

Handout

Letter to California Students

Dear students,

Welcome. You are about to begin a unit titled Teaching the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide that was created by our organization, Facing History and Ourselves. You are joining a community of tens of thousands of students from around the world who have explored the same questions you are about to explore—questions such as: Who am I? What shapes my identity? Why do people form groups? What does it mean to belong? What happens when people are excluded from membership?

After taking part in a unit similar to the one you are about to study, one student said, “I’ve had 13 math classes, 20 English classes, 6 or 7 science classes, art, P.E., Spanish . . . but in all the time I’ve been in school, I’ve had only one class about being more human.” In the next few weeks, you will be learning about the choices people made during two catastrophic moments in history. First, you will learn about the Armenian Genocide, the mass murder of about 1.5 million Armenian children, women, and men by the rulers of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Then, you will engage in a deeper study of the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, a tragic event in which millions of people, including six million Jews, were murdered. While you study these histories, you will also be learning about yourselves and your responsibility to others in the world around you. That is what we mean by “Facing History and Ourselves.” As another former Facing History student explained, “When I took the Facing History course back in eighth grade, it helped me understand that history was a part of me and that I was a part of history. If I understood why people made the choices they did, I could better understand how I make choices and hopefully make the right ones.”

This unit may be different from others you have experienced. In this unit, you will be asked to share your own ideas and questions, in discussions and through writing in a journal. You will be asked to listen carefully to the voices of others—the voices of people in your classroom community as well as the voices of people in the history you are studying. In this unit, you may hear things that spark powerful emotions, such as anger or sadness. You will be asked to use both your head and your heart to make sense of the choices people have made in the past and the choices people continue to make today.

At Facing History, we like to think of a unit as a journey. When taking this journey, you need to bring your journal, your curiosity, an open mind, and a willingness to share. As you embark on and continue this journey with the students and adults in your classroom, it is important for you to support each other so that everyone can do their best learning. We wish you a meaningful journey during which you learn about the past and the present, about yourself and about others. You may even find that you have changed as a result of this experience.

Thank you for participating in this journey with us.

Facing History and Ourselves