aztecs, Maya, The Silk Road, Local NC/Winston-Salem study.

3. **Societies in Transition**
   
   Defined as societies, cultures or civilizations in a period of transition when developments or failures lead to changes in the social organization of the society. Religion, science, or the tyranny of an individual, group, or idea can act as the foundation of this change. This is a fundamentally transitional category where the causes and effects of the turning point are analyzed.


4. **The Modern World: Age of Ideas and Science**
   
   Defined as the portion of a society’s history in which technology and the strength of the human mind create change and overcome or outmaneuver previously more powerful forces (i.e. brute force, ignorance, tyranny of the majority, superstition). Progress is extremely rapid as intellectual creativity feeds technological production.


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1 Credit for this framework is attributed to “The Humanities: An overview of the two-year cycle”; Hudson Montessori School, 2017.
### Humanities 3-Year Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cycle A</th>
<th>Cycle B</th>
<th>Cycle C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aug.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Columbian Societies of Mesoamerica and South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sept.</strong></td>
<td>Early Agriculture &amp; City Life</td>
<td>Native North Americans</td>
<td>Ancient China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oct.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nov.</strong></td>
<td>Classical Civilizations</td>
<td>U.S. Nationhood</td>
<td>Ancient Greece and Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dec.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jan.</strong></td>
<td>Societies in Transition</td>
<td>U.S. Nationhood</td>
<td>Ancient Greece and Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feb</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Triangle Slave Trade</td>
<td>World Views; Religions and Philosophies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mar.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apr.</strong></td>
<td>The Modern World; Age of Ideas &amp; Science</td>
<td>Study of Winston-Salem</td>
<td>20th Century Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peace Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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