

A Glimpse of Russia

Keep 'em Reading • by Judith Snyder

Grades
K–5

This year Russia opens her doors to international athletes for the XXII Winter Olympic Games. During the two weeks of televised sporting events, the media will also give viewers a glimpse of this multifaceted country. Expand this exposure to offer your students a broader worldview as they deepen their appreciation of a rich, varied culture.

Exploring information about Russia with students before the games provides relevant content to use while also teaching core language skills. Let the Olympic Games foster curiosity about the host country and supply a venue to teach inferring, comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing information.

Activities in this article can be easily modified to accommodate scheduling constraints or your students' academic needs. Many activities can be completed in one class period or extended with adjustments to the requirements and end products. Gather your copies of books about Russia and choose the activities that will work for you.

Introducing Russia

Developing Background Knowledge: Grades K–5

Video Clips

- Showing video clips of Russia visually engages students. Short clips of two to seven minutes allow the opportunity to set a purpose for listening and promote multiple focused discussions. This visual overview will help students grasp the vast and varied land, climate, and people.
- Before watching the clips, allow for time to reflect on what students already know about Russia. Identify main categories for consideration and display information on a class **KWL** chart, or let small groups develop their own.

- During and after each video clip, students can note surprising or interesting facts. Compile the facts learned. At the end of this activity and discussion, ask the student groups to develop questions about Russia and add them to the chart. Refer to these questions throughout the unit as answers are found. Unresolved questions offer an opportunity for extending research.

Russian Speaker

- Invite a Russian immigrant to talk to classes about the culture and history of Russia.
- Create a display case with items from Russia.

Russian Language

- Start each class by learning one or two Russian words. The Russian Language School offers a website with computer-generated pronunciation of a variety of words (www.russianlanguageschool.com/alphabet/letter-01/). Listen to each word and practice its pronunciation several times.
- Display a Russian-language book (*My First Book of Russian Words*, by Katy Kudela, Capstone 2010; or *My First Russian Phrases*, by Jill Kalz, Capstone 2013) and show or write words using the Russian alphabet and the English translations.
- Create labels for common items used in school.

Russian Music

- Play Russian music in the background during class. Include both folk and classical music (e.g., Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Stravinsky's *Firebird*, and Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No. 2").

Listening with Purpose: Grades K–2

- Kindergartners will enjoy listening to the book *Russia in Colors*, by Catherine Ipcizade (Capstone, 2009). Let students study the

Au: Are librarians familiar enough with KWL or should it be spelled out the first time?

illustrations on each page and identify information gleaned from the pictures. Read the text aloud and discuss additional facts. As students listen, they should identify one or two details that they find most interesting. At the end of the first read-through, distribute drawing paper for students to draw their favorite fact. Write a sentence dictated by the student under each picture. Reread passages as necessary.

- First and second graders can use unanswered questions from the Developing Background Knowledge activity as a basis for a separate activity requiring thoughtful listening to informational text. Choose one of the questions listed in the KWL chart. Display and discuss the table of contents in a book about Russia that uses simple text; use a document reader if available. Agree on a chapter or page that is most likely to provide the answer, and read the page aloud. Write each answer at the bottom of a blank piece of drawing paper. Repeat this activity until the questions are answered or until there are enough pages for each student or pair of students to illustrate the information. Bind the pages into a book about Russia. Option: Use the technology available to create a slide show.
- Find a list of books about Russia that use simple text at www.librarysparks.com.



Gathering Information from Maps, Charts, and Graphs: Grades 3–5

An essential skill for informational text is reading maps, charts, and graphs. Use atlases to help students understand the vastness of the land and the variety of people who live in Russia. Locate outline maps in your school resources or online. Display a map that compares the size of Russia to the size of the United States. Then distribute individual Russian maps to students to identify major cities and geographical locations. Use this opportunity for mini lessons on reading the different types of maps, charts, and tables in an atlas. Explore the climate, products, and populations in the diverse regions. Ask questions of the class that require careful reading of the maps and charts. Be sure to include Sochi, the city hosting the Winter Olympics. Compare its climate to that of the rest of Russia.

Applying reading skills from the atlas activities to maps and charts in nonfiction books requires students to demonstrate their knowledge. Since most books have embedded maps and charts in the subject matter, students will need to browse through the pages to find examples and read the captions to discover the topic. Mark the pages for future reference. Compare the information from the book maps and charts to those in the atlas. Identify any variations and determine possible causes for differences.

Ask questions that require students to analyze and synthesize the information in the maps to help predict the way of life of the people who live in each region. Have them defend their predictions by using the information found in the maps and charts.

Festivals and Holidays: Grades 1–5

Russian holidays and festivals reveal traditions Russians find important. Ask students to research the types of and reasons for Russian celebrations.

Create a list of major US holidays and **develop a graphic organizer** that depicts similarities and differences in each country's holidays. Discuss material orally, supporting decisions with text.

Daily Life in Russia Research: Grades 3–5

Studying the everyday events in Russian lives enables students to make personal connections. Use a variation of the jigsaw teaching technique to help students cooperate and learn together. Assign a different topic to five research groups (housing, school, family life, pastimes, and foods). Using the table of contents and index, each group searches for information about their topic and writes three to five interesting facts.

Jigsaw into secondary groups where the experts on each topic share the facts with the rest of this new group. Using this compiled information, the group writes a journal entry from the point of view of a Russian child. Be sure the information learned in the previous exercises is included in the entry.

Russian Arts: Grades 4–5

Another aspect of culture includes the arts. Explore Russian creativity and talent via famous personalities. Students search in books and online to find:

AU: Can you provide direction so we can provide this as an online resource

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- A picture of the person
- Three pivotal facts about the Russian artist/author/musician/dancer
- The reason for the person's fame

Students place a caption under the picture along with the name and life span of the individual. Post the information on a class chart or slideshow. The oral presentation that accompanies the slide show should include an example of the artist's work. Find a list of famous Russian artists at www.librarysparks.com.



Extensions:

- Find an **American working** in the same field and time period as the **Russian**.
- Place pictures on a timeline to help make connections.

Russia in Literature and Folklore: Grades K–5

Much can be learned about a culture from its folklore and fiction, for values are embedded in the subjects, characters, and plots. Though the following activities focus on core skills, be sure to discuss the values that the stories impart and what we can discover about the Russian people as a result.

Picture Books (Grades K–3)

Primary students can gain insights by listening to picture books whose story origins or subjects pertain to Russia. Before reading, present a question that will require readers to attend to the story and pictures (e.g., *The Keeping Quilt*: What is the importance of the quilt? If it were yours, what would you do with it? *Little Lost Tiger*: What do we learn about the Siberian tiger's survival problems?). Find other picture book suggestions at www.librarysparks.com.



The famous Russian author Leo Tolstoy also wrote children's stories. Introduce him to the class and share several of his tales in *The Lion and the Puppy and Other Stories for Children*. The stories are short, simple, and similar to Aesop's Fables and Russian folk tales, and they teach lessons.

Dramatizing Folktales: Grades 1–3

Folktales with simple plots are perfect for creative dramatics. Read and act out one story with the whole class, or divide the class into smaller groups to create a variety of folktale dramas. Modify

the story and characters to meet the needs and numbers of the group. Provide one day for practice and one day to perform. Keep costumes and props to a minimum.

Comparing Stories: Grades 2–5

Folktales also offer an opportunity for compare and contrast activities because of the variations in tellings. Use a graphic organizer to compare characters, setting, and plot. These picture books are good sources:

The Turnip, by Barkow (present-day setting in a school garden)

The Enormous Turnip, by Tolstoy and Goto (a traditional telling)

The Giant Turnip, by Tolstoy and Sharkey (uses animal characters)

The Tale of the Firebird, by Gennady Spirin

The Firebird, by Demi

Both versions contain beautiful illustrations, but the stories contain different characters and variations on the plot.

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The Frog Princess, by Gennady Spirin

The Frog Princess, by Laura Cecil

The Frog Prince, a German version of this story.

Even when formal instruction is over, interested students may want to return to the library to continue searching for answers to questions from the KWL chart. Encourage their curiosity by establishing a center with Russian resources.



Judith Snyder is a seasoned teacher/librarian in Colorado as well as a professional storyteller and freelance writer. Judith is the author of the *Jump-start Your Library* series, three books featuring hands-on library lessons from *UpstartBooks* (2008), and a picture book, *What Do You See?* (2009), from *Odyssey Books*.