

## La Malinche Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question

*What was La Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico?*

#### Materials:

- La Malinche PowerPoint
- Google document with Student Materials in English:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Tp-3NdoX6Hao01HI7HJtP\\_wAWyfiJdC8a\\_IIEECJ22U/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Tp-3NdoX6Hao01HI7HJtP_wAWyfiJdC8a_IIEECJ22U/edit?usp=sharing)
- Google document with Student Materials in Spanish:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1a-NhWW5GkATPyzd6-oqPHuLXEchL\\_gq6cf7Ssmx8i04/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1a-NhWW5GkATPyzd6-oqPHuLXEchL_gq6cf7Ssmx8i04/edit?usp=sharing)

#### Plan of Instruction:

#### Note:

- Before this lesson, students should be familiar with the historical context of the conquest of Mexico.
- Make a copy of the Google doc before class so that you can edit it and share it with your students. Go to File > Make a Copy.
- This lesson is designed to be delivered digitally. Viewing the documents online enables students to zoom in high resolution and see important details of the documents. It also provides them the opportunity to access documents using digital tools, which is one objective of the lesson. **We strongly recommend familiarizing yourself with the webpages before teaching this lesson and checking to make sure all of the linked webpages are accessible on your school computers.**

1. Introduction: Use the La Malinche PowerPoint to set the stage for the lesson.
  - a. Slide 2. *Imagine that you're on Twitter and come across this tweet. You think the claim is interesting—the author says Malinche was considered a traitor by her own people. Let's say you've never heard of Malinche, so you don't know whether this is believable.*
  - b. Slide 3: *Your interest is piqued, so you search to see what others have tweeted about the person named Malinche.*

*Here are some tweets that appear when you conduct that search. Based on these, how are these people talking about Malinche? Take a couple minutes to read these tweets and jot down how these Twitter users are describing Malinche. Have a few students share out.*

*Ask students, what do these tweets say about Malinche? Then, Are these tweets trustworthy sources of historical information?*

Support students in understanding that *while these tweets provide anecdotal evidence of the ways Malinche is remembered and discussed on Twitter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—it seems like her history is contested and controversial—in order to determine if they provide trustworthy information about the life of Malinche, we’d have to first determine whether this information comes from trustworthy sources.*

- c. Slide 4. *Whenever we come across information online, we should ask ourselves, (1) Who’s behind the information? (2) What’s the evidence? and (3) What do other sources say?*

(The slide image is of our Civic Online Reasoning classroom poster, which is available for free download on our website [cor.stanford.edu](http://cor.stanford.edu).)

- d. Slides 5-6. *To answer, “Who’s behind the information?” for the first tweet, we can look at the author’s profile and then **laterally read**—open a new tab in our browser and do an internet search—to learn more about the author. It appears that this Twitter user writes Young Adult novels. Maybe she’s interested in Mexican history, but it doesn’t seem like she’s an authority on the subject. So, I’m thinking she’s not the most trustworthy source for learning about Malinche.*
- e. Slide 7. *If we laterally read about the users behind the rest of these tweets, we would find that none of these tweets were authored by authoritative sources on the history of Mexico.*

*Our next question to ask is “What’s the evidence?” Solicit students’ responses. Support students in understanding that none of these tweets contain any evidence. Given the lack of supporting evidence in these tweets, I’m not going to accept any of these claims.*

- f. Slide 8. *Our third question to ask, then, is “What do other sources say?” We need to be mindful of what other sources we’re consulting. They need to be reliable and authoritative. When exploring historical questions, we want to consult the accounts of credible historians. We can also investigate the historical record ourselves by analyzing verified primary sources. That’s what we’ll be doing today.*

*La Malinche was an Indigenous woman who traveled extensively with Hernán Cortés, the person who led the Spanish in the conquest of Mexico. Malinche (more commonly called “La Malinche”) is one of the most popular figures in Mexican history and legend. The word malinchista means traitor, especially a traitor to Mexican culture or people. As seen in the tweets, her history continues to be debated to this day.*

- g. Slide 9. *But what do historical sources tell us about Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico? There are no surviving documents made by Malinche herself, but she appears in multiple historical sources about the conquest. Today you are going to look at some of those historical documents and decide if you can draw any conclusions.*

**Note:** You will show slides 10-11 before students analyze Document D. You may wish to return to slides 2-3 (tweets that mention Malinche) and show slide 12 (map of Aztec tributary provinces in 1519) during the Final Discussion.

2. Review the skill of corroboration.
- You might choose to refer to our Corroboration poster, which is available for free download at <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/corroboration-classroom-poster>
  - Sometimes we can draw conclusions about history, even when accounts disagree or don't include a lot of information.*
  - We must also source documents when we corroborate, so that we know which parts of the account are believable and which are not.*
3. Source Documents A & B: Share [Documents A and B](#) with the class. Read the headnotes (at the top of the pages) and source information (at the bottom of the pages) together as a class but do not yet read the main texts of the documents. Source both documents together as a class by answering Guiding Questions 1-4 for each document. Then have students read the body of each document and answer the remaining Guiding Questions.

**a. Document A: Hernán Cortés's Letter to the King of Spain**

- i. Why might this be a reliable source on Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico?

Remember, these are possible answers that students may present before reading the document. Some possible answers:

- Malinche traveled with Cortés extensively, so he may have known her well from spending a lot of time with her.*
- Malinche interpreted for Cortés. As his interpreter, Malinche would have been in close contact with Cortés and may have been able to communicate with him well.*
- Cortés wrote this account at the time of his expedition, so this might provide us with information about Malinche as the conquest occurred.*

- ii. Why might this **not** be a reliable source on Malinche?

Remember, these are possible answers that students may present before reading the document. Some possible answers:

- Cortés was writing to his boss, the king. Historians have*

*argued that a main reason Cortés wrote these letters was to protect himself from punishment by winning the favor of Charles V, the king of Spain. Cortés had acted against orders when he traveled from Cuba to Mexico. This likely affected how he portrayed events of the conquest. He would have wanted to make himself look good.*

2. *There also could have been cultural and language barriers to understanding between Cortés and Malinche. Since Malinche was Cortés's interpreter, that would mean they were able to communicate to some degree. But since Spain and the Indigenous societies of Mexico had very different cultures and they were not previously in contact with each other, maybe there were misunderstandings.*
3. *Based on prior knowledge they have of the conquest of Mexico, students might be wary of an account by a Spanish conquistador about an Indigenous Mexican. While it's crucial to keep Cortés's perspective in mind, we shouldn't discount the letter as historical evidence that could contain accurate information about the past.*

#### **b. Document B: Florentine Codex**

- i. Why might this be a reliable source on Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico?

Remember, these are possible answers that students may present before reading the document. Some possible answers:

1. *This account was based on statements made by Aztec elders, some of whom likely witnessed the conquest firsthand.*
2. *Sahagún and the Aztec writers who drafted this text would have had some knowledge of what occurred during the conquest, even if they did not witness it firsthand.*
3. *While we don't know all the details of how the authors composed the book, since it's an encyclopedia, it was meant to inform, so the creators conducted research and may have been trying to present the information accurately.*
4. *Malinche was Indigenous, and some of the creators of the codex were Indigenous. While that doesn't mean we can trust this account for sure, it's always a good idea to consult accounts from multiple perspectives, especially when examining historical eras marked by power struggles and imbalances among groups. Even if we*

*don't know if this individual document is the most reliable, consulting multiple perspectives strengthens our historical analysis overall.*

- ii. Why might this **not** be a reliable source on Malinche?  
Remember, these are possible answers that students may present before reading the document. Some possible answers:
  - 1. *This document was made at least 30 years after the conquest. Time can distort memories, so the statements of the elders may have contained inaccuracies. This book may provide evidence of some Aztecs' memories, attitudes, and opinions from the time of the conquest but will also certainly contain the views and attitudes from the time the book was written, decades after the event.*
  - 2. *Additionally, scholars don't fully understand the process of how the book was created, so maybe this is very accurate, or maybe it's not. This book was made during Spanish colonial control of Mexico, which likely affected what the authors and interviewees included in the book, though we don't know to what extent.*

4. Analyze Documents A & B: Have students read the main text for Documents A and B and answer the Guiding Questions. Remind students that their answers to the sourcing questions might change from what you discussed as a class before reading based on what they learn from the documents.

5. Discuss Guiding Questions for Documents A & B.

**a. Document A: Hernán Cortés's Letter to the King of Spain**

- i. Students should identify that, according to this account, Malinche was one of Cortés interpreters.
  - 1. Support students in understanding the significance of Cortés having two interpreters, Malinche and Geronimo de Aguilar. Explain to students that before Malinche learned Spanish, translation from Nahuatl (the language of Cholulans and the Aztecs) to Spanish relied on two interpreters. Malinche spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan. She translated Nahuatl to Mayan. Then, Geronimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who years before had shipwrecked and lived with Maya before joining Cortés's expedition, translated Mayan to Spanish. This two-step interpretation may have made communication slow and prone to error early on.
- ii. Students should identify that according to this account, Malinche found out from a Cholulan woman that Moctezuma's forces were planning to

attack the Spanish. Rather than leave with the person who warned her of the upcoming attack, she relayed the information to Cortés.

- iii. The consequence of Malinche's actions, according to this document, was the Spanish massacre of Cholulans.
- iv. Based on Document A alone, Malinche was Cortés's interpreter and someone who warned Cortés of an attack planned against his expedition.

**b. Document B: Florentine Codex**

- i. Students should identify that, according to this document, after the Spanish had taken gold from Moctezuma's palace, Malinche ordered Aztec nobles to bring food and other necessities to the Spanish. As a consequence, the Aztecs provided the Spanish with sustenance, even though they were afraid.
  - ii. Students should identify that the top illustration does corroborate Document A. The speech symbols indicate that Malinche interpreted between Cortés and the Aztec nobleman. They should identify that the second illustration also corroborates a point raised by Document A: in addition to direct interpreting, Malinche spoke with local people to acquire benefits in the form of information (Document A) and sustenance (Document B) for the Spanish expedition.
  - iii. Based on Document B alone, Malinche aided the Spanish in acquiring necessities from Aztecs during the conquest. The accompanying illustrations depict her as interpreting for Cortés.
- c. What can we conclude about Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico from these two accounts?
- i. Document A was written by a conquistador. Document B was written, at least in part, by Aztecs who may have witnessed the conquest themselves and whose people had been conquered. Despite these very different perspectives, both documents provide evidence that Malinche was Cortés's interpreter. Additionally, both documents present Malinche as someone who took actions that aided the Spanish expedition.
- d. What questions do these accounts raise? Some additional questions to raise with students:
- i. Document A: *Consider Cortés's motivation in telling the story of the massacre in a particular way. Do we believe him? Would he have wanted to make it seem that he was attacking Cholulans in retaliation*

*or preemptively? Even if we are to accept his account of the events, is Malinche to blame?*

- ii. Document B: *Was Malinche Indigenous? Yes. Was she Aztec?* Neither Document A nor B says she was. Documents C and D will address this point further, but support students in understanding that there were many Indigenous groups in Mexico, and that saying Malinche was Indigenous does not mean she was Aztec. Document B was written by Aztecs, so this is important to bear in mind when reasoning about the account.
6. Have students read **Document C: Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s Account**, answer Guiding Questions, and share out.
- a. Students should note the possible strengths of this source, as it was written by a firsthand witness of the conquest, who was motivated to provide a corrective to what he considered inaccuracies in previous histories of the conquest. Students should also note the possible weaknesses of the source, including the facts that Díaz wrote his book decades after the events depicted and was motivated to portray the conquest as just while he opposed reforms ordered by the Crown to reduce the exploitation and mistreatment of Indigenous Mexicans.
  - b. According to this account, after the Spanish massacre, the leaders of Tabasco presented gifts of submission to the Spanish. Malinche was part of this offering.
  - c. Díaz del Castillo seems to have held Malinche in high regard. Some evidence students may cite to support this are Castillo’s descriptions of Malinche as a “Very excellent woman,” “Good looking and intelligent and without embarrassment,” “Excellent woman and good interpreter,” “person of the greatest importance and was obeyed without question by the Indians throughout New Spain,” or “without the help of Doña Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico.”
  - d. Students should identify that Document C corroborates Documents A and B because it, too, says that she was an interpreter for the Spanish and that she played a key role in the expedition.
  - e. Document C differs from the accounts of Documents A and B by providing an account of how Malinche came to be Cortés’s interpreter. In this document we learn that she was enslaved in Xicalango, in Tabasco, and by the Spanish. We also learn that Malinche was not Aztec; she was from southern Mexico. Additionally, the account says that Malinche bore Cortés a son and married the Spaniard Juan Jaramillo. Lastly, students may note that Díaz del Castillo

credits Malinche more for the success of the Spanish expedition than Cortés did in Document A.

Support students in reasoning about why Documents A and C, which were both written by conquistadors, differ so drastically. In particular, ask students to consider when these accounts were written, who the audiences were, and what the authors' different motives were. For instance, Cortés may have sought to diminish the importance others played in the conquest in order to make himself look better to the king, while Díaz wanted to credit people other than Cortés for Spain's dominion over Mexico. Students may also argue that in seeking to justify the conquest, Díaz may have emphasized the role of Indigenous Mexicans who cooperated with the Spanish.

- f. Be sure to support students in discussing, answering, and debriefing Question 8. Students may have various interpretations of what Malinche's role was in the conquest of Mexico based on this document alone. They may argue that she was enslaved by the Spanish, subjected to sexual violence, and had to carry out their orders, including as an interpreter. Alternatively, they may argue that she was enslaved but through her work as an interpreter came to be respected by the Spanish. Or, they may have an altogether different argument of what her role was based solely on this document. If students disagree or are uncertain, explain that that is a common aspect of historical research and interpretation but that they need to support their position with evidence from the document.
7. Prepare students to analyze **Document D: Tlaxcalan Canvas**. Project the PowerPoint presentation.
- a. Slide 10. Explain, *Malinche appears over thirty times in the Tlaxcalan Canvas. You will work in groups to analyze four of her appearances in this historical document. You have a link to a digital version of the [Tlaxcalan Canvas](#), provided by Brown University, on page 7 of the student materials file, Document D. On the linked website, you can navigate to specific portions of the canvas by selecting specific numbers from the drop-down menu on the bottom-right of the window. This section of the webpage is circled in bright red on the PowerPoint slide.* Point out to students that while they need to review the Tlaxcalan Canvas images on the website, the descriptions of the canvas cells are included on pages 8-11 of the student materials file.
  - b. Slide 11. Four cells of the Tlaxcalan Canvas are included in the Student Materials file. Divide students into groups. Group 1 will analyze cell 4, Group 2 cell 6, Group 3 cell 9, and Group 4 cell 11. After they analyze their respective cell and answer the corresponding Guiding Questions, students will share their excerpt analyses with the class.

- c. Have all students read the background information on Document D: Tlaxcalan Canvas (page 7 of the Student Materials). Then, have students analyze the cell that corresponds to their group number and answer the related Guiding Questions. Tell students to be prepared to select one representative from their group to share their research and analysis with the class.
- d. After groups have completed the Guiding Questions, have one person from each group summarize what they learned from their analysis about Malinche. Other students should take notes in the table provided (page 12 of the student materials file).
  - i. Students should identify that the Tlaxcala Indigenous city council commissioned the work a few decades after the conquest.
  - ii. The Tlaxcalans played a large role in the conquest of Mexico, so Tlaxcala's city council was knowledgeable about the events of the conquest. However, students should also note the motivations of the Tlaxcalans in composing this document. Since they wanted to make sure Spain continued to give them rights and privileges that it denied to other Indigenous groups, the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* might portray the history of the conquest of Mexico in a way that would make the Tlaxcalans look most favorable to the Spanish Crown. This could limit its reliability as a source about the events of the conquest.
  - iii. Group 1
    1. In Cell 4, Malinche is located in the center of the illustration between a Tlaxcalan noble and Cortés. Her centrality in the illustration may suggest that she acted as an intermediary between the Spanish and Indigenous peoples.
    2. Cell 4 corroborates Documents A-C in portraying Malinche as Cortés's interpreter. Additionally, it corroborates Document B by portraying Malinche as instrumental in acquiring food for the Spanish.
    3. Based on Cell 4 alone, Malinche was Cortés's interpreter and may have helped the Spanish to acquire sustenance. Students may also argue that this document provides evidence that Malinche served as an intermediary who helped the Spanish make alliances with some Indigenous groups and was a central figure in the Spanish expedition.
  - iv. Group 2
    1. In Cell 6, Malinche is located in the center of the illustration and is depicted as taller than anyone else. This portrayal suggests

Malinche's importance in interactions between the Spanish and Tlaxcalan nobility.

2. Cell 6 corroborates Documents A-C in portraying Malinche as Cortés's interpreter. Additionally, it corroborates Document B in portraying Malinche as instrumental in acquiring sustenance for the Spanish. It also corroborates Document C in portraying her as a central figure in the Spanish expedition.
3. You may wish to point out to students that in Document B, Díaz del Castillo mentions the "wars in...Tlaxcala." However, no fighting between the Tlaxcalans and Spanish is presented in this account. You might ask students to use the source information to reason about why this might be the case.
4. Based on Cell 6 alone, Malinche was Cortés's interpreter, helped the Spanish to acquire food, and was central in interactions between the Spanish and Tlaxcalans. Students may also argue that this document provides evidence that Malinche served as an intermediary who helped the Spanish make alliances with the Tlaxcalans.

v. Group 3

1. In Cell 9, Malinche is shown commanding an attack against the people of Cholula. The consequence is the death of Cholulans and an attack on the holy temple of Quetzalcoatl.
2. Cell 9 corroborates Document A in portraying Malinche's actions at Cholula as leading to the Cholula Massacre in 1519.
3. Cell 9's account of Malinche differs from Document A in describing the person who warned Malinche of the attack as Tlaxcalan instead of Cholulan. Here you might also wish to have students reason about how the source information for both Documents A and D could explain this difference. In Document A, Cortés wrote that he ordered the attack, whereas in Cell 9 of Document D, Malinche is depicted as ordering the attack. Additionally, Malinche is not depicted as interpreting for Cortés.
4. Based on Cell 9 alone, Malinche acted as the commander of an attack against the people of Cholula in 1519.

vi. Group 4

1. In Cell 11, Malinche interprets for Cortés and Moctezuma II, the reigning emperor of the Aztecs at Tenochtitlan. As a result, Moctezuma II and other Aztec nobles present Cortés and Malinche with large gifts of food. Students may also use background information to argue that the consequences of her actions may have been Cortés's imprisonment of Moctezuma and the fall of Tenochtitlan.
  2. Cell 11 corroborates Documents B and C's account that Malinche acted as Cortés's interpreter. Showing Malinche interpret between Cortés and Moctezuma II corroborates Document C's account of the importance of Malinche in the success of the Spanish expedition. Both Documents B and Cell 11 of Document D suggest Malinche played a role in securing food and other supplies for the Spanish at Tenochtitlan.
  3. Based on Cell 11 alone, Malinche was Cortés's interpreter, played a role in acquiring supplies for the conquistadors, and was actively involved in important events of the conquest, such as when Moctezuma met Cortés.
- e. **Note:** You may need to remind students that the Tlaxcalans spoke Nahuatl, the same language as the Aztecs. Malinche also spoke Nahuatl.
8. Corroboration. Have students write their corroboration paragraph on the last page of the Student Materials (page 12).
  9. Final Discussion.
    - a. Ask students: *Based on everything we analyzed today, what would you argue La Malinche's role was in the conquest of Mexico?*
    - b. After students have presented their arguments for what Malinche's role was based on the historical record, you may wish to return to the claims presented in the tweets at the beginning of the lesson plan (Slides 2-3). Some questions you may wish to raise:
      - i. *After our analysis of the historical record, what do you think about the claim that Malinche was a traitor? Is that claim justified?*
      - ii. *What does it mean to be a traitor? Was Malinche Aztec or Cholulan? To be called a malinchista is to be called a traitor to Mexican culture or people. Consider her historical context. Was there a unified Mexico or Mexican identity at the time Malinche lived?*

1. Support students in understanding that the lands that comprise Mexico today were home to many different governments and societies before Spanish conquest. There was no unified Mexico or Mexican national identity but many different ethnic groups with their own polities, alliances, and enemies. You may wish to return to the PowerPoint to project slide 12, which shows a map of the Aztec Empire and the other states of central and southern Mexico and northern Central America. The star on the map marks where Malinche was born, in a frontier region between the Aztec tributary states and Maya lands, far from the heart of the Aztec Empire. The large red square marks where the Tabascans gave Malinche to the Spanish. The red diamond marks Cholula, and the red triangle marks the capital of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan.
- iii. *What about the claim that La Malinche was the victim of abuse? Do we know if she had any say in whether to help the Spanish?*
    1. According to Díaz del Castillo (Document C), Malinche was given as a child to traders from Xicalango, who then gave her to Tabascans. Later, Malinche was one of twenty women “given” to the Spanish soldiers by the caciques of Tabasco. Díaz also wrote that Cortés “allotted” Malinche to one of his captains and later impregnated her.
  - iv. Students may have various interpretations on this matter. They may argue that she was enslaved by the Spanish, subjected to sexual violence, and had to carry out their orders, including as an interpreter. Alternatively, they may argue that she was enslaved but, through her work as an interpreter, came to be respected by the Spanish. Or, they may have an altogether different argument of what her role was based solely on this document. If students disagree or are uncertain, explain that that is a common aspect of historical research and interpretation but that they need to support their position with evidence from the document. You should note that many scholars do believe Malinche was likely subjected to abuse, including sexual abuse, by the Spanish.
  - v. Ask students: *What perspectives are missing from this document set?* Most importantly, students should think about the absence of any documents authored by Malinche. No known documents made by her are known to exist.

While we don't know the gender of everyone who may have been involved in the creation of Document D, it's clear that women authors are absent from this document set, which is representative of the

archival record on this history. This absence is crucial to consider, as it may influence what was and was not recorded about Malinche.

- c. *In Documents A-D, were there other Indigenous groups or individuals who helped the Spanish? Under what conditions? How does this context affect our understanding of Malinche?*
- i. There were no Indigenous individuals aside from Malinche who aided the Spanish mentioned in the excerpt of Document A (Cortés's Letter to King Charles) included in this lesson, though Cortés did write about the Tlaxcalans in other portions of his letter to the king. In Document B (The Florentine Codex), Aztecs provided food to the Spanish, though they appeared to do so under the fear of violence. In Document C (Bernal Díaz del Castillo), Tabascans gave Spaniards gold and women, but this was only after the Spanish massacred hundreds of their people. In Document D (Tlaxcalan Canvas), Tlaxcalans allied with the Spanish. The Tlaxcalan Canvas portrays this alliance as harmonious and active, though its authors' motivations combined with Díaz del Castillo's (Document C) reference to the wars in Tlaxcala, warrant skepticism of this harmony. In sum, Malinche was not the only Indigenous person to cooperate with the Spanish in the context of witnessing violence perpetrated by Spaniards.
- d. *How would you characterize the role Malinche played in the conquest of Mexico, considering her historical context? How do you understand her history?*

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## Documents

### Document A

Hernán Cortés, *Despatches of Hernando Cortés Addressed to the Emperor Charles V*, 1522, <https://lccn.loc.gov/02004936>.

### Document B

*The Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 1579, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/>.  
English Translation from Nahuatl: John Lockhart (Ed. & Trans.), *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

### Document C

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, 1576, <https://lccn.loc.gov/09030461>.

### Document D

Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 1552, <http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>.