

Grade 7 Literacy  
Week of January 4 – January 8

**Lesson 1: About Identity – Introduction**

**Totem Poles**

**We all have an identity that was passed down and shaped when we were born.**

Having a sense of identity is important because it allows people to stand out as individuals, develop a sense of well-being and importance, and fit in with certain groups and cultures. Many cultures and societies place great value and significance on certain items, which hold symbolic meaning and gain respect from citizens. National flags, for instance, have distinct colors and patterns, and symbolize past achievements intimately familiar to citizens.

source: sdsu.edu

In this unit you will be challenged to:

- **think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts**
- **recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in a variety of texts structures and how they contribute to meaning**
- **recognize and appreciate the role of story, narrative, and oral tradition in expressing First Peoples' perspectives, values, beliefs, and points of view**

Throughout this unit, we will take a look at identities, how they are formed and expressed by others. Although some identity has biological origins, identity also exists as a learned behavior. People living in tribes, for instance, learn the specific clothing styles and even normal behaviors of those tribes as they grow up. Identity exists in many forms, and ranges from small traits to powerful behaviors.



View the video on the importance of totem pole carving to the Haida Nation and other Indigenous Peoples: <https://youtu.be/lkPwSnZ30IQ>

**Get ready to learn by thinking about this:**

One's own identity, what's contributed to the formation of it and how you express it.

**So, in what ways do people form and express their identity?**

**Overview of Lessons:**

- 1. Read/view a variety of texts about identity.
- 2. Complete the activities in the reading guide and submit.
- 3. Complete a reading project.
- 4. Take a short test to show your understanding.
- 5. In the writer's workshop, you will go through the writing project to create your own piece of descriptive writing.

# Totem Poles

## What are Totem Poles?

Totem poles are monuments created by First Nations of the Pacific Northwest to represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events. Totem poles are typically created out of red cedar, a malleable wood relatively abundant in the Pacific Northwest, and would be erected to be visible within a community.

Most totem poles display beings, or crest animals, marking a family's lineage and validating the powerful rights and privileges that the family held. Totem poles would not necessarily *tell* a story so much as it would serve to document stories and histories familiar to community members or particular family or clan members.

A totem pole typically features symbolic and stylized human, animal, and supernatural forms.<sup>1</sup> Totem poles are primarily visual representations of kinship, depicting family crests and clan membership. For example, some Kwakwaka'wakw families of northern Vancouver Island belonging to the Thunderbird Clan will feature a Thunderbird crest and familial legends on their poles. Other common crests among coastal First Nations include the wolf, eagle, grizzly bear, thunderbird, killer whale, frog, raven, and salmon.<sup>2</sup> Wealthy and influential families may have more than one crest. Totem poles can also be created to honour a particular event or important person.

Of all the material culture produced by coastal First Nations, the totem pole is likely one of the most recognizable cultural symbols of the Pacific Northwest. The array of different totem pole styles and designs reflect the rich diversity of the First Nations histories and cultures that produced them. This section will explore the meaning and purpose of totem poles, how they are constructed, stylistic variations, and their significance in cultural revitalization initiatives among First Nations.



Image from House frontal poles outside the Haida Heritage Centre, Kaay Llnagay, BC. Photo (c) 2010, Robyn Hanson  
Text from [https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem\\_poles/](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem_poles/)



## Read and Respond

Read the following text (from [https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem\\_poles/](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem_poles/)):

In 1872, Chief G'psgolox commissioned artists Hemzid and Wakas to carve a pole in memory of the chief's deceased wife and children. Starting in the early 1920s, the federal government adopted a policy of salvage anthropology and, fearing the decline of Indigenous art, began to buy out totem poles from communities living along the Skeena River. In 1927, Iver Fougner, an Indian Agent in Bella Coola, wrote to the Department of Indian Affairs asking permission for the Swedish Consul of British Columbia to purchase the G'psgolox Pole.<sup>1</sup> One day in 1929, the pole was severed and taken from the Haisla village of Misk'usa while the villagers were away on a fishing trip.<sup>2</sup> The pole was then shipped to Sweden, where it remained in storage until 1980, when it was finally put on display at the national Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm.

Eventually, the Haisla learned of the pole's whereabouts in 1991, and began the long journey of repatriating the pole. The Haisla and the museum negotiated a plan for repatriation: the museum agreed to return the pole, and the Haisla would carve a replacement. Finally, in April 2006, the pole returned to Vancouver. On July 1, 2006, the Haisla officially welcomed the pole home to Kitimat. It was the first pole in Canada to be repatriated from overseas. Louisa Smith, a spokesperson for the Haisla chief, summed up the emotion of the day: "The repatriation of the G'psgolox totem pole has been a journey of a hundred years and thousands of miles...Our children and future generations will be able to see, touch and feel a piece of their history, reclaimed by a nation against all odds."<sup>3</sup>

This story is documented by director Gil Cardinal in a National Film Board (NFB) documentary entitled *Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox Pole*. You can view the film in its entirety on the NFB website (link below).

<sup>1</sup> "G'psgolox pole returns home after 77 years, First totem ever to be repatriated from overseas," Ecotrust Canada, <http://www.ecotrust.ca/g%E2%80%99psgolox-pole-returns-home-after-77-years-first-totem-ever-be-repatriated-oversea> (accessed 13 January, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> "Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox Pole- Film Description," National Film Board of Canada, <http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=51162> (accessed 13 January, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Ecotrust Canada.

