

Alcatraz: More Than Just a Rock

Materials Needed:

- Computer with internet access
- Online resources (e.g., National Park Service Alcatraz website, historical archives, documentaries)
- Notebook or word processor
- Writing utensil

Lesson Procedure:

1. Introduction: The Legend (15 mins)

Start with a discussion: What comes to mind when you hear 'Alcatraz'? Discuss its reputation as the world's most inescapable prison. Watch a short introductory video clip or view compelling photos online to set the scene.

2. From Fortress to Prison (20 mins)

Research the early history of Alcatraz Island. When was it first used by the U.S. military? Why was it chosen as the site for a federal penitentiary in the 1930s? Discuss the context of the time (Great Depression, rise of organized crime) and why a high-security prison like Alcatraz was deemed necessary. Use the National Park Service website for reliable information.

3. Life on 'The Rock' (30 mins)

Investigate the daily routines, rules, and conditions for inmates. Who were some of Alcatraz's most famous inmates (e.g., Al Capone, George 'Machine Gun' Kelly, Robert Stroud 'The Birdman')? Why were they sent there? Research the psychological impact of imprisonment on Alcatraz. Consider reading first-hand accounts if available online.

4. Great Escapes? (30 mins)

Explore the most famous escape attempts, particularly the 1962 attempt by Frank Morris and the Anglin brothers. What were the plans? What obstacles did they face (the guards, the building, the frigid waters of the bay)? What is the official conclusion, and what are the enduring mysteries? Analyze the viability of escaping Alcatraz.

5. The End of an Era (15 mins)

Why did USP Alcatraz close in 1963? Research the reasons, focusing on the high operational costs and deteriorating structures. Discuss Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's role in the closure.

6. Alcatraz Today (15 mins)

Learn about the Native American occupation of Alcatraz (1969-1971) and its significance. Explore Alcatraz's current status as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Discuss its role as a major tourist attraction and historical site.

7. Activity & Assessment (30 mins)

Choose one of the following activities:

- **Timeline Creation:** Develop a detailed timeline of Alcatraz's history, highlighting key events, inmates, and changes in its use.
- **'Escape Analysis' Report:** Write a short report analyzing one specific escape attempt. Detail the plan, the execution, the outcome, and your assessment of its chances for success.
- **'Life Inside' Diary Entry:** Write a diary entry from the perspective of an Alcatraz inmate or guard, describing a typical day and reflecting on the environment.
- **Legacy Essay:** Write a short essay discussing why Alcatraz continues to capture the public imagination long after its closure as a prison.

8. Wrap-up (5 mins)

Review the learning objectives. Discuss what was most surprising or interesting about Alcatraz's history.