

What is a Unit Study?

(...and how does it compare to a History Study?)

by Amy Pak • Home School in the Woods

With all of the choices in homeschool curriculum today, it is easy to see how bogged down parents can get deciding what methods to use. In our homeschool years, we chose unit study among other various forms, because we are a very ‘hands-on’, project-oriented group! My children (as well as myself) are quite visual, and unit studies allow for lots of role-play, activities, and arts of all kinds. For those who aren’t familiar with unit studies, I will brief you.

Most of us have grown up with text books and work books, rote memorization and techniques encouraging us to take tests well. Not that these things don’t have their place and may perhaps work better with larger groups with time limitations, as is the case in classroom settings, but they don’t accommodate all learning styles. There are children that like the idea of work-books; those who have a feeling of accomplishment when each page is completed and can see progress in a structured manner. My children fall into the broader category, however, which is the more tactile, or ‘hands-on,’ learner, approaching study from a global way of thinking. They need to see the whole picture for things to make sense. This doesn’t mean that the roles are cast in stone; people can be a mix of styles, but usually, a particular one dominates.

Unit Studies approach a theme topic from several angles, encouraging activity and love of learning as well as discipline and responsibility. This form of study works best when the main topic is studied in the areas of Bible, History, Science, Health, Physical Education and the Arts, but Language and Math can often be applied as well.

Language and Math are subjects that must be taught precept upon precept (e.g. you must learn to add before you can learn to multiply), but most other subjects can be approached in various ways, either touched on vaguely or explored in depth. In our family, we use textbooks for both Language and Math at the levels that the children are progressing at. However, in our Unit Studies, we encourage lots of reading on the topic, incorporate real-life experiences - yes, even real-world math problems - and try to provide a multitude of pertinent educational encounters at multi-age levels. Below is a further illustration of how Unit Studies work.

EXAMPLE: Let’s say we are studying The War Between the States. These are some of the categories you might study under the topic, broken down into subjects:

- HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY:** (The majority of activities would fall under history for this topic)
1. *Research key events previous to the secession: Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850, biographies of slaves, research Northern oppression of the South*
 2. *Prepare a timeline noting events and battles*
 3. *Map the northern & southern territories and border states. How did the western states fit in?*
 4. *Understand how strategy is used by playing a game of chess*
 5. *Research the lives of military leaders, political figures, and influential people who participated in the cause*
 6. *Research the government of the U.S. at the time. Compare the reasons the Union fought for unity while the Confederacy fought to secede.*
 7. *What was the 13th Amendment and what did it mean to the slaves?*
- BIBLE:**
1. *Many prominent leaders during the American Civil War were devout Christians, such as Lee, Jackson, Lincoln, and Chamberlain. Read their biographies. How would their lives compare to military leaders or governing rulers of the Bible, such as Joshua or David?*
 2. *A saying attributed to the war originated in scripture. Lincoln said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Find the original scripture. Why would that apply to this particular war?*

SCIENCE & HEALTH: 1. Although many men died outright during battle, the majority died of disease, exposure, infection, and other maladies. Research the topics of:

- a) common diseases
- b) field hospital surgery
- c) amputation & prosthetics
- d) blood letting & leeching
- e) nurses and doctors of the battlefields
- f) sanitary conditions

2. Research ballistics and the use of 19th century weaponry. How does a cannon project a missile? A gun project a minié-ball? Compare and contrast differences between:

- a) the Parrott and Napoleonic cannons
- b) a Colt Model 1851 Navy Revolver and 58 Springfield Musket

3. This was the era of the first ironclad ships. Research the Monitor and the Merrimac and compare/contrast them to their wooden ancestors.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION: 1. Create a boot camp where young recruits must register and be trained for long marches, weapon handling, and battle tactics. If you have enough participants, divide into Union and Confederate armies and reenact a skirmish or battle.

2. This is a great opportunity to look into games of the late 19th century. Rolling hoops was a common game! Use a hoola-hoop and a stick and try your skills at it!

MUSIC, ART, & HOME ECONOMICS: 1. Research uniforms, period clothing, foods, etc. Cook up an authentic Civil War dinner!

2. Sew costumes of the era such as soldiers' uniforms and dresses of the time period.

3. Sing songs such as "Goober Peas," "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," "The Bonnie Blue Flag," "Dixie," and "John Brown's Body."

4. Make a checker board out of a piece of muslin and a dried corn-cob cut to make checker pieces.

5. Make a haversack.

6. Find a book by Mort Künstler, an artist known for detailed paintings of various Civil War scenes.

7. Research photos by Matthew Brady, a photographer known for his remarkable capture of the War on film.

8. Create a war journal with stained paper and a chamois, leather, or burlap cover.

READING & WRITING: 1. Read biographies of men and women of the war.

2. Read "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a book that caused Lincoln to greet Harriet Beecher Stowe with, "So this is the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war!"

3. The library is full of books on the Civil War! Grab a big basket and gather a bunch! Assign individual reading and read aloud as a family.

4. Journal as a soldier, nurse, or leader.

5. Write a newspaper gazette with articles pertaining to events during the war. Write from a first-hand perspective. If you can, include photos from your reenactments.

6. Collect famous speeches and/or quotes and use them for copy work.

- MATH:** 1. *The cost of the war was immense. Research the overall cost of the war and compare it to the cost of other wars.*
2. *There were costs in other areas as well—the number of lives lost. Research the number of fatalities and casualties and compare that to other wars.*
3. *Create a graph showing casualties from different forms: disease, shot in battle, infection, etc. Which culprit took the most lives?*
4. *Compare currencies of the era. For a time, the Confederacy had their own currency. After the war it was worthless. What forms of money had they used and how did it compare to Union currency?*
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Can you see how all subjects rotate around the topic chosen? Many subjects are touched on such as music, while others are heavily steeped in the topic such as history. As stated above, although math and language are utilized, they are not organized in a fashion conducive to learning fundamentals on a daily basis. That is why we recommend using a different program to teach those areas. However, Unit Studies can offer unique applications of math and language concepts only addressed theoretically in textbooks, such as analyzing Confederate currency, which would not specifically be covered in a math text book. Also, the particular activities in a unit study can be used in the place of penmanship, reading, and writing activities to further instill the lesson taught in the unit study.

Do not feel that you have to have equal amounts of history and science and such within every topic. Although this example offered a rich history base, another topic, such as “Biomes,” would lend itself better to a science unit study.

Unit Studies allow children of different age levels to benefit from each other. The younger ones are exposed to the materials the older one is learning from. The older child can help instruct the younger, further reinforcing the lessons learned. I have heard it said that children should learn within peer groups, but I do not agree. I pose the question, “How often is an adult in a life situation (working, neighbors, etc...) strictly in their particular peer group?” Usually a person is exposed to environments with age differences they must learn to live with and adjust to on a daily basis, whether on the job, in a neighborhood, or in a family. Ultimately, a lost skill can be rekindled; coping with age differences leads to a multi-generational respect not always found in modern society.

How does a Unit Study compare with a History Study?

Unit Studies and History Studies are very similar, however, as you can see, even Unit Studies do not necessarily take the place of a math curriculum or full grammar curriculum. Even still, Unit Studies do incorporate several subjects, often at a more equal level. History Studies, on the other hand, focus on history as the main topic of study, sprinkling in other subjects, such as math, physical education, Bible, music, and science as needed. Although a History Study should not take the place of an actual curriculum for learning grammar and language, you can incorporate the appropriate level of reading, penmanship, and vocabulary — all topics heavily used in a History Study. Another well-used skill is creative writing, which should be encouraged at the level your child is learning at. The older the child, the more should be expected in the research and writing of specific projects.

The creative arts are also widely used in the building of projects, lap books, newspapers, and much more. And of course, no hands-on study is complete without including some type of food! Often our History Studies will include recipes that pertain to the topics. There is nothing like teaching through the taste buds to make a lesson memorable and fun!

Check out our History Studies and download the samples provided on their webpages! We have *Time Travelers* for American history, and *Project Passport* for world history. Both studies are designed to contain text while incorporating many hands-on projects and activities to drive the lessons home!