

HOLOCAUST WRITING & ART CONTEST

TEACHER GUIDE

(adopted and revised from Facing History and Ourselves ‘Using Testimony to Teach’)

In 2020, what is the most important lesson that we can learn from the Holocaust?

Overview

This year’s contest does not require students to use the testimony of a survivor. Nonetheless, survivor and witness testimonies—firsthand accounts from individuals who lived through or encountered genocide and other atrocities—help students more deeply appreciate and empathize with the human and inhuman dimensions of important moments in history. They supplement what we learn from historians and secondary sources by offering unique perspectives on the difficult and sometimes impossible situations individuals were forced to confront during moments of collective violence and injustice. This lesson plan and the activities below are selected to help teachers and students engage with these difficult testimonies and process them.

Part of the reason this lesson plan follows the story of survivors is that by focusing on a single story, it is sometimes easier to find more specific details that orient one’s fundamental claim. Students might see the prompt and immediately imagine that the best lesson is to ‘treat others nicely’. While this is a good place to begin, the stories of the survivors are intricate and personal and call upon students to think more critically and with greater refinement about the Holocaust as a historical warning. This lesson plan is meant to help guide students toward more nuanced responses.

Context

Placing these testimonies in a larger context can be crucial to students’ understanding of these firsthand accounts. To provide your students with more information about the time and places in which the Holocaust occurred, please consider HERC’s other resources available through our website.

Pre-Viewing

One way to help create a reflective classroom before viewing a testimony is to have students read this quote from Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel about the experience of hearing survivor testimony.

Wiesel says, “...the idea of telling these stories is to sensitize people - that you should become more sensitive - to yourselves, to your friends, even to strangers...become sensitive; not only to the story of what we try to tell, but about what happens even today - because what happens even today is always related to what happened then.” Have students reflect on this quote in journals. You may choose to prompt them with one or more of the queries below:

1. What message is Wiesel trying to express?
2. What does it mean to “become sensitive”? How can we become sensitive to others’ stories?
3. What kinds of things “happen today” that might be “related to what happened then”?

Before students view the testimony, encourage your students to both watch and listen. The testimonies include both words and images. Have students watch the speaker's body language and notice the patterns of speech. When do they pause? Where do they look? How do those gestures relate to the stories they are telling?

Testimony Viewing

Each survivor's or witness's story is unique. During the Holocaust in particular, the experiences of survivors depended on a wide range of variables, such as their country of origin, how early or late in the war they were apprehended, what work or death camp they found themselves in, and what opportunities they had to gain any advantages that could help them preserve their strength.

Have students view one or a few of the testimonies from our collection, [Enduring Legacies](#). For the sake of ease, this lesson will be oriented around Walter Peltz, but any of the testimonies can be used with the same structure.

1. Begin by reading the description of the testimony provided directly under the video. After reading the description, ask your students what interests them the most, what questions do they have about the story, and what do they wonder about the person?
2. After gathering some of the most pressing questions and areas of interest, model the process of exploration by selecting the sections of video that seem to address these areas of research interest.
For example, if some students are interested in life before the war, and others wonder why this happened, select the section on Increasing Antisemitism (11:43) and view it together.
3. Depending on your class dynamics, you may choose to have students watch sections of testimony without taking notes. However, to get students oriented to the process, it is recommended that you prompt students to use a Two-Column chart for Note-Taking.
 - a. At the top of the page, they should identify what question they would like to answer by viewing this section of the video (i.e. was life in Poland before the war more welcoming?).
 - b. Then, on the left side of the page, students record information presented in the testimony.
 - c. On the right side, students record their reactions to this information: a question, a comment, a feeling, or a connection to something they know about or have experienced.
4. After viewing this section of the video, see if students feel that they can answer their question, if they need more information, or if other questions have emerged.
5. The same steps can be repeated in large group or individually in order to dig deeper into the testimony. Ultimately, in order to answer the main prompt, most of a video will be seen. Guided by the interest and the questions of the students, however, it may not be seen in the order it is presented.

In order to comply with the prompt, you may choose to select a single video for all of your students to examine together or allow them to explore the archive individually using a similar method of inquiry.

Post-Viewing

After students have watched the testimonies, consider using the Levels of Questions strategy to begin consolidating thoughts about the testimony that can be transformed into content for an essay or concepts for a work of art. If your students were diligent about note taking during the process of watching the video, you may wish to move quickly through Level One or skip it altogether.

Level One Questions (Factual)

What events are being described? Where are they happening? Who is involved?

What adjectives do the subjects of the testimonies use to describe what happened to them?

Level Two Questions (Inferential)

How does this story contribute to your understanding of the Holocaust?

What changes do the survivors seem to have undergone as a result of their experiences?

What does this story reveal about human behavior?

Level Three Questions (Universal)

Is it possible to truly understand the experience of a Holocaust survivor?

What limits our understanding of the Holocaust?

Responding to the Prompt

Ultimately, the goal is to identify a position that responds to the prompt. So, after students have explored their video testimony, return to the orientation of the contest. One way to do so is to revisit questions that initiated the lesson:

1. What message is Walter Peltz trying to express?
2. What does it mean to “become sensitive” to his story?
3. What kinds of things “happen today” that might be “related to what happened” to Walter?

Finally, ask students how they would answer the main question: In 2020, what is the most important lesson that we can learn from the Holocaust?

