



CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST



HOLOCAUST
CENTER *for*
HUMANITY

Educate. Inspire. Take Action.



STEP ONE

CREATE A BRAVE AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

When addressing any difficult topic, **it is important to establish a brave classroom environment** in which all students can bring their whole selves to the learning experience.

In such a classroom, students are equipped with the skills to have difficult conversations in respectful and civil ways. They are also provided ample opportunities to reflect both on their learning and how that learning impacts their understanding of the world around them. This is an important step in helping them make meaning from their study of the history of the Holocaust.¹

This process includes:

- Establish conversational norms.
- Establish a habit of journaling, which provides students with the opportunity to work through both their learning and their thinking on difficult topics.
- Make sure to balance the learning to include examples of individuals and groups who actively resisted the Nazis and the collaborators, including ways in which people attempted to preserve their culture and dignity in the face of overwhelming oppression and violence.



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Encourage students to continually reflect on the agency of individuals or groups with the given social, political, geographic, and historical context.

¹Agency: the ability to take action or to choose what action to take

STEP TWO

ESTABLISH YOUR RATIONALE FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST*

As you would when making all content and textual choices in your classroom, it is important to consider why you want to teach this topic.

Elements to consider when developing your rationale statement:

1. Ensure that the goals of what students will learn about the Holocaust are balanced with the relevance of that learning to the world in which they live.
 - a. Students must learn the historical events that occurred before they can think critically about how those events are relevant to their world today.
2. Avoid prioritizing an emotional response.



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- a. While emotions are a part of learning, they do not reflect significant engagement with the material. The goal should be to create lasting learning through critical thinking about the context in which the Holocaust took place and how to draw insights from this history
- b. Holocaust Scholar Deborah Dwork notes that Holocaust education should not attempt to shape students' behavior but "seek to explore and lay bare underlying social processes and political, bureaucratic, and economic structures. By plumbing and analyzing events at specific times and places, the foundational skeleton of genocide (enactment, response, resistance), the structural mechanisms emerge. And this knowledge (I trust) will help us identify systems and processes that will spur change. We may not be able to alter how human beings wish to act, but we may well be able to alter the conditions that prompt those wishes or allow them to be actualized. That would be good enough. Actually, that would be great."²

*Adapted from the Azrieli Foundation's "The First Step: A Guide for Educators Preparing to Teach about the Holocaust." <https://azrielifoundation.org/stories/taking-the-first-step-towards-holocaust-education-and-teaching/>

² Dwork, Debórah. 2017. "A Critical Assessment of a Landmark Study." *Holocaust Studies* 23 (3): 385–95. doi:10.1080/17504902.2017.1296083.

ESTABLISH YOUR RATIONALE FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST CONTINUED...

Elements to consider when developing your rationale statement:

3. Guide students to make meaning from the Holocaust, rather than drawing direct lessons from the Holocaust.
 - a. Be cautious when drawing overly explicit connections between the Holocaust and students' current actions, as this can oversimplify the complexity of this or any history. Reducing the Holocaust to an extreme case of bullying is not only reductive, but it can prevent students from recognizing the historical specificity of what they are learning. It is vital that students engage in historical thinking in which they consider the role of a wide range of social, political, and economic factors that gave rise to the Holocaust.
 - b. Holocaust scholar Paul Salmons notes that there is a danger in seeking a universal "lesson" that results in missing other important insights that come from deeper understandings of the specific historical event. While it is clearly the case that without the Nazis' racist ideology and radical antisemitism the Holocaust could not have happened, still to reduce the Holocaust to a lesson on anti-racism is an oversimplification which '...does not reveal the complexities of historical process to the student. It leads to the assumption that there was a straight path from racist ideology to the extinction of a people. It overlooks the possibility that there was a twisted road to Auschwitz.' (Franklin Bialystok)³

Questions to consider when crafting a rationale for Holocaust literature:

- What specific event or series of events of the Holocaust does the text relate to?
 - What do you want them to learn about the Holocaust through this text?
- How does this text help us understand the people of the past?
- Why is learning about this relevant to the students?
- How does this literature connect with other literature you will be covering in the course?



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³Salmons, Paul. "Universal Meaning or Historical Understanding? The Holocaust in History and History in the Curriculum." *Teaching History*, no. 141 (2010): 57–63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43260782>.

EXAMPLE: Rationale for Teaching the Holocaust through “Night:”

Note: This is one example of a rationale for teaching the Holocaust through Night; yours may differ based on your course content and the age level of your students.

Through reading Elie Wiesel’s novel “Night,” Students will explore themes of antisemitism, systemic oppression, collaboration, and the complex and evolving nature of the Holocaust. Students will gain a comprehensive understanding of the historical context in which the Nazi regime and its collaborators weaponized antisemitism to target the Jews of Europe as well as the moral dilemmas and brutal realities faced by Holocaust victims at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp and beyond.

By engaging with the history of the Holocaust as experienced by a Jewish teenager deported from a Nazi collaborator state, students will gain a deeper understanding of the complex social, political, and economic processes and structures that create the environment in which genocide is possible. This understanding can help them identify and disrupt similar structures of oppression and abuse in the world in which they live.



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Questions to consider when crafting a rationale for teaching about the Holocaust in a secondary history course.

- How does the history of the Holocaust fit into the historical context of the first half of the twentieth century?
- How will studying the history of the Holocaust help students think critically about the modern social, political, and economic structures that created the environment in which genocide was possible?
- How will studying the history of the Holocaust help students think critically about the context in which they live and the ongoing impact of systems of oppression?
- Why is this learning relevant to the students?

Once you have considered the three important elements and the questions to consider relative to your content, use this space to develop your own working rationale statement:

Remember to refer back to this statement as you prepare your unit. It may also be helpful to refer back to this rationale after you complete the unit to edit, adjust, or expand.



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STEP THREE

Build an academic and conceptual foundation for the students:

- Define Key Terms
- Genocide at its foundation is an identity crime. As such, it is important for students to understand identity and what it means for them.⁴ This can be done through the “Exploring Identity Lesson Plan.”
- Introducing students to the “Universe of Obligation” and the “Pyramid of Hate” will provide a conceptual framework to guide their study of the history of the Holocaust.
- View "Survivor Voices: Bearing Witness from the Holocaust to Today", a 25-minute educational documentary produced by the Holocaust Center for Humanity. This film can provide an introduction to the study of the history of the Holocaust.

STEP FOUR

Establish Historical Context through an overview of the following topics:

- Judaism and Jewish Identity
- Historical antisemitism
- Pre-War Jewish life in Europe
- The basic tenets of Nazi ideology and the political process by which the Nazis came to power in Germany
- Pre-War Germany and the Holocaust during World War II

⁴David Moshman, “US and Them: Identity and Genocide,” *Identity* 7, no. 2 (2007): 115–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283480701326034>, 132.