

LESSON: Teaching with Holocaust Survivor Testimony

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 7–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: This resource includes several options for using survivor testimony. The length of time needed for activities within each section varies, but an estimate of 60 minutes per section is reasonable. Individual activities may be completed in class or as assessments.

60 minutes SECTION I: Why Testimony?

30 minutes SECTION II: Sources & Perspectives

60 minutes SECTION III: Providing Context

60 minutes SECTION IV: Making Meaning

60 minutes SECTION V: Bearing Witness

Section I functions as the introduction. Other sections may be selected and completed independently based on desired educational outcomes.

This is a *thematic* resource that builds on fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic.

RATIONALE

Students will examine Holocaust survivor testimonies as both personal memories and as deliberately-created historical records, and will evaluate how the Holocaust affected the lives of individuals, as well as the role of memory in our understanding of history.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of oral histories (such as Holocaust survivor testimonies) and what role do they play in our understanding of history?
- How are oral histories (eyewitness testimonies) different from other primary sources? What can we learn about individual experiences, actions, and choices from testimonies?
- Why is it important to bear witness to history (and the Holocaust, specifically)?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand the Holocaust as an event that affected individuals differently

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- Consider how time, memory, and contemporary context shape our understanding of historical events
- Recognize that Holocaust survivors make choices when sharing their own experiences
- Enhance active listening skills and ability to identify context clues

TEACHER PREPARATION

- [Guidelines for Teaching with Survivor Testimony](#)
- [Oral History Interview Guidelines](#) (optional)
- [USC Visual History Foundation iWitness project](#) (optional, external resource)
- [USC Shoah Foundation guidelines and strategies for using testimonies](#) (optional, external resource)
- A basic understanding of how and why the Holocaust happened is required to make the most of these activities. [Foundational resources and introductory lessons](#) are available on the Museum website.

STUDENT MATERIALS

- [Venn Diagram](#) (testimonies and secondary sources)
- [Testimony Clips Organized by Topic](#)
- [Worksheet: Gerda Weissmann Klein's testimony](#)
- [Worksheet: Primary Source Analysis](#) (liberation of the camps)
- [Worksheet: Analyzing Survivor Testimony](#)
- [Venn Diagram](#) (multiple testimonies)
- [Map of Europe, 1939](#)
- [Basic Timeline](#)
- [Artist Statement](#)

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve educational outcomes. Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- *The Path to Nazi Genocide* is subtitled in 12 languages. Scroll below the video to see the options.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.

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- Although this lesson includes a [timeline](#), which has been shortened from the USHMM foundational [Timeline Activity](#) lesson, teachers may opt to print and post relevant timeline cards from the larger activity as reminders for students.

This lesson is available as an [online, asynchronous experience for students](#), which can be accessed through a web browser or LMS files. The online lessons are accessible for all students for in-person and virtual learning, and they provide specific support for students using screen readers.

Teachers can also create their own lesson, utilizing USHMM oral testimonies as a resource or use any of these activities as introductions to using Holocaust survivor testimonies in the classroom.

60 min. SECTION ONE: WHY TESTIMONY?

This section should be completed as the lesson introduction. Other sections may be completed independently based on desired educational outcomes.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of oral histories, and what role do they play in our understanding of the Holocaust?
- How are oral histories (eyewitness testimonies) different from other primary sources?
- What can we learn about individual experiences, actions, and choices from testimonies?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

- Students understand the unique value of survivor testimonies as both personal memories and as deliberately-created historical records, and
- Students learn that they can critically evaluate testimonies as historical sources

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Review the [Guidelines for Teaching with Survivor Testimony](#).

This activity is intended for use toward the beginning of a unit on the Holocaust. It prepares students to critically analyze primary source materials and evaluate the unique role of eyewitness testimony as historical sources.

15 min. DEFINING KEY TERMS

1. Explain to students that one of the ways that they will be learning about the Holocaust is through testimonies provided by Holocaust survivors themselves -- that is, people who experienced the history and were interviewed years after the events in order to preserve their memories.

Before getting started, it is good to make sure everyone understands the terms being used.

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2. Define: **Holocaust Survivor**.

Different people and organizations define who is a Holocaust survivor differently. Not even all survivors agree about the definition.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum acknowledges as Holocaust survivors, Jews who experienced the persecution and survived the mass murder that was carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. This included those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees or those in hiding. Holocaust survivors also include people who did not self-identify as Jewish, but were categorized as such by the perpetrators.

Roma and Sinti, Poles and other Slavic peoples, Soviet prisoners of war, persons with disabilities, political prisoners, trade union leaders, “subversive” artists, those Catholic and Lutheran clergy who were seen as opponents of the regime, resisters, Jehovah’s Witnesses, male homosexuals, and criminal offenders, among others were also victims of Nazi persecution.

3. Discuss the word **testimony**. How have students heard it used before? In what context? Review the word’s meanings.

A **testimony** has:

- Legal meanings: a) all such declarations, spoken or written, offered in a legal case or deliberative hearing; and b) something that serves as evidence.
- Meanings related to authentication that do not necessarily have a legal connection: a) an assertion that offers first-hand authentication of a fact; and b) evidence or proof in support of a fact or an assertion.¹

Let students know that in the context of the Holocaust, the phrase **oral history** is often used interchangeably with **testimony**. Typically, these are audio or video recordings of interviews with individuals having personal knowledge of a past event -- in this case, the Holocaust.

TEACHER NOTE: Rather than simply presenting these definitions, some teachers may wish to project and fill in a Frayer model to assist students with these definitions.

15 min. **DISCUSSION**

4. Ask students what they think is the biggest difference between learning about an event from someone who experienced it versus learning from a history book or other secondary source. What is the benefit of learning about an event from someone who experienced it directly? This may be done as a class discussion, or if time

¹ Using *Testimony in Holocaust Education*. Yad Vashem.

<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/lesson-plans/use-of-testimony.html>

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permits, students may individually fill out a [Venn diagram](#) illustrating unique and shared qualities of the different sources, and discuss in pairs or small groups their answers to the questions.

5. Brainstorm as a class (or in small groups): Now scaffold students' consideration that even between testimonies, there may be differences.
 - a. How might two people describe the same event differently? Why?
 - b. Does the intended audience (i.e., family, friends, public) of this testimony have an impact on the details that an individual chooses to share or omit?
 - c. Does it make a difference whether someone is recording or recalling experiences as an event is happening, right after the event, or years later?

(Answers do not have to be comprehensive. The objective is for students to think about these questions.

Answers may include: in a record created contemporaneously with or immediately following an event (such as a diary), the author doesn't know what will happen next; in a survivor testimony, memoir or autobiography, they can identify important things that might not have seemed important at the time, but now they know how things turned out. Survivors of traumatic events may choose to selectively include or omit details depending on when they share their testimony, to whom, and for what reason.).

Teacher Note: It may be easiest for students to begin by applying these questions to a well-known current event or example from their own lives. **Be alert for sensitive and emotional personal topics that may get raised.**

30 min. ACTIVITY: EVALUATING TESTIMONY AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

6. Explain to students that they will examine an oral history excerpt recorded by a Holocaust survivor approximately 45 years after the events she describes.

As a class, watch the following testimony clip of [Gerda Weissmann Klein](#) (02:52 min) describing her liberation; while watching the video, students should fill out the provided [worksheet](#).

Teacher Note: To maximize efficient use of classroom time, students may do this for homework the night before the lesson.

7. Assign students to think/pair/share discussing their worksheet answers. Briefly synthesize their conclusions as a class.
8. Now, in small groups, ask students to use the [primary source analysis worksheet](#) to examine each of the sources below and investigate more about the liberation of other Nazi camps.
 - [Liberated prisoners at Ebensee](#) (photo) and [Survivors of the death march to Volary, Czechoslovakia](#) (photo)
 - [Liberation of Ohrdruf](#) (film 01:21)
 - [Aaron Eiferman letter](#) to his wife re: liberation (5 pages, handwritten in cursive; [transcription](#))

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- [*Ghastly Nazi Extermination Camp Seized*](#), Portland Press Herald (newspaper article; [PDF 1.46 MB download](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (for small groups, as a jigsaw, or whole class discussion)

- Was there anything that you learned from the testimony that would have been difficult or impossible to discover from any of the other sources?
- Were there things you learned from the other sources that would have been difficult to learn from a survivor's testimony?
- Describe the difference between learning from a primary versus a secondary source?
- What might explain differences in the information that each source chose to record or emphasize? (Take into account, the people who produced the source, the different camps described in each source, the time in which it was recorded, and the purpose of the source)
- How do these sources complement each other and provide a fuller understanding of what liberation of the camps was like?

OPTIONAL: Conclude this activity by watching [Gerda and Kurt Klein's combined testimonies](#) (YouTube video, 03:44 min). If you do not have access to YouTube, [Kurt Klein's description of liberation](#) is available on the Museum's website. Discuss how the pairing of Gerda's and Kurt's different perspectives changes one's understanding of the liberation experience.

*Teachers and students who wish to further explore Gerda Weissmann Klein's experiences may access for free the Academy Award-winning documentary, [One Survivor Remembers](#) (41:30 min) based on her written memoir, *All But My Life*.

**To learn more about the death march that Gerda endured from Gruenberg camp to Volary, Czechoslovakia, see Yad Vashem's online feature [The Death March to Volary](#).

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30 min. SECTION TWO: SOURCES AND PERSPECTIVES

This section helps students to understand and evaluate oral testimonies as purposefully created sources that reveal the unique impact of the Holocaust on each individual.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What role do oral histories play in our understanding of the Holocaust?
- What can we learn about individual experiences, actions, and choices from testimonies?
- Why is it important to seek out multiple perspectives when using eyewitness testimonies to study history?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

- Students understand the Holocaust as an event that affected individuals differently
- Recognize that Holocaust survivors make choices when sharing about their own experiences

30 min. ACTIVITY: ENHANCING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Assign to students in pairs or ask students to choose the testimonies of two eyewitnesses (survivors, liberators, or rescuers) describing the same event from the list below. While listening to the testimonies, students should take notes on each testimony clip using the provided [worksheet](#).

Examples:

- 1936 Olympics: [Gary Bigus](#) (01:09), [John Woodruff](#) (02:03), and [Gretel Bergmann](#) (07:45)
- Kristallnacht: [Survivors Remember Kristallnacht](#) (Students may be assigned options from eight different survivor testimony clips averaging 5-9 minutes each.)
- Hidden Children: [Sarah \(Sheila\) Peretz Etons](#) (01:37), Fred Deutsch ([01:56](#) & [01:42](#)), [Freya \(Alice\) Lang Rosen](#) (02:06), [Anita Magnus Frank](#) (1:27), [Jerry Von Halle](#) (01:34)
- Deportations: [Cecily Klein-Pollack](#) (02:23), [Leo Schneiderman](#) (02:31), [Selma \(Wijnberg\) Engel](#) (01:51), [Bart Stern](#) (02:54), and [Vladka Meed](#) (01:54)
- Warsaw ghetto uprising: [Estelle Laughlin](#) (06:28) and [Vladka Meed](#) (01:53)
- Mobile killing squad massacres: Frima L. ([02:49](#) and [03:27](#)) and [Martin Spett](#) (02:42)
- Rescue in Denmark: [Leif Donde](#) (01:26), Preben Munch-Nielsen ([01:02](#) and [01:22](#))
- Liberation: [Gerda Weissmann Klein](#) (02:52), [Norbert Wollheim](#) (02:13), [Kurt Klein](#) (03:35), [Pat Lynch](#) (01:02), [James Rose](#) (01:12)

Invite students to think/pair/share information from their worksheets and answer the question, “How do the two interviewees describe the same experience from different perspectives?” Teachers may choose to provide a [Venn diagram](#) or organizer of your choice for students to organize their thoughts about similarities and differences in the testimonies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What emotions do they convey?

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- How does their choice of words and description of events contribute to the tone of their narrative?
- What is the same in each testimony and what is different?
- Did you learn anything by listening to more than one perspective?
- What questions do the different testimonies raise for you about the event that they describe?

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60 min. SECTION THREE: PROVIDING CONTEXT

This section helps students place survivors' testimony about personal experiences and events in historical context.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What role do oral histories play in our understanding of the Holocaust?
- What can we learn about individual experiences, actions, and choices from testimonies?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

- Students understand the Holocaust as an event that affected individuals differently
- Students recognize that Holocaust survivors make choices when sharing about their own experiences
- Students understand the unique value of survivor testimony as personal memories and as deliberately-constructed historical records, and they can critically evaluate testimonies as historical sources

60 min. ACTIVITY: PLACING SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

PRE-CLASS HOMEWORK: Assign students to listen to testimonies of survivors from [the provided collection of testimony clips](#) that reflect multiple perspectives of the varying experiences, events, and geographies of the Holocaust. Have students fill out the [Analyzing Survivor Testimony worksheet](#) as they listen to the testimonies.

1. Begin class with a discussion of what stood out the most for students from the testimonies they watched. What questions did the testimonies raise?
2. Using the Museum's [Timeline Activity](#), provide historical context for the testimony clips by asking students to place [testimony interviewee cards](#) on the timeline (in lieu of the regular individual profile cards). This activity culminates in a gallery walk and class discussion.
3. Alternatively, or as homework, teachers may ask students to use the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) to research the event or experience described by "their" survivor and answer the following questions (see the [Testimonies Organized by Topic](#) document for suggestions on which encyclopedia articles correspond to each testimony).
 - Does the survivor describe experiences or details that are also included in the encyclopedia article?
 - What details does the survivor describe that aren't in the encyclopedia article?
 - What historical details are in the encyclopedia article that the survivor might not have known when they personally experienced the events described (or even when they were interviewed years later)?
 - Based on the [timeline*](#), what sorts of events might the survivor have excluded from their testimony intentionally? Why would someone choose not to include some information in their testimony?

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For additional context, students may read the biographical paragraphs provided with each testimony, and using the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#), research how the Holocaust occurred in the country where “their” survivor was living at the time.

Using the [Map of Europe 1939](#) or an online resource, pin locations with descriptive information (name, date, event/experience) for each testimony. Students can also trace a person’s movement, if any is indicated in the testimony.

Ask students:

- How did the person’s location--what country they were in, whether they were in an urban or rural setting--affect their experiences at different points in time during the Holocaust?

Teachers may opt to have students create presentations to share the results of their research with the rest of the class.

*If teachers have used the [Timeline Activity](#) prior to this, then they may refer to that timeline instead.

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30-60 min. SECTION IV: MAKING MEANING

This section asks students to reflect upon the personal meaning of survivor testimonies through an examination of elements such as words, tone, and mood.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What role do oral histories play in our understanding of the Holocaust?
- What can we learn about individual experiences, actions, and choices from testimonies?
- How do the words and imagery conveyed through testimony illustrate the impact that the Holocaust had on individuals and their communities?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

- Students understand the unique value of survivor testimony as personal memories and as deliberately-created historical records, and they can critically evaluate testimonies as narrative structures as well as historical sources
- Consider how time, memory, and contemporary context shape understanding of historical events
- Students recognize that Holocaust survivors make choices about language to use and what to share and omit from their experiences when they provide testimony
- Students engage in active listening and identify context clues

30-60 min. ACTIVITY: DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH POETRY AND ART

1. Create a “found poem.” (This activity has been adapted from the [Densho project](#).) Have students select a phrase that struck them as meaningful or important and one word that was significant or powerful, selecting either from different survivor testimonies or from a single testimony. Ask them to write the phrase and word each on different strips of paper (for in-person classrooms) or on a shared platform, like Jamboard (for remote learning).

Students will take turns constructing a “found poem.” Each student will have two turns. In the first round, each one places their phrase or word somewhere into the poem. In the second round, they can move a phrase or word within the poem. After the turns are complete, make sure everyone can see the finished poem and ask for a volunteer to read the poem aloud to the class.

Note: this task can also be done individually where each student finds a minimum of ten words/phrases and arranges them to create a poem. Before students submit, they can find an image to pair with their poem and post both in the classroom/digital space to share with others.

Discuss:

- Why did you choose your particular phrase or word?
- How did you choose where to place a phrase or word in the poem? What guided your decisions?

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- What themes from the testimonies are evident in the poem?
 - What is included in the testimonies that are missing from the poem?
 - What does the poem reveal about the *tone* (the survivor's voice and expression in their testimonies)?
 - What *mood* (the emotions you feel as you read) does the poem evoke?
 - Are themes in this poem specific only to the Holocaust or are they universal? Explain.
 - What title would you give this poem to express what it means to you?
2. Create a collage, image, or work of art that illustrates or is inspired by the survivor testimony or testimonies that have been assigned or chosen.

This activity may be used alone or as an extension of the “found poem” activity above -- reflecting the words, tone, and mood of the poem that students created. Or it may be done as a stand-alone activity, using the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website](#) or [collection](#) to find images that are descriptive of events, geography, or themes related to a specific survivor's experiences to include in or inspire the artwork. Each student should produce an [“Artist Statement”](#) to explain in their own words their creative process, including motivations, inspirations, and their methods of approach.

Gather the works together, do a gallery walk and conclude with a moment of silence to honor the lives and words of the survivors and their families.

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30-60 min. SECTION V: BEARING WITNESS

This section functions well as an opportunity for student reflection or as a “concluding activity” toward the end of a unit on the Holocaust.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to bear witness to the Holocaust?
- Why is it important to bear witness to history?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

- Students reflect upon their responsibilities bearing witness to Holocaust survivor testimonies
- Students understand that bearing witness is an active process of “doing.”

PRE-CLASS HOMEWORK:

Students listen to the [final episode](#) (15:01) of the podcast series, *First Person: Conversations with Holocaust Survivors*, and identify two meaningful statements and record the timestamps to access later, or highlight statements on [transcript](#).

1. Discuss the following definitions with students:

Bearing witness is:

- To show that something exists or is true.
 - To make a statement saying or otherwise communicate that one saw or knows something
2. Ask students to share which word(s) they think are the most important in each definition and explain why. It is particularly effective to visually display these words in front of the class (or in a word cloud if online). Typically, students will identify the words: **show, true, communicate, saw, know**. Explain that bearing witness involves demonstrating or communicating the truth or reality of an event, often one that the “truth bearer” saw with his or her own eyes.
 3. Share the following two quotations from Elie Wiesel:
“I believe firmly and profoundly that whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness, so those who hear us, those who read us must continue to bear witness for us. Until now, they’re doing it with us. At a certain point in time, they will do it for all of us.” - [The Many Legacies of Elie Wiesel](#)

“‘For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.’ For not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories.” - [Remarks at the Dedication Ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 22, 1993](#)

Ask students:

- How does Wiesel describe people who listen to survivor testimonies?

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- In each of the two quotes above, Wiesel asserts that those who bear witness to the Holocaust, and specifically to survivor testimonies, have certain responsibilities. According to Wiesel, what are those responsibilities?
4. In small groups or pairs, students discuss which passages resonated the most for them from the First Person podcast episode and why they chose their particular passage.
 5. As a class, discuss the reasons that survivors themselves give for why they share their experiences. Return to Wiesel's quotes about bearing witness. What might Wiesel mean when he says, "... not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories?" What can students do to honor this call to action?

Through creative writing, artwork, or a formal presentation students reflect on the aspects of learning about the Holocaust that speak most strongly to them, and address Wiesel's call to bear witness for both the dead and the living.

NOTE: The "found poem" and art collage activity from section 4 can also be used as a means to synthesize student reflections here.

EXTENSIONS

1. Review the [Guidelines for Recording Oral History Interviews](#). Ask students to interview an elder in their family or community and record their own oral history interviews.