Objectives:

- Students will understand that more than one perspective is shown in the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) History Gallery.
- Students will understand that exhibits in museums usually reflect the point of view of the curators.
- Students will understand how choices curators make impact the way a narrative of a time period is told.
- Students will reach their own tentative conclusions about different time periods in California history.

Pre-Museum Activity

1. Tell the students that they will be studying a fictional person named Nathan Cole, and they have the following objects to use to draw some conclusions about him.
   - His high school eleventh grade report card that shows he received four As and two Bs
   - A copy of a traffic ticket for speeding
   - A passport that indicates he has traveled to more than 30 countries
   - A referral from a teacher to the principal’s office for “disrupting class”
   - A trophy for being the best soccer player of his senior year
   - A letter from someone who may have been his girlfriend complaining about his habit of coming late to dates they go on together
   - An unfinished application for a job at McDonald’s
   - A little sticker that says “I voted” to show he voted in the last election

2. Ask students to put an asterisk next to those items that would give someone a good impression of Nathan. Next, ask them to circle those items that would make someone form a poor impression. Discuss their choices in class.

3. Point out that museums have limited space, and curators—the people who decide what goes into the museum—must decide which are the most important objects to include. Museum visitors’ impressions when they see the exhibit will differ depending on what the curators decided to display.

If they could only pick three items about Nathan to include in their exhibit, what would they select? What kind of impression would people have about Nathan when they looked at the exhibit? Would they like him, dislike him, or be ambivalent?
Explain that when they go to OMCA, they will be looking to see what story the curator chose to tell and to decide if they agree or disagree with that story.

4. It might be important to have a conversation about why perspectives or points of view help to make a stronger exhibit and that there really is no such thing as a “neutral” exhibit. This gets at a very important historical understanding—that history is not “fact” but rather interpretation. Students need to understand that many “facts” exist in the same way that they have many objects that are important to them, but it’s the choice of facts and how they are explained that constitutes history. Just as there is no way to show every object a student has ever encountered, there is no way to tell a history that includes all the “facts.” Therefore, the idea of a “true” history is essentially a false conception. Rather, history is an explanation of the past that the weight of the evidence will support. Students shouldn’t come away from this activity thinking that curators are “biased” and therefore shouldn’t be trusted. Instead, the goal is for students to understand that curators, like all historians, try to make accurate reasonable choices but that the students—the viewers—need to use critical judgment in deciding if the curators did a good job.

**Important #1:** Point out to students that when they visit OMCA they will see something unique. This Museum has made a deliberate effort to “co-curate” their exhibits with members of the community. For example, in the section of the History Gallery that deals with California Indians, the Museum worked with tribal representatives who themselves decided which objects would go into the exhibit. Other examples are some of the quotes on the wall of the Gallery. Often these were chosen, not by Museum staff, but by members of the community who were part of the group being discussed. Therefore, when students look for the “curator’s point of view,” they are actually seeing the point of view not only of a Museum curator but community groups as well. This might make a significant difference in the way the history of California is told in OMCA compared to other museums in our state.

**Important #2:** Students need to understand that when objects are placed in a museum, sometimes the items are meant to reflect the views that were prevalent at the time, not those of the curators. For example, OMCA has a pitcher made at the turn of the century that clearly reflects racist anti-Chinese sentiment. (This is in the History Gallery section titled “San Francisco: Glorious City.”) This object has been placed in the exhibit not to express support for that belief but to show people today what many people in the past believed. It is important for students to recognize this distinction before they try to determine the curator’s’ point of view. To help students understand this difference, you could ask them to think of some negative aspects of society today and objects that would reflect those aspects, such as newspaper headlines that indicate an anti-immigrant attitude or car advertisements that objectify women. While we may not like these items, they do tell us about the world we live in today. If we want people in the future to have a clear picture of who we are, they will need to understand our problems as well as our strengths.

**Before the Visit**

Assign students to work in small groups. You can show them an overview map of the Museum and explain that while each group will start in a different area, all groups will cover all the areas. There should be four groups (or eight if you want two groups for each area). They are The Gold Rush, Building of the Railroads, World War II, and Building Modern California. This assignment assumes that students will look at all four exhibits. However, if you feel your students need more time, you could assign each group only two areas to examine.
**Vocabulary**

Make sure students understand and are familiar with the following words and ideas that they may see in the Gallery and on the worksheet:

- Curator
- Point of view or perspective

**Museum Visit**

Start the groups off in different parts of the Museum so that all the students aren’t in the same spot at the same time.

Make sure that each student has a copy of the worksheet.

_The museum prefers that students use pencils rather than ink pens for recording so please remind students of this before they get started._

**After the Visit**

Students could complete the last worksheet, “Follow-Up Questions,” that asks them to tie together their conclusions after looking at all four areas listed for this activity.

This could also be an opportunity for class discussion. How many students felt that the perspective on California provided by the Museum and community groups was generally positive and how many felt it wasn’t? What kind of evidence did students use to prove their point? Be specific about which objects, text, graphs, and other elements helped them to reach this conclusion. If you want to be ambitious, this could be done in the form of a debate.

**Extra Credit**

Students could go to another museum or exhibit on their own time and describe the perspective of the curators. Make sure they provide evidence to support their conclusions.