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# Rideau Canal – The Great Debate

## Teaching Resource

**Target Group:** Intermediate & Senior

**Subject Areas:** Language Arts, Social Studies, Civics, History, Art, Geography, Science & Technology

**Duration:** 7 classes depending upon available resources and classroom skill level

### Overview

As the oldest functioning waterway of its kind in North America, the Rideau Canal has been nominated for World Heritage Status. The Rideau's 47 locks link a waterway that stretches over 200 kilometers from Ottawa to Kingston. The canal still operates much as it did when it first opened in 1832. Although recognized in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's longest skating rink, few people know the magnitude of this engineering marvel - or the human cost behind its construction. Using a debate format, students will examine the significance of one of Canada's most recognized landmarks from historical, geographic, artistic, and technological perspectives.

### Objectives

Students will gain experience:

- learning about the heritage and dramatic history of the Rideau Canal
- demonstrating an understanding of individual contributions to the formation and growth of the capital city of Canada with particular attention to the contribution of Irish immigrants
- exercising intellectual skills needed to analyse, evaluate and appreciate various viewpoints concerning the history of the Rideau Canal and the impact it had on the development of Canada
- researching and applying relevant information from a variety of primary sources (e.g. interviews) and secondary sources (e.g. diagrams, map, internet sources)
- organizing information using a variety of methods (e.g. summary notes, timelines, visual organizers, images)
- participating in group work to accomplish a shared task

## Materials

Rideau Canal documentary (recorded from CPAC programming, or available on DVD), computer with access to the Internet (optional)

## Procedure

1. Launch the lesson by showing CPAC's Rideau Canal documentary. This could be done over 2 classes with an open class discussion following each segment to assess comprehension and encourage information retention.
2. Following the documentary, initiate a whole-class discussion on the growing concern of national security. Ask students to consider what they saw in the documentary and reflect on challenges the government might have faced to keep Canada safe in the 1800s.
3. Student responses will provide an opportunity to share and reinforce information, as well as establish a general level of understanding concerning natural waterways as a source of water, a method of transportation, and as a natural barrier to invasion.

### Some suggested springboards for discussion are:

What possible solutions might have been available in the early 1800s?

What potential pitfalls might these solutions have presented?

How could those pitfalls be remedied?

Could Canada's natural geography assist in maintaining national security? Why or why not?

4. Explain to students that following the War of 1812 the British were quite nervous about further invasion from America. They had been transporting supplies and men up the St. Lawrence River in small canoes or boats, but believed an alternative route from Montreal to Kingston was needed to better defend Canada. The solution was to build the Rideau Canal. This engineering marvel ultimately turned a wilderness waterway into a region of thriving, vibrant communities.

Students will divide themselves into an equal number of teams and sign up to defend either the "For" or "Against" argument of a debate topic relating to a challenging issue raised in the Rideau Canal documentary. The number of groups and topics must be such that two groups are obliged to sign up per topic. Some suggested topics are:

1. Be it resolved that the Rideau Canal should be awarded World Heritage Status.
2. Be it resolved that the benefits of the Rideau Canal outweighed the costs of its construction.
3. Be it resolved that Irish immigrant labour was exploited in the construction of the Rideau Canal.
4. The current annual cost of operating the Rideau Canal is approximately \$8 million\*.  
Be it resolved that this a worthwhile expenditure of Canadian taxpayers' money.

(\*Source: Mr. Doug Stewart, Superintendent - Rideau Canal, 2005)

## Implementation

1. Establish a suitable debate format to be followed by the students. Consideration should be given to alternating speakers and groups, length of time per speaker, length of time for rebuttal (if any), length of time for audience to ask questions if desired.
2. Once groups have been selected explain the debate format to be followed and provide a written description of same for their reference. Groups should be instructed to try and determine their opposition's strengths and weaknesses as well as their own. They should attempt to capitalize on their opposition's weaknesses, while minimizing their own through appropriate responses using sound research.
3. Students will research their position according to mutually agreed-upon team strategy using a variety of reference materials including CPAC's Rideau Canal documentary. Some possible research approaches could be: Canada's natural geography at the time, economic requirements, military requirements, political climate, exploitation of immigrant labourers, engineering expertise.
4. Each pair of teams will debate their position in front of the class. If groups are fairly large (over 6 students) individual presentation times should be kept to a maximum length (2 minutes). A student from the class could be the "Official Timer". The Timer should provide all speakers with a warning that time will expire, and terminate the presentation once the speaker has reached their time limit.
5. Following each debate the class votes on which one of the two teams was the most convincing. This can be done silently or with a show of hands. You may also wish to ask students to provide constructive comments to both teams.
6. Finally, the winning team is declared. You may wish to ask students to write a brief reflection on their opinion concerning their topic prior to, and after they researched and debated their topic.

### Teaching Tips

- encourage accuracy by asking students to record bibliographic information for all sources used in their assignment (ie. television or radio program, newspaper, magazine, website, interviews, etc.).
- increase participation by setting up a “Who Knew?” bulletin board for students to post interesting facts about the Rideau Canal discovered over the course of their research.
- promote creativity by encouraging students to assume the “role” of an historical figure – real or fictitious - involved in the construction of the Rideau Canal.

<b>ASSESSMENT TOOL</b>		
The following may be used to assist in the evaluation of students’ work for Rideau Canal – The Great Debate		
LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student participation was minimal in group discussions and the assigned project</li> <li>• Student showed minimal research; a limited variety of different resources were used (1 to 2)</li> <li>• Final presentation was incomplete, inaccurate and/or inadequate</li> <li>• Student was unable to respond satisfactorily to most questions relating to their debate topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student was reasonably engaged in group discussions and the assigned project</li> <li>• Student conducted an adequate amount of research using a sufficient variety of different resources (3 to 4)</li> <li>• Student presentation was satisfactory and covered the main aspects of their argument.</li> <li>• Student was able to respond satisfactorily to most questions relating to their debate topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student was highly engaged in class, group discussions and the assigned project</li> <li>• Student researched their topic thoroughly using a wide variety of different sources (5 or more)</li> <li>• Student’s presentation showed a thorough understanding of the complexities of their argument</li> <li>• Student was able to respond satisfactorily to all questions relating to their debate topic</li> </ul>

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

The following may be used to enhance understanding of interested students or as a whole class activity in conjunction with the Rideau Canal – The Great Debate activity.

<p>Comic Relief</p>	<p>Humour or sarcasm can often help people understand an issue from a different perspective. Good editorial cartoons can function this way and can also be an excellent way to open dialogue concerning a controversial or sensitive subject.</p> <p>Invite students to create an editorial cartoon dealing with a controversial aspect of the construction of the Rideau Canal. Illustrations and language should reflect the time period.</p> <p>Their finished cartoon should be accompanied by a brief summary (oral or written) explaining:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• why they selected that subject or issue for their cartoon;</li> <li>• what message they are trying to convey through their cartoon;</li> <li>• whether symbols are used in their cartoon. If so, what they represent.</li> </ul>
<p>Time Traveller</p>	<p>A great deal can be happening in different fields (social, political, technological, etc.), in different countries at the same time. For instance, there were compelling reasons why Britain wanted the Rideau Canal built, and why Irish immigrants, and others, answered the call for labour.</p> <p>Invite students to research and indicate on a time-line, the significant social, political, economic factors in Canada and other parts of the world prior to, during and immediately following completion of the Rideau Canal.</p> <p>Ask them to reflect (orally or in writing) on how an understanding of events occurring in the rest of the world enhances their understanding of why and how events unfolded as they did in Canada.</p>
<p>Special Guest</p>	<p>Invite a local historian to speak with your class about the Rideau Canal. Encourage students to ask questions about engineering, military, social, political and financial challenges, as well as the Canal's relevance and future value to Canada.</p>

## Resources

The following on-line resources were correct as of the writing of the Rideau Canal – The Great Debate

[www.cpac.ca](http://www.cpac.ca)

[National Historic Site of Canada](#)

[Bytown Museum Tour](#)

[Rideau Canal](#)

[History of the Rideau Canal Waterway](#)

[The Nature of the Rideau River](#)

[Rideau Canal: Wikipedia](#)

[Royal Engineers Museum](#)