

55 Fun History Fact Bell Ringer Cards

One fact, one opinion question, one source per card. Every fact was checked against the source printed on the card.

The four-minute routine

1. Project or read the fact. Students write one sentence: "I think this because..."
2. Ask the card's question. Students answer in writing first, then pair-share for one minute.
3. Take two answers out loud. Push for a reason, not a guess.
4. Point to the source on the card. Ask once a week: "How would we check this?"

About the "Myth busted" cards

Several cards correct a popular myth. They make strong first-week bell ringers because they teach the habit the whole course depends on: a story everyone repeats is not the same as a story someone checked.

Eras in this set

- Ancient World (to 500 CE): 9 cards
- Medieval World (500–1450): 10 cards
- Early Modern / Age of Exploration & Revolutions (1450–1800): 9 cards
- 19th Century (1800–1900): 9 cards
- 20th Century (1900–1945): 9 cards
- Cold War & Modern (1945–present): 9 cards

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #1

For about 3,800 years, the Great Pyramid of Giza was the tallest human-made structure on Earth.

Discuss: Why do you think people in ancient Egypt put so much time and effort into building something so huge?

Source: Britannica – How long did the Great Pyramid of Giza hold the record as the tallest man-made structure in the world?

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #2

Evidence suggests the Egyptian pyramids were built by paid laborers, not by slaves as many people believe.

Discuss: Why do you think the myth that slaves built the pyramids has lasted so long?

Source: History.com – 11 Things You May Not Know About Ancient Egypt

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #3

Cleopatra came from a family of Greek Macedonians, but she was the first ruler in her family line to learn the Egyptian language. Ancient writers said she may have known as many as a dozen languages.

Discuss: How do you think speaking many languages helped Cleopatra as a ruler?

Source: History.com – 10 Little-Known Facts About Cleopatra

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #4

When pirates captured a young Julius Caesar and demanded a ransom of 20 talents, Caesar laughed at them and said he was worth at least 50.

Discuss: Was Caesar being brave or just showing off? Explain your thinking.

Source: Britannica – The Time Julius Caesar Was Captured by Pirates

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #5

The month of July was first called Quintilis, Latin for 'fifth month.' It was renamed to honor Julius Caesar in 44 BCE.

Discuss: If you could rename a month after someone from history, who would you choose and why?

Source: Britannica – July

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #6

Some ancient Roman concrete can heal its own cracks: reactive chunks of lime in the mix help seal tiny cracks before they spread. Rome's Pantheon, dedicated in 128 CE, still has the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome.

Discuss: Why do you think modern builders are now studying ancient Roman concrete?

Source: MIT News – Riddle solved: Why was Roman concrete so durable?

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #7

The Rosetta Stone, found in 1799, has the same decree carved in three scripts: Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic, and ancient Greek. It helped scholars finally learn to read hieroglyphs.

Discuss: Why do you think having the same message in three scripts made the Rosetta Stone so valuable?

Source: Britannica – Rosetta Stone

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #8

Divers pulled the Antikythera mechanism, sometimes called an 'ancient Greek computer,' from a shipwreck in 1900-1901. Its gears could track the Sun, Moon, and planets, predict eclipses, and show when the Olympic Games would happen.

Discuss: Why do you think nothing this advanced appeared again for more than a thousand years?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – What Is the Antikythera Mechanism, the World's First Computer?

ANCIENT WORLD (TO 500 CE)

Fact #9

In 1974, farmers digging a well in China found China's Terracotta Army. Archaeologists have since found about 8,000 life-size clay soldiers, and each one appears to have its own unique face.

Discuss: Why do you think an emperor wanted an army of clay soldiers buried near his tomb?

Source: History.com – 5 Things You May Not Know About the Terracotta Army

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #10

Myth busted: Vikings almost certainly did not wear horned helmets. The horned look became popular in the 1870s, when a costume designer created horned helmets for an opera by Richard Wagner.

Discuss: Why do you think movies and costumes keep the horned-helmet myth alive?

Source: History.com – Did Vikings really wear horned helmets?

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #11

Scientists proved Vikings were cutting down trees in Newfoundland, Canada, in the year 1021, using a solar storm signal locked inside tree rings. That is more than 470 years before Columbus sailed in 1492.

Discuss: Why do you think Columbus is remembered more than the Vikings who reached North America first?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – New Dating Method Shows Vikings Occupied Newfoundland in 1021 C.E.

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #12

In 1324, Mansa Musa, king of Mali, traveled to Mecca with a huge caravan carrying hundreds of pounds of gold. He spent and gave away so much gold in Egypt that its value dropped, and the economy took 12 years to recover.

Discuss: Can being too generous ever cause problems? Explain using Mansa Musa as an example.

Source: History.com – This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #13

Myth busted: Educated people in the Middle Ages knew the Earth was round. The idea that they believed in a flat Earth was largely made up in 1828 in a popular biography of Columbus by Washington Irving.

Discuss: Why do you think a made-up story can become 'common knowledge'?

Source: History.com – Christopher Columbus Never Set Out to Prove the Earth Was Round

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #14

Myth busted: The image of medieval people as dirty and unwashed is false. Bathing and handwashing were common and were treated as important routines.

Discuss: Why do you think people today often imagine the past as dirtier or less advanced than it really was?

Source: National Geographic – What life in medieval Europe was really like

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #15

The computer word 'algorithm' comes from the name of al-Khwarizmi, a Muslim scholar who lived in the 800s, through a Latin translation of his math book.

Discuss: Why do you think so many science and math words come from other languages and cultures?

Source: Britannica – Algorithm

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #16

At its peak in the late 1200s, the Mongol Empire covered about 9 million square miles, making it the largest connected land empire in history.

Discuss: What challenges do you think came with ruling such a huge empire?

Source: History.com – What Were the Biggest Empires in History?

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #17

Explorer Marco Polo was one of the first Europeans to see an Asian rhinoceros, and he thought the horned animals were unicorns.

Discuss: Why do you think Marco Polo compared the rhino to something he already knew about from stories?

Source: History.com – 11 Things You May Not Know About Marco Polo

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #18

The famous Bayeux Tapestry is not actually a woven tapestry. It is a strip of linen about 230 feet (70 meters) long with scenes embroidered on it.

Discuss: Why do you think people told history through pictures like this instead of only in writing?

Source: Britannica (Compton's) – The Bayeux tapestry is not a woven tapestry

MEDIEVAL WORLD (500-1450)

Fact #19

Only four original copies of the 1215 Magna Carta still exist today. It was sealed by King John at Runnymede, England.

Discuss: Why do you think a document from 1215 still matters to people today?

Source: Library of Congress – Lincoln Magna Carta (Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor exhibit)

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #20

Ferdinand Magellan's 1519 voyage set out with about 240 men on five ships, but only 18 men made it back to Spain in 1522. Magellan himself died in the Philippines before the trip was finished.

Discuss: Why do you think explorers were willing to take such huge risks?

Source: National Geographic – 240 men started Magellan's voyage around the world. Only 18 finished it.

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #21

Tomatoes were first grown in Mexico and came to Europe in the 1500s. For a long time, many Europeans thought tomatoes were poisonous, and tomato sauce did not become a regular part of Italian cooking until the late 1700s.

Discuss: Why do you think people are sometimes afraid to try new foods?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – A Passion for Tomatoes

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #22

In January 1610, Galileo used a homemade telescope to discover four moons circling Jupiter. Astronomers still call them the Galilean moons.

Discuss: Why do you think Galileo's discovery upset people who believed everything circled the Earth?

Source: NASA – 415 Years Ago: Astronomer Galileo Discovers Jupiter's Moons

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #23

During the Dutch 'tulip mania' of the 1630s, one rare tulip bulb sold for more than the cost of a mansion in Amsterdam. Historians now say the famous 'crash' was overblown and few people were ruined.

Discuss: Why do you think people pay huge amounts for things that are popular or rare?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – There Never Was a Real Tulip Fever

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #24

Isaac Newton served in Parliament, but he reportedly spoke only once—to ask an usher to close a window because it was chilly.

Discuss: Can someone be a genius in one area and quiet or unsure in another? Explain.

Source: History.com – 9 Things You May Not Know About Isaac Newton

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #25

Congress voted for independence on July 2, 1776. The Declaration of Independence is dated July 4, but it was not actually signed until August 2.

Discuss: Why do you think Americans celebrate July 4 instead of July 2?

Source: National Archives – Did You Know... Independence Day Should Actually Be July 2?

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #26

Myth busted: Paul Revere almost certainly did not shout 'The British are coming!' on his 1775 ride. Most colonists still thought of themselves as British, and he most likely warned that 'the regulars are coming out.'

Discuss: Why do you think the more dramatic version of the story became so popular?

Source: Paul Revere House – Revisit the Ride: What Did Paul Revere Actually Say?

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #27

Myth busted: Benjamin Franklin never officially proposed the turkey as America's national bird. He did write a letter to his daughter calling the bald eagle a bird of 'bad moral character' and the turkey 'a much more respectable bird.'

Discuss: Which animal do you think best represents the United States, and why?

Source: The Franklin Institute – Did Benjamin Franklin Want the National Bird To Be A Turkey?

EARLY MODERN / AGE OF EXPLORATION & REVOLUTIONS (1450-1800)

Fact #28

Myth busted: George Washington's false teeth were never made of wood. His dentures used materials like tin, gold, lead, and human teeth; staining over time made them look like wood grain.

Discuss: Why do you think people like to tell surprising (but false) stories about famous leaders?

Source: George Washington's Mount Vernon – Wooden Teeth Myth

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #29

Former presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died within hours of each other on July 4, 1826—exactly 50 years after the Declaration of Independence.

Discuss: Is this just a coincidence, or does it feel like something more? Explain your opinion.

Source: Thomas Jefferson's Monticello – John Adams

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #30

The oldest surviving photograph from a camera was made in 1827 by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. It showed the view from his window and took several days of sunlight to capture.

Discuss: How would life be different if taking a photo still took days?

Source: Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin – The Niépce Heliograph

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #31

Ketchup most likely began centuries ago as a fermented fish sauce, similar to sauces found in Southeast Asia. The first published recipe for tomato ketchup did not appear until 1812.

Discuss: What other everyday foods do you think might have surprising origins?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – A Brief (But Global) History of Ketchup

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #32

Abraham Lincoln is the only U.S. president to hold a patent. In 1849 he patented a device that used inflatable air chambers to lift riverboats over sandbars.

Discuss: Why do you think problem-solving skills are useful for a president?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – Abraham Lincoln Is the Only President Ever to Have a Patent

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #33

Myth busted: Napoleon was not unusually short. He was probably about 5 feet 6 or 7 inches—average or taller for a Frenchman of his time—but British cartoonists drew him as tiny.

Discuss: How can cartoons and media shape the way people see a leader?

Source: Britannica – Was Napoleon Short?

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #34

The Pony Express mail service started in April 1860 but lasted only about 18 months. The new transcontinental telegraph made it outdated in October 1861.

Discuss: What modern technology do you think will become outdated as fast as the Pony Express did?

Source: Smithsonian National Postal Museum – Pony Express

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #35

In 1867, the United States bought Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million. Critics mocked the deal as 'Seward's Folly,' but a later gold discovery proved it was a smart buy.

Discuss: Have you ever made a choice others doubted that turned out well? How is that like the Alaska purchase?

Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian – Purchase of Alaska, 1867

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #36

The 1883 eruption of the Krakatoa volcano in Indonesia is considered the loudest sound in modern history. People heard it as far as 3,000 miles away.

Discuss: How do you think people 3,000 miles away explained a sound they could not see the cause of?

Source: Britannica – What's the Loudest Sound in History?

19TH CENTURY (1800-1900)

Fact #37

The Statue of Liberty was not always green. Its copper skin, only about as thick as two pennies, slowly reacted with the air and formed a green layer called a patina that protects the metal.

Discuss: Do you think the statue looks better green or would it look better copper-colored? Why?

Source: National Park Service – Frequently Asked Questions About the Statue of Liberty

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #38

The teddy bear is named after President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1902 he refused to shoot a bear that had been tied to a tree on a hunting trip, and a toy maker soon sold a stuffed 'Teddy's Bear.'

Discuss: Why do you think this story made Roosevelt more popular with Americans?

Source: National Park Service – The Story of the Teddy Bear (Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace)

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #39

The Wright brothers' first powered flight on December 17, 1903, lasted just 12 seconds and went 120 feet. Pieces of their airplane later traveled to the Moon with Neil Armstrong and to Mars on NASA's Ingenuity helicopter.

Discuss: Why do you think astronauts and NASA chose to carry pieces of the Wright Flyer into space?

Source: NASA – 120 Years Ago: The First Powered Flight at Kitty Hawk

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #40

In 1911, the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre by Vincenzo Peruggia, a former handyman there, who hid it in his Paris apartment for about two years. The theft actually made the painting far more famous.

Discuss: Why do you think a crime made the Mona Lisa more famous instead of less?

Source: History.com – The Heist that Made the Mona Lisa Famous

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #41

On Christmas Day 1914, during World War I, some British and German soldiers met in 'No Man's Land' between the trenches, exchanged gifts, and played informal games of football (soccer).

Discuss: What does the Christmas Truce tell us about the soldiers on both sides?

Source: Imperial War Museums – The Real Story of the Christmas Truce of 1914

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #42

Jeannette Rankin of Montana became the first woman elected to Congress in 1916—nearly four years before the 19th Amendment gave women across the U.S. the right to vote.

Discuss: How do you think Rankin felt serving in Congress when most American women still could not vote?

Source: Library of Congress (Picture This blog) – Jeannette Rankin: First Woman Elected to Congress

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #43

Almost 400 men and women worked on carving Mount Rushmore from 1927 to 1941, and despite the dangerous conditions, no one died during the carving.

Discuss: What do you think made it possible for such a dangerous project to have no deaths?

Source: National Park Service – The Workers (Mount Rushmore National Memorial)

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #44

The top of the Empire State Building was built as a docking port for dirigibles (giant airships), but strong winds at the top made docking nearly impossible.

Discuss: Why do you think people in the 1930s imagined airships would be the future of travel?

Source: History.com – 10 Surprising Facts About the Empire State Building

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #45

During World War II, the U.S. 'Ghost Army,' a unit full of artists and designers, fooled the enemy with 93-pound inflatable tanks and loudspeakers playing recorded troop sounds. Its records stayed secret until 1996.

Discuss: Do you think creativity can be as important as strength in a conflict? Why?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – The Ghost Army of World War II Used Art to Deceive the Nazis

20TH CENTURY (1900-1945)

Fact #46

The code created by Navajo Code Talkers in World War II was never broken. Because Navajo had no word for 'submarine,' they used 'besh-lo,' meaning 'iron fish.'

Discuss: Why do you think a code based on a spoken language was so hard for the enemy to crack?

Source: The National WWII Museum – American Indian Code Talkers

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #47

Sputnik 1, the world's first artificial satellite, was launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957. It was about the size of a beach ball and circled Earth about every 98 minutes.

Discuss: Why do you think a satellite the size of a beach ball worried so many Americans?

Source: NASA – Sputnik and The Dawn of the Space Age

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #48

In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges helped integrate New Orleans schools, walking to school with federal marshals. Her teacher, Barbara Henry, taught her as her only student for an entire year.

Discuss: What do you think gave a six-year-old the courage to keep going to school every day?

Source: History.com – Who Is Ruby Bridges?

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #49

Myth busted: The Cold War 'hotline' between Washington and Moscow, set up in 1963 after the Cuban Missile Crisis, was never a red telephone. It used teletype machines that sent typed messages.

Discuss: Why do you think written messages might have been safer than phone calls in a crisis?

Source: Smithsonian Magazine – There Never Was Such a Thing as a Red Phone in the White House

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #50

Myth busted: NASA did not invent Velcro or Tang. Velcro is a Swiss invention from the 1940s, and Tang was made by General Foods in 1957; astronauts just made them famous.

Discuss: Why do you think people give NASA credit for inventions it did not create?

Source: NASA – Tang, Teflon, Velcro

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #51

The Voyager Golden Record, sent into space aboard NASA's Voyager probes, carries greetings in 55 languages along with pictures, music, and sounds from Earth.

Discuss: If you could add one sound or song to represent Earth, what would it be and why?

Source: NASA Science – Golden Record Greetings

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #52

In 1980, the World Health Organization declared smallpox eradicated. It is still the only human disease that has been completely wiped out.

Discuss: Why do you think it has been so hard to eradicate other diseases the way smallpox was?

Source: World Health Organization – History of smallpox vaccination

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #53

Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989 while working at CERN in Switzerland. The world's first website was at the address info.cern.ch.

Discuss: How would your daily life be different without the World Wide Web?

Source: CERN – A short history of the Web

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #54

The Berlin Wall opened on November 9, 1989, partly because of a mistake: East German official Günter Schabowski announced new travel rules would start 'immediately,' though they were meant to begin the next day. Crowds rushed to the border.

Discuss: Can one mistake change history? What other examples can you think of?

Source: History.com – 10 Things You May Not Know About the Berlin Wall

COLD WAR & MODERN (1945-PRESENT)

Fact #55

People have lived on the International Space Station without a break since November 2000. The station circles Earth 16 times a day, so its crew sees 16 sunrises and sunsets every 24 hours.

Discuss: Would you want to live on the space station for six months? Why or why not?

Source: NASA – International Space Station Facts and Figures