Section 1 - Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about the Age of Exploration. This period of discovery lasted from about 1418 to 1620. During this time, European explorers made many daring voyages that changed the world.

A major reason for these voyages was the desire to find ocean routes to East Asia, which Europeans called the Indies. When Christopher Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean, he was looking for such a route. Instead, he reached the Americas. Columbus thought he had reached the Indies. In time, Europeans would realize that Columbus had found what they called the “New World.” The Indies in the Atlantic became the West Indies. European nations soon rushed to claim lands in the Americas and elsewhere.

Early explorers often suffered terrible hardships. In 1520, Ferdinand Magellan set out with three ships to cross the Pacific Ocean from South America. He had guessed, correctly, that Asia lay west of South America. But Magellan had no idea how vast the Pacific Ocean was. He thought his crew would sail for a few weeks at most. Instead, the crossing took three months. While the ships were still at sea, the crew ran out of food, nearly starving to death. One sailor wrote about the terrible time. “We ate biscuit . . . swarming with worms. . . . We drank yellow water that had been putrid [rotten] for days . . . and often we ate sawdust from boards.”

Why did explorers brave such dangers? You will learn about the voyages of explorers from Portugal, Spain, and other European countries. You will also learn how the Age of Exploration changed the way people viewed the world.

Section 2 - The Causes of European Exploration

Why did European exploration begin to flourish in the 1400s? Two main reasons stand out. First, Europeans of this time had several motives for exploring the world. Second, advances in knowledge and technology helped to make the Age of Exploration possible.

Motives for Exploration For early explorers, one of the main motives for exploration was the desire to find new trade routes to Asia. By the 1400s, merchants and Crusaders had brought many goods to Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Demand for these goods increased the desire for trade.

Europeans were especially interested in spices from Asia. They had learned to use spices to help preserve food during winter and to cover up the taste of food that was no longer fresh.

Trade with the East, however, was difficult and very expensive. Muslims and Italians controlled the flow of goods. Muslim traders carried goods to the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Italian merchants then brought the goods into Europe. Problems arose when Muslim rulers sometimes closed the trade routes from Asia to Europe. Also, the goods went through many hands, and each trading party raised the price.
European monarchs and merchants wanted to break the hold that Muslims and Italians had on trade. One way to do so was to find a sea route to Asia. Portuguese sailors looked for a route that went around Africa. Christopher Columbus tried to reach Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic.

Other motives also came into play. Many people were excited by the opportunity for new knowledge. Explorers saw the chance to earn fame and glory, as well as wealth. As new lands were discovered, nations wanted to claim the lands’ riches for themselves.

A final motive for exploration was the desire to spread Christianity beyond Europe. Both Protestant and Catholic nations were eager to make new converts. Missionaries of both faiths followed the paths blazed by explorers.

**Advances in Knowledge and Technology**  
The Age of Exploration began during the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a time of new learning. A number of advances during that time made it easier for explorers to venture into the unknown.

One key advance was in cartography, the art and science of mapmaking. In the early 1400s, an Italian scholar translated an ancient book called *Guide to Geography* from Greek into Latin. The book was written by the thinker Ptolemy (TOL-eh-mee) in the 2nd century C.E. Printed copies of the book inspired new interest in cartography. European mapmakers used Ptolemy’s work as a basis for drawing more accurate maps.

Discoveries by explorers gave mapmakers new information with which to work. The result was a dramatic change in Europeans’ view of the world. By the 1500s, Europeans made globes, showing Earth as a sphere. In 1507, a German cartographer made the first map that clearly showed North and South America as separate from Asia.

In turn, better maps made navigation easier. The most important Renaissance geographer, Gerardus Mercator (mer-KAY-tur), created maps using improved lines of longitude and latitude. Mercator’s mapmaking technique was a great help to navigators.

An improved ship design also helped explorers. By the 1400s, Portuguese and Spanish shipbuilders were making a new type of ship called a caravel. These ships were small, fast, and easy to maneuver. Their special bottoms made it easier for explorers to travel along coastlines where the water was not deep. Caravels also used lateen sails, a triangular style adapted from Muslim ships. These sails could be positioned to take advantage of the wind no matter which way it blew.

Along with better ships, new navigational tools helped sailors travel more safely on the open seas. By the end of the 1400s, the compass was much improved. Sailors used compasses to find their bearing, or direction of travel. The astrolabe helped sailors determine their distance north or south from the equator.

Finally, improved weapons gave Europeans a huge advantage over the people they met in their explorations. Sailors could fire their cannons at targets near the shore without leaving their ships. On land, the weapons of native peoples often were no match for European guns, armor, and horses.
Section 3 - Portugal Begins the Age of Exploration

The Age of Exploration began in Portugal. This small country is located on the Iberian Peninsula. Its rulers sent explorers first to nearby Africa and then around the world.

Portugal’s explorers changed Europeans’ understanding of the world in several ways. They explored the coasts of Africa and brought back gold and enslaved Africans. They also found a sea route to India. From India, explorers brought back spices, such as cinnamon and pepper, and other goods, such as porcelain, incense, jewels, and silk.

During the 1500s, Portugal also began to establish colonies in Brazil. The native people of Brazil suffered greatly as a result. The Portuguese forced them to work on sugar plantations, or large farms. They also tried to get them to give up their religion and convert to Christianity. Countless numbers of native peoples died from overwork and from European diseases. Others fled into the interior of Brazil.

The colonization of Brazil also had a negative impact on Africa. As the native population of Brazil decreased, the Portuguese needed more laborers. Starting in the mid–1500s, they turned to Africa. Over the next 300 years, ships brought millions of enslaved West Africans to Brazil.

Section 4 - Spain’s Early Explorations

In the late 1400s, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain were determined to make their country a powerful force in Europe. One way they thought to do this was to sponsor explorations to claim new lands for Spain.

Key Explorers for Spain It was Ferdinand and Isabella who sponsored the voyages of Christopher Columbus. The Italian-born Columbus thought that the Indies, or eastern Asia, lay on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He believed sailing west would be the easiest route to reach it.

When Columbus failed to win Portuguese support for his idea, Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to pay for the risky voyage. They wanted to beat Portugal in the race to control the trade wealth of Asia. They also wanted to spread Christianity.

In August 1492, three ships left Spain under Columbus’s command. For the crew, venturing into the open ocean was frightening.

As the weeks went by, some of the men began to fear they would never see Spain again. Then, on October 12, a lookout sighted land. Columbus went ashore on an island in the Caribbean Sea, and claimed it for Spain.

For three months, Columbus and his men explored nearby islands with the help of native islanders, whom the Spanish called Taino (TY-noh). Thinking they were in the Indies, the Spanish soon called all the local people “Indians.”

In March 1493, Columbus arrived back in Spain. He proudly reported that he had reached Asia. Over the next ten years, he made three more voyages to what he called the Indies. He died in Spain in 1506, still insisting that he had sailed to Asia.
Many Europeans, however, believed that Columbus had actually found a land mass that lay between Europe and Asia. One of these was Ferdinand Magellan (muh-JEL-uhn), a Portuguese explorer.

Magellan believed he could sail west to the Indies if he found a strait, or channel, through South America. The strait would connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, allowing ships to continue on to Asia.

Magellan won Spain’s support for a voyage to find the strait. In August 1519, he set sail with five ships and about two hundred and fifty men.

Magellan looked for the strait all along South America’s east coast. He finally found it at the southern tip of the continent. Today, it is called the Strait of Magellan.

The Impact of Early Spanish Exploration  The early Spanish explorations changed Europeans’ view of the world a great deal. The voyages of Christopher Columbus revealed the existence of the Americas. Magellan’s expedition opened up a westward route to the Indies. It showed that it was possible to sail completely around the world. It also proved that Columbus had indeed found a "New World"—one that Europeans hadn’t realized was there.

Columbus’s voyages marked the beginning of Spanish settlement in the West Indies. Spain earned great wealth from its settlements. Settlers mined for precious minerals and started sugar plantations. The Spanish also brought new crops, such as sweet potatoes and pineapples, to Europe.

For the native people of the West Indies, however, Spanish settlement was extremely detrimental. The Spanish forced native people to work as slaves in the mines and on the plantations. Priests forced many of them to become Christians. When the Spanish arrived, perhaps one or two million Taino lived on the islands. Within fifty years, fewer than five hundred Taino were left. The rest had died of starvation, overwork, or European diseases.

Like Portugal, Spain looked to West Africa for new laborers. From 1518 through the mid-1800s, the Spanish brought millions of enslaved Africans to work in their American colonies.

After Columbus’s voyages, Spain was eager to claim even more lands in the New World. To explore and conquer "New Spain," the Spanish turned to adventurers called conquistadors, or conquerors. The conquistadors were allowed to establish settlements and seize the wealth of natives. In return, the Spanish government claimed some of the treasures they found. (We will read more about conquistadors later)

Section 6 - Other European Explorations

Spain and Portugal dominated the early years of exploration. But rulers in rival nations wanted their own share of trade and new lands in the Americas. Soon England, France, and the Netherlands all sent expeditions to North America.

Key Explorers Sailing on behalf of the Netherlands, English explorer Henry Hudson journeyed to North America in 1609. Hudson wanted to find a northwest passage
through North America to the Pacific Ocean. Such a water route would allow ships to sail from Europe to Asia without entering waters controlled by Spain.

Hudson did not find a northwest passage, but he did explore what is now called the Hudson River in present-day New York State. His explorations were the basis of the Dutch claim to the area. Dutch settlers established the colony of New Amsterdam on Manhattan in 1625.

In 1610, Hudson tried again, this time under the flag of his native England. Searching farther north, he sailed into a large bay in Canada that is now called Hudson Bay. He spent three months looking for an outlet to the Pacific, but there was none.

After a hard winter in the icy bay, some of Hudson’s crew rebelled. They set him, his son, and seven loyal followers adrift in a small boat. Hudson and the other castaways were never seen again. Hudson’s voyage, however, laid the basis for later English claims in Canada.
Vocabulary—Please answer with a definition of the word in your own words

Missionaries:

Cartography:

Colony:

Detrimental:

Mutiny:

Please answer the following questions using “RACE” format:

1. What are all the motives for exploration mentioned in the reading?

2. What were some of the advances in technology at the time? How did these advances in technology act as a catalyst for the Age of Exploration?
3. Describe the legacy, or lasting effects, of Portuguese exploration in the 1500’s.

4. What are the effects of Spain’s successful exploration of the “New World”?

5. What did European countries ask conquistadors to do? Why did conquistadors agree to the deal?

6. What was Henry Hudson hoping to find? What did Hudson end up finding?