“The Starving Time”
Reading an excerpt of the text

What was “the starving time”?
The winter of 1609-1610 was a difficult time for the colonists in Virginia. They were not prepared to farm enough food to feed themselves, because they thought they would be able to trade with local Indians for food. However, bad relations with the Indians of the Powhatan Confederacy put an end to that idea. A bad drought decimated the crops they did manage to grow for themselves. The supply of food from England that was coming their way got blown to Bermuda in a storm at sea. So many people starved during that winter that the number of colonists went from around 500 to around 60, and the Virginia colony was almost completely abandoned.

What is an excerpt?
- An excerpt is a piece of a text – anywhere from a few words, to a few sentences, to several pages.
- For example, an excerpt from the “Star-Spangled Banner” could be, “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.” because that is one line from the longer text (lyrics) of the song.
- If you can read and understand one good-sized excerpt from a text, you should have everything you need to read any of the other excerpts from the same text.

What is the text?
- There are different sources for what happened during “The Starving Time.” What is usually referred to as “The Starving Time” is a chapter from John Smith’s 1624 book, The General History of Virginia.
- (Another source is from a larger work called A True Declaration of the Estate in Virginia. It was written as propaganda in 1610 by members of the Virginia Company to justify why it’s worthwhile to invest money in the Jamestown colony.)
Excerpt from “The Starving Time”:  
(for 4th & 8th graders)

Six months after Captain Smith left, there were no more than 60 people out of 500, and these were the most miserable, poor creatures. These people survived for the most part by eating roots, herbs, acorns, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish, and even the very skin of our horses. No, so great was our famine, that the poorer people dug up an Indian that we had killed and buried, and ate him. Others did the same thing, boiling and stewing (a body) with roots and herbs. And one man among the rest killed his wife, sold her, and had eaten part of her before it was known. For this he was executed, as he well deserved. Now whether she tasted better roasted, boiled, or broiled, I don’t know, but I never heard of a dish of salted wife before. That was the time, that to this day we called the starving time; it is too horrible to say what we lived through, and hard to believe. But the fault was our own, for our lack of goodwill from God, hard work, and ability to govern ourselves. It was not because something was wrong with Virginia (because eventually it became an excellent place to grow crops) as has been thought.

Second excerpt from “The Starving Time”:  
(for 8th graders)

The basis of all those terrible things was the will of God (since God allowed lots of things to happen). In the violent storm, mentioned above (in the paragraph that would have come before this one), God separated the head from the body—meaning that he separated the head of the group, Sir Thomas Gates, from the body of the group, the rest of the people. All the important powers of taking charge were exiled with Sir Thomas Gates in those unfortunate (yet fortunate) islands. (He’s talking about Bermuda. It’s unfortunate because it’s far from Virginia, but it’s fortunate because it’s so warm and pleasant there.) The rest of those supplies, though beaten up by the storm, made a great shipwreck (as in, caused greater trouble) in Virginia. The storm this time was disastrous, or disagreements among the colonists. Every man, thinking too highly of himself, thought he should be in charge. Every man, thinking others weren’t as good as he, refused to take orders from others. It is so easy for these ambitious and argumentative to tear into pieces a colony that has just been founded, especially where no prominent and respected leaders have the authority to punish such obnoxious disobedience.
The basis of all those terrible things was the will of God (since God allowed lots of things to happen).

In the violent storm, mentioned above, God separated the head from the body, all the vital powers of the group being exiled with Sir Thomas Gates in those unfortunate (yet fortunate) lands.

The ground of all those miseries, was the permission of God, who, in the fore-mentioned violent storm, separated the head from the body, all the vital powers of the group being exiled with Sir Thomas Gates in those unfortunate (yet fortunate) islands.

A closer look at the original text:
- U’s that should be V’s (and a V that should be a U)
- words that aren’t spelled the same today
- difficult vocabulary words

Discussion questions:
- What are the reasons for “the starving time” in what John Smith wrote?
- What are the reasons for “the starving time” in what the Virginia Company wrote?
- How do these works describe the hardships of “the starving time”?
- Why is it important to know about “the starving time” today?