

Lesson Plan: Moai Statues

Summary

Students explore Easter Island's moai through nine clear facts, learning what they represent, how they were carved from single stone blocks, why most face inland, and how they are believed to have been walked to their platforms. They examine size, features, hidden bodies, clan symbols, toppled statues, and modern preservation.

<https://www.youtube.com/@theartisticbiker/live>

Objective

Students will explain who made the moai, what they represent, how they were transported, and why they face inland. Students will analyze physical features such as eyes, hats, carvings, and buried bodies, then connect those features to purpose and community memory.

Standards

- NGSS MS-ESS3-1, construct explanations of how human activities influence Earth systems.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1, cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly.
- C3 D2.His.1.6-8, analyze connections among past events and developments.

Materials

- 9 Fun Facts list
- Worksheet
- Optional, projector or prints of moai photographs, pencils, lined paper

Introduction

Activate prior knowledge with a quick show of hands on monuments students have seen in person or in media. Read the 9 Fun Facts aloud. Ask, what evidence in the facts shows the statues were meant to protect people, and what details show how they were moved and raised.

Activity

Small groups use the 9 Fun Facts as their only source. Each group builds a three part chart, Purpose, Construction, Change Over Time. They place each fact into the matching part, then write one sentence that ties the part to the whole story. Groups sketch a simple moai outline, label eyes, hat, body, and platform, and add one caption from the facts to explain each label.

Assessment

Collect each group chart and labeled sketch. Check that students placed facts in correct parts and wrote clear one sentence explanations. Individual exit ticket, answer two prompts, Which fact best proves the moai were guardians, Which fact best explains how they were moved.

Rubric

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)
Content Understanding	Accurately uses all facts, connects purpose, construction, change over time	Uses most facts with minor errors	Uses some facts with gaps	Minimal use of facts, major errors
Discussion Participation	Shares ideas, cites facts, listens to others	Shares and cites facts	Limited sharing or off task	No participation
Worksheet Completion	All answers complete and supported by facts	Most answers complete, minor gaps	Some answers missing or weak support	Many answers missing
Technology Connections	Clear labels and captions on sketch, neat layout	Labeled sketch with minor issues	Basic sketch with limited labels	Sketch unclear, missing labels

9 Fun Facts

1. **The moai statues are older than many castles.**

Most were carved between the years 1000 and 1600, though some might go back as far as 900. While Europe was raising stone cathedrals, the Rapa Nui people of Easter Island were carving 30 foot ancestors from solid rock using only hand tools. These statues were their way of honoring powerful chiefs and family leaders who had died, believing their spirits would continue to protect the living.

2. **Each statue came from one giant block of volcanic stone.**

Craftsmen carved them directly into the rock face of a volcanic crater called Rano Raraku using stone chisels made from tougher basalt. Once a statue was finished, workers cut it free from the cliff and somehow hauled it miles to its new home. They did all this without wheels, cranes, or draft animals, proving what human teamwork can do with brains, rhythm, and muscle.

3. **The statues are believed to have been “walked” to their final homes.**

For a long time people thought the moai were dragged on wooden sleds, but modern experiments suggest they could be moved upright by rocking them side to side with ropes. About twenty people could make a five ton replica shuffle forward like a giant stone penguin. This motion fits island legends that said the statues “walked” themselves across the land, guided by the mana, or spiritual energy, of their builders.

4. **The famous “heads” have hidden bodies buried beneath them.**

Most of the moai stand in pits where wind and soil have built up for hundreds of years, covering everything below the neck. Excavations show they have full torsos, arms, and hands carved along their sides, plus symbols etched across their backs. The dirt kept those lower carvings hidden until modern scientists began carefully uncovering them.

5. **They look inland because they were meant to guard the people.**

Each moai stands on a stone platform called an ahu, which marks sacred ground often used as a family tomb. The statues face inland toward the villages to watch over descendants and bless their harvests. Only a few look out to sea, guarding ceremonial sites where visitors and canoes once arrived.

6. The biggest moai would have been taller than a school bus.

The largest completed statue stands about 33 feet tall and weighs 82 tons. Another unfinished one in the quarry would have been nearly 70 feet tall and weighed over 180 tons. Even the smallest moai is about the size of a giraffe.

7. They used to wear red stone hats and have glowing white eyes.

The red pukao hats were carved from a lighter rock called scoria and could weigh 12 tons each. When placed on the statues' heads, they showed the high status of the ancestor they represented. Their eye sockets once held white coral with black pupils, and when the eyes were added during ceremonies, the Rapa Nui said the moai came alive to watch over the island.

8. Some moai carry secret carvings on their backs.

Archaeologists have discovered symbols of birds, fish, and clan emblems carved into the stone. These designs probably recorded family stories or spiritual meanings tied to the ancestor inside the statue. It is like each moai wears a stone version of its family history across its shoulders.

9. Around 900 moai still stand or lie across Easter Island today.

Many were knocked down during island wars in the 1700s and 1800s when rival clans tried to destroy one another's ancestors' power. Since the 1950s, island families and scientists have worked together to raise them again and preserve them from storms, salt, and rising seas. Each time a moai is re erected, it is not just a repair, it is a reunion between the living and their ancestors.

Worksheet

Name: _____ Date: _____

Review

- 1) What do the moai represent, and how did the Rapa Nui believe they helped the living.
- 2) From which place were most statues carved, and what tools were used.
- 3) Explain how the statues are believed to have been moved to their platforms.

Discussion

- 4) Why do most statues face inland, and what does that placement suggest about community values.

Data Analysis

- 5) Using the facts about size and weight, describe one challenge the builders had to solve, and name one technique that helped them solve it.

Reflection

- 6) Many statues were knocked down during wars and later raised again. What does re erecting a statue mean to a community, and why might that matter today.