

John Smith (1580-1631)

Nowadays, many courses in American literature begin with texts written in Spanish by Christopher Columbus, Bartolomé de las Casas, Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. These courses often also include examples of old Native American oral narrative and poetry, originally composed in a number of different languages, which were transcribed and translated into English at various times throughout history. While acknowledging the importance of such contributions to the development of American culture, we will begin our course with John Smith, the author of the first English work written in America: *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Hath Happened in Virginia*. He wrote it in June 1608 as a personal letter to a friend in England while he was in Virginia (a region vaguely defined at that time), and although he did not intend it for publication, it was published as a pamphlet in London in 1608. This was the first of a series of books in which Captain John Smith chronicled the early days of the English colonization of America. As a writer, Captain Smith stood in the tradition of the great Elizabethan voyagers whose works were very popular in Europe throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth.

Born into a farmer's family in Willoughby (Lincolnshire), shortly after his father's death, at the age of sixteen John Smith left his apprenticeship in England and went to the Netherlands as a volunteer soldier to fight for the independence of the Dutch against the troops of King Philip II. This was the start of his military career, filled with high adventure known to us primarily through the protagonist's own lively accounts, whose authenticity many critics doubt. According to his autobiographical work entitled *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captain John Smith, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* (1630), in 1600 he joined the Austrian army fighting against the Turks, and was promoted to captain while fighting in Hungary. In Transylvania



Captain John Smith's portrait, attributed to Simon van de Passe, was drawn in 1617 and published with the first map to name the region of "New England," a product of Smith's own surveying.

he was wounded in battle, taken prisoner and sold as a slave to a Turk, who sent Captain Smith as a gift to his sweetheart in Istanbul. This lady supposedly fell in love with the young Englishman and sent him to her brother to get training for the Turkish imperial service. Captain Smith escaped by killing the brother and returned to Transylvania, where he received a large reward.

On his return to England in the winter of 1604-1605, John Smith became involved with the Virginia Company, which was a joint stock corporation formed with a charter from King James I and charged with the settlement of Virginia. In December 1606, Smith sailed with the Virginia Company's first colonists as one of the seven councillors who were to govern the colony, due to his rich experience and strong character. Their main goal was commercial, not religious. Therefore, unlike the Puritan families who later settled in America in order to build a new home, this group of men wanted to accumulate wealth as quickly as possible for their colonial company of investors in London through the discovery of gold and copper. This first expedition required a voyage of over three months in three ships before they landed at Jamestown on May 13, 1607. From the start, Captain Smith had serious conflicts with his fellow travellers—he was placed under arrest while the fleet was near the Canary Islands, and even threatened with execution in the West Indies. In September 1608, however, he was finally elected president of the council, a position equivalent to that of the colony's governor.

Life was extremely difficult for the settlers because of the lack of supplies, harsh weather conditions, disagreements over policy, illness, and resistance by the Native People, who wanted the strangers to leave. In order to secure the Jamestown colonists' survival, Captain Smith fought the indigenous population who lived in that area, but sometimes he also had to negotiate for food with them. He reported that, although he generally dealt with them from a position of force, in the course of his explorations he was captured by the Chesapeake Bay Indians and held prisoner for six or seven weeks by Powhatan, the chief of a confederacy of tribes, whom Smith called their "Emperor" or "King." Captain Smith was released in friendship and returned to Jamestown, guided by Powhatan's men. He governed the colony until he was seriously burned in a gunpowder explosion and decided to return to England for treatment in October 1609. In London, he tried to promote the further colonization of Virginia, but was unable to go back because the Virginia Company no longer supported him. One of his many enemies, George Percy, who succeeded him in the government of Jamestown, described him as "an ambitious, unworthy and vanaglorious fellow." Prevented by his opponents from returning to Virginia, John Smith crossed the Atlantic again to explore the Maine and Massachusetts Bay areas, which he named New England, with the approval of the Prince of Wales, who would become King Charles I. It was Prince Charles who put English names on the map of the coast of New England which John Smith gave him. As Captain Smith was denied other opportunities to return to the colonies, he spent the rest of his life writing books through which he tried to encourage colonization with vivid descriptions of the riches of the New World and the beauties of the wilderness. The colonists who would later settle Plymouth (1620) and Massachusetts Bay (1630) profited from Smith's maps and reports.

Nowadays Captain Smith is most widely known as the hero of a love tale about an Indian princess rather than as a writer, a geographer and a ruthless administrator of the Jamestown colony. Nevertheless, the veracity of the famous episode in which Pocahontas supposedly saved the Captain's life is still in dispute because it seems awkward that whenever Smith mentioned Pocahontas in earlier versions of his captivity narrative he invariably omitted that crucial incident. In fact, there was no trace of her courageous intervention in his first book, published in 1608, less than a year after Smith's capture, nor in the detailed text which was printed with his *Map of Virginia* (1612). She emerged as Smith's saviour in a letter to Queen Anne (June 1616) in which the author simply mentioned: "at the minute of my execution, she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine." It was not until 1624, seven years after Pocahontas' death in England in 1617, that Smith publicized a thrilling account which was suspiciously similar to another rescue by an

Indian princess described in a Spanish work that he might have read in those years. Since Powhatan had also died in 1618, there was no one to contradict the author. Smith may have borrowed or invented the episode for its melodramatic effect, taking advantage of the fame of Powhatan's daughter in London society at a time when the English had to justify war on Powhatan's nation.

Lacking other sources of information, the national myth of Pocahontas was created relying basically on an account Smith published seventeen years after the actual events, in his *General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), where he often mixed fact and fiction. We will read some extracts from this work, his most famous and substantial one, published in six books, with four engraved maps, a portrait of Pocahontas and some poems. We will not find in it the accuracy we would expect from a modern historian, but a story told by an adventurer who was among the first to recount his direct experiences in the New World. When approaching the following passages, we should bear in mind that its author was a proud, self-made man of action who was addressing readers back in England in order to explain the advantages of his aggressive colonial policy and to emphasize his central role in the survival of the Jamestown colony, which was the first permanent English settlement in America. In other words, he wrote with political intention and his work constitutes a major resource for understanding the concept of "manifest destiny": the notion that America made manifest the destined expansion of European civilization and, therefore, that Europeans had the right to take possession of the whole continent.¹ Always writing of himself in the third person, he presented himself enthusiastically in the role of hero, focusing attention on his exploits and asserting his bravery to face all kinds of dangerous situations.

In the passages preceding those we are going to read, Captain Smith gave details about the difficulties he had to overcome in order to prevent some of the colonists from returning to England, and how he had succeeded in providing much more food than they would have ever had in their home country. Then, as the Council complained that Smith was too slow to discover the head of the Chickahominy River, he decided to undertake a very risky exploration which proved to be fatal for three of his men and ended up with his own captivity. When Captain Smith realised that he could not go on sailing up the river, he ordered his men to remain in their

¹ In 1845 a journalist named John L. Sullivan wrote that nothing must interfere with "the fulfilment of our *manifest destiny* to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."

barge “in a broad bay out of danger of shot” and wait for his return; but they went ashore, and George Cassen was slain. He went higher upstream in a canoe, with two Englishmen (John Robinson and Thomas Emry) and two Natives. The two Englishmen were killed while they were sleeping by the canoe and Smith was looking for food. According to his own account, Smith himself was surrounded by “200 savages,” two of whom he managed to kill. Referring to himself in the third person, as usual, he proudly added: “He was shot in his thigh a little, and had many arrows that stuck in his clothes but no great hurt.”

**From *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*²
Book III, Chapter 2**

The savages having drawn from George Cassen whither³ Captain Smith was gone, prosecuting that opportunity they followed him with 300 bow-men conducted by the King of Pamunkey, who in divisions searching the turnings of the river found Robinson and Emry by the fireside; those they shot full of arrows and slew.⁴ Then finding the Captain, as is said, that used the savage that was his guide as his shield (three of them being slain and divers others so galled⁵), all the rest would not come near him. Thinking thus to have returned to his boat, regarding them, as he marched, more than his way, [he] slipped up to the middle in an oozy⁶ creek⁷ and his savage with him, yet dared they not come to him till being near dead with cold he threw away his arms. Then according to their composition⁸ they drew him forth and led him to the fire where his men were slain. Diligently they chafed⁹ his benumbed¹⁰ limbs.

He demanding for their captain, they showed him Openchancanough,¹¹ King of Pamunkey, to whom he gave a round ivory double compass dial. Much they marveled at the playing of the fly¹² and needle, which they

² The Bermuda Islands.

³ To which place.

⁴ Slay, slew, slain: to kill in a violent way.

⁵ Wounded.

⁶ Slimy.

⁷ Small river.

⁸ Agreement for surrender.

⁹ Rubbed for warmth.

¹⁰ Made numb with cold, deprived of the power of feeling or moving.

¹¹ Powhatan's half brother.

¹² Compass card.

could see so plainly and yet not touch it because of the glass that covered them. [...]

Notwithstanding, within an hour after, they tied him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him, but the King holding up
20 the compass in his hand, they all laid down their bows and arrows and in a triumphant manner led him to Orapaks¹³ where he was after their manner kindly feasted and well used.

Their order of conducting him was thus: Drawing themselves all in file, the King in the midst had all their pieces¹⁴ and swords borne before him. Captain
25 Smith was led after him by three great savages holding him fast¹⁵ by each arm, and on each side six went in file with their arrows nocked.¹⁶ But arriving at the town (which was but only thirty or forty hunting houses made of mats, which they remove as they please, as we our tents), all the women and children staring to behold him, the soldiers first all in file performed the form of a *bissom*¹⁷ so
30 well as could be, and on each flank, officers as sergeants to see them keep their orders. A good time they continued this exercise and then cast themselves in a ring, dancing in such several postures and singing and yelling out such hellish notes and screeches; being strangely painted, every one [had] his quiver¹⁸ of arrows and at his back a club, on his arm a fox or an otter's skin or some such
35 matter for his vambrace,¹⁹ their heads and shoulders painted red with oil and pocones²⁰ mingled together, which scarlet-like color made an exceeding handsome show, his bow in his hand and the skin of a bird with her wings abroad,²¹ dried, tied on his head, a piece of copper, a white shell, a long feather with a small rattle growing at the tails of their snakes tied to it, or some such like
40 toy. All this while, Smith and the King stood in the midst, guarded as before is said, and after three dances they all departed. Smith they conducted to a long house where thirty or forty tall fellows did guard him, and ere²² long more bread and venison²³ was brought him than would have served twenty men.

[...]

¹³ A temporary hunting village further inland.

¹⁴ Fire-arms; weapons for shooting.

¹⁵ Firmly.

¹⁶ Fitted on the bowstring ready to use.

¹⁷ *Bissone*: a snakelike formation.

¹⁸ Archer's sheath for carrying arrows.

¹⁹ A piece of armour designed to protect the forearm.

²⁰ *Puccoon*: the Virginian Indian name of a North American plant yielding a red dye. Cf. Capt. Smith, *Map of Virginia* 13 (1612): "*Pocones* is a small root that grows in the mountains, which being dried and beaten in powder turns red."

²¹ Outspread.

²² Before.

²³ The flesh of a deer, used as food.

Then they led him to the Youghtanunds, the Mattapanients, the Piankatanks, the Nantaughtacunds, and Onawmanients²⁴ upon the rivers of 45
 Rapahannock and Potomac, over all those rivers and back again by divers
 other several nations to the King's habitation at Pamunkey where they
 entertained him with most strange and fearful conjurations:

As if near led to hell
 Amongst the devils to dwell.²⁵ 50

[...]

At last they brought him²⁶ to Werowocomoco,²⁷ where was Powhatan,
 their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood
 wondering at him, as he had been a monster, till Powhatan and his train²⁸ had
 put themselves in their greater braveries.²⁹ Before a fire upon a seat like a
 bedstead,³⁰ he sat covered with a great robe made of raccoon³¹ skins and all the 55
 tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench³² of sixteen or eighteen
 years and along on each side [of] the house, two rows of men and behind them
 as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red, many of
 their heads bedecked³³ with the white down³⁴ of birds, but every one with
 something, and a great chain of white beads about their necks. 60

At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The
 Queen of Appomattoc³⁵ was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands,
 and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel, to dry them;
 having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long
 consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought 65
 before Powhatan; then as many as could, laid hands on him, dragged him to

²⁴ All these groups were part of the confederacy ruled by the powerful Algonquian chief Powhatan.

²⁵ A couplet from a translation of Seneca published by Bishop Martin Fotherby in his *Atheomastix* (1622).

²⁶ Captain John Smith

²⁷ Powhatan's village, on the north shore of the York River, twelve miles from Jamestown.

²⁸ Group of persons following as attendants.

²⁹ Finest attire; costumes.

³⁰ A framework for supporting the mattress of a bed.

³¹ A mammal that inhabits most of North America. It is chiefly gray with black and white stripes on its face and on its long tail. Its coarse fur is used in furriery.

³² Girl or young woman.

³³ Decorated.

³⁴ Soft, fluffy feathers, as the outer covering on young birds or an inner layer of feathers on adult birds.

³⁵ Opossunoquonuske, the leader of a small village in Virginia who was killed in 1610 in retaliation for the deaths of fourteen soldiers.

them, and thereon³⁶ laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas,³⁷ the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty³⁸ could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon him to save him
 70 from death, whereat the Emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets,³⁹ and her bells, beads, and copper, for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves.⁴⁰ For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest.



This scene of the rescue of Captain Smith by Pocahontas was one of the nine illustrative drawings which Robert Vaughan added to the engraved "Map of Ould Virginia" published in the *General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624).

³⁶ On them.

³⁷ The historical Pocahontas (c. 1591-1617) was kidnapped by the settlers in 1613, taken to Jamestown and used as a political pawn in negotiations with her father. She was the first Native American in Virginia to convert to Christianity, and was baptized an Anglican. In April 1614, she married the tobacco planter John Rolfe, a marriage which brought peace between the English settlers and her people. She travelled to England with her husband and infant son in 1616. She was presented at the court of James I, where she made an excellent impression by her intelligence and beauty. The following year, on her way back to New England, Pocahontas had to be taken off the ship at Gravesend, and died there of pneumonia, smallpox or tuberculosis. "Pocahontas" was a nickname, meaning "the naughty one," "little-wanton" or "spoiled child." Her parents knew her as "Amonte," her secret clan name was "Matoaka" (which meant "she is playful"), and she was also known as Rebecca Rolfe after her marriage.

³⁸ Earnest request.

³⁹ Light, short-handled axes.

⁴⁰ They thought him as skilled as themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-EVALUATION

1. How did Captain Smith protect himself from the Natives?
 - a. He left in his boat.
 - b. He hid from them on the banks of the creek.
 - c. He hid behind the body of his guide.
 - d. He pleaded with his captors.
2. According to the author, which of the following best describes the Natives' feelings before they captured Captain Smith?
 - a. caution
 - b. jubilation
 - c. contempt
 - d. excitement
3. What word best describes the Natives' reaction to the dial?
 - a. indifference
 - b. wonder
 - c. dislike
 - d. fear
4. The Natives' treatment of Captain Smith can be described as
 - a. always violent.
 - b. always kind.
 - c. invariably hostile.
 - d. generally unpredictable.
5. The author portrays the Native "soldiers" as
 - a. educated.
 - b. disciplined.
 - c. undisciplined.
 - d. restrained.
6. What makes us think that Captain Smith is not in immediate danger while he is in Orapaks?
 - a. He is given presents of feathers and shells.
 - b. He is not guarded.
 - c. The Natives bring him a vast quantity of food.
 - d. The Natives dance around him.

7. As Smith is taken back and forwards among the Native groups, what do we understand about their attitude to him?
 - a. They are unsure of what he is and what to do with him.
 - b. They want to kill him.
 - c. They believe he is the devil.
 - d. They want him to fight Powhatan.
8. What word best describes the Natives' treatment of Smith early in the feast in Werowocomoco?
 - a. dismissive
 - b. respectful
 - c. insulting
 - d. mannerless
9. Which of the following makes us think that the Natives had difficulties in reaching a decision?
 - a. Even Pocahontas had to contribute to the debate.
 - b. Two great stones were brought.
 - c. The debate lasted a long time.
 - d. Powhatan had little authority over his subjects.
10. How could we term Powhatan's final decision?
 - a. practical
 - b. vengeful
 - c. pitiless
 - d. just

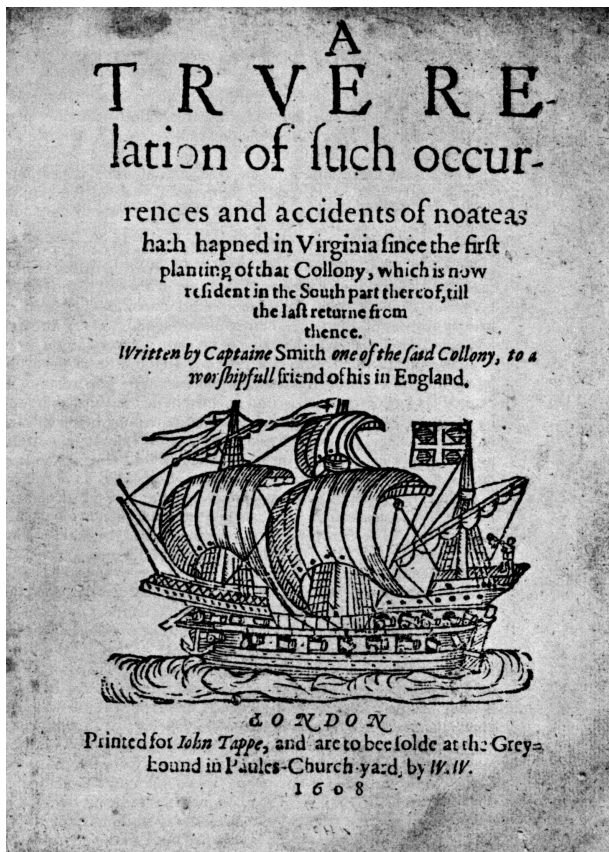
EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS

1. Skim the text to get its general sense and try to sum up the plot in two or three sentences. Remember that the **plot** is what happens to the characters in a story; it is an unfolding series or pattern of events.
2. Now, scan the text and list the names of the individual people who are mentioned. Next to each name, write down any information provided by the author about each person. How are these individuals portrayed? Are any of them described or are we only told about the actions they perform?
3. Notice how the author refers to his captors. Can you find any derogatory terms applied to them?

4. How are the captors described? What do they look like? How are they dressed? Do they ever speak, or do we learn about them only from what the author says they did?
5. List the instances in which Captain Smith is attacked or feels threatened, and then list the instances in which he is treated as an honoured guest by the Natives.
6. What impression of the Natives does the author try to convey by this alternation of threats and compliments? How do you think Smith's contemporary readers would have perceived such behavior on the part of his captors? How successful was the author in presenting the Natives as potential betrayers never to be trusted by the English? How reliable does he appear to readers today?
7. John Smith's military training allowed him to use technical terms, such as "bissom," to explain how the warriors were placed. List the weapons that are mentioned and, next to each name, write down any details that the author gives about them (their form and/or how they may be used). By looking at the way the author pays attention to details of warfare, can you point out how he reveals his military background?
8. Why did the author refer to the tribesmen as "soldiers," to their leaders as "sergeants," to the tribal chiefs as "Kings" and to Powhatan as "Emperor" or "King"?
9. Captain Smith interspersed his *General History* with quotations from English translations of classical authors. What is the main function of the quotation from Seneca in the passage above?
10. The author generally wrote in a self-promoting way in order to establish his own reputation and prided himself on knowing how to manage the Indians. By scanning the text, can you find any actions performed by Captain Smith that proved to be decisive in saving his life? In general terms, how did he depict himself?
11. Apart from publicizing his accomplishments, Captain Smith often had to justify his daring actions and defend himself from numerous accusations. In particular, he was held responsible for the deaths of Thomas Emry and John Robinson, and sentenced to death by hanging. The timely arrival of the *Susan Constant*, under the command of Captain Newport, at the Jamestown waterfront stayed the execution. Can you find in the passages above any evidence used by Captain Smith to claim that he should not have been blamed for the deaths of the two colonists?

12. In other books, such as *A Description of New England* (1616) and *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Anywhere, Or the Pathway to Experience to Erect a Plantation* (1631), Captain Smith uses the **first person narrative** and expresses his own subjective perceptions and opinions about all kinds of matters. Why does he omit the personal pronoun “I” and write of himself in the **third person singular** throughout *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*? What is the effect of this strategy?
13. Look closely at the Pocahontas episode and try to interpret it from your own perspective. The author clearly states that she saved him from being clubbed to death. Would she have shown her willingness to offer her own life in place of Smith’s in such a way? Would Powhatan and his men have yielded to the girl’s wish to save Captain Smith? How probable do you think the event was?
14. Philip L. Barbour, the foremost modern Smith scholar, accepted the Pocahontas rescue story as true. He suggested that the Captain might have misunderstood a ceremony of naturalization and adoption in which he was symbolically killed and reborn with the status of one of Powhatan’s sons. Pocahontas’ action would have been part of a ritual which Smith could not understand. What do you think about this interpretation?
15. Pocahontas became a symbol to all Americans, representing wilderness reclaimed by civilization. She has inspired many novels and poems. Why do you think that the legend of Pocahontas has achieved the status of a national myth? Comment on the fact that Pocahontas’ gesture has been interpreted as a sign of the Native Americans’ submission to their English conquerors.
16. After his liberation, Captain Smith became interested in the Natives’ languages and ways of life. In the passages above, does he give any hints of his interest in the Natives’ customs?
17. From the passages above, can you reach any conclusions about how Smith viewed contact between the two cultures? Did he perceive the so-called “encounter” as an interaction on equal terms? Bear in mind the basic difference between facts (actual events) and the author’s opinions (viewpoint, personal judgement and interpretation of facts).
18. As a colonial writer, John Smith had to struggle to make his language depict a new world. What linguistic strategies did he use? Note particularly the adaptation of the current English lexicon and the introduction of new vocabulary, restricted to a number of concrete words derived from Native languages.

19. According to Everett Emerson, Book III of *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* "is characterized by richness and literary integrity, and it is full of incident and character." Discuss this statement.
20. Captain John Smith was a person of singular importance in the colonization of America. His practicality, common sense, hard work, individualism and leadership have been praised by many Americans. Why do you think that he has often been identified as the quintessential American hero?



The title page of the first English work written in America, which was published in London in 1608, reads: A TRUE RELATION of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that Collony, which is now resident in the South part thereof, till the last returne from thence. *Written by Captaine Smith one of the said Collony, to a worshipfull friend of his in England.*

When you finish each study unit, before you proceed to the next one, you may find it useful to make a list that will help you to keep in mind the most important points you have studied. Your notes will also be valuable whenever you need a quick revision. You may prefer either to write full sentences about the authors and their works, or only jot down the key words that you consider essential to remember. Here is an example of a student's response to the contents of unit 1.

Captain John Smith (1580-1631)

- * Author of the first book written in America: A True Relation (1608). Other works: Map of Virginia (1612), General History of Virginia (1624), The True Travels (1630).
- * English soldier, adventurer, explorer, geographer. Self-made man of action.
- * Arrived at Jamestown, 1607. Governor of Virginia 1608-09. Life devoted to writing after his return to England.
- * Well-known as the hero of a love tale which probably never happened: Pocahontas history + myth.
- * **READING:** Excerpts from General History of Virginia about Captain Smith's captivity (threatened + honoured). Powhatan and Pocahontas.
 - travel writing tradition (description + report of events)
 - portrayal of Natives in derogatory terms (savages, devils)
 - quotations from classical writers (Seneca)
 - lexicon: military technical terms + words from Native languages
 - third person narrative (Smith = he); in other works, he uses the first person narrative (Smith = I)
 - rhetoric: self-promoting way of writing; proud author who justifies and defends himself (individualism and practicality)
 - reliability? fact + fiction