

A FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES GUIDE TO EXPLORING SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

“The shared experience of listening to a survivor bearing witness is like no other experience...It inevitably affects us deeply and literally changes the way we feel about history and ourselves.”

-Margot Stern Strom

Facing History and Ourselves' Founder and Executive Director



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Exploring Survivor Testimony

Overview

Facing History teachers have found that one of the most powerful ways to help students begin to grasp genocide and other tragic moments in history is through survivor testimony - firsthand accounts from individuals who lived through genocide and other atrocities. There are many ways to bring these powerful voices into the classroom including literature and art, video testimony, or a survivor visit. Facing History has also developed multi-media pages to interact with the stories and hear the voices of individual survivors.

Teachers can ensure that students have the historical context for the testimony by including these voices at an appropriate place in the study of Holocaust and Human Behavior. Students will have already explored issues of identity and membership and should be within the case study. This will allow them to consider the questions of identity and membership through their personal connections as well as the particular history. These lesson ideas are meant to be flexible and to support you as you bring survivor testimony into your classroom and have discussions about the voices from history and the connections to students today.

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Preparation for Survivor Testimony

“...That several currents flow at differing depths in Holocaust testimonies, and that our understanding of the event depends very much on the source and destination of the current we pursue” (Preface from Lawrence L. Langer, [Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory](#)).

While using survivor testimony presents tremendous opportunities, the disturbing nature of this material can also present some challenges for teachers who want to find a safe, respectful way for students to engage with this content. Careful preparation and debriefing help address these concerns. For example, be prepared for a range of students' responses, including laughter, or even a lack of emotions while reading or watching a video about this history. If some respond in what appears to be insensitive ways, it may well be because they are struggling with how to process this information on an emotional and intellectual level. It is also important to proceed at a pace that allows ample time for students' questions and comments before, during and after engaging with survivor testimony. To help students reflect on their feelings, questions and ideas, they should be encouraged to write in their journals at many points throughout the experience.

Suggested Activities: One or more of these ideas, in addition to your own, can be used to create a lesson plan relevant for your students.

Review class norms about a safe, respectful learning community: Exploring survivor testimony often requires students to confront evidence of horrific violence and injustice. Before engaging with this material, you might want to review your classroom contract so that students feel they have a safe space to voice any concerns, question or emotions provoked by this content. You can also ask students to think about what it means to them to feel safe in the classroom, and what they need to do to help other students feel safe and supported. So that they are not caught off-guard, you might inform students about the violence to which they will bear witness. For more ideas on establishing a safe, respectful classroom community, refer to our [contracting teaching strategy](#).

Review the historical context of the testimony: Survivor testimony should not be explored in a vacuum; students get the most out of this experience when it is an integral part of a unit of study. To help remind students of the historical context of the survivor's testimony, you might ask students to think of words that describe conditions of the time and place the survivor will be addressing. Then you could have students discuss questions such as: What factors might be influencing the choices people were making at this time? If they could speak with someone who experienced this historical moment, what would they want to ask this person?

Journal prompts: Before giving students the opportunity to bear witness to survivor testimony, you might have them anticipate what they are about to experience by responding to one or more of these prompts:

- If students could speak with someone who survived this historical moment, what questions would they want to ask this individual?
- Why do you think these survivors have chosen to tell their stories to the world? What do they expect you and others to learn from such stories? If you could share a story with others, what would it be? Who would you want to hear it? Why would you select this story to share?
- In the first clip from the video montage [Challenge of Memory](#), Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel speaks to students about the experience of hearing survivor testimony. He 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.” Ask students to respond to Wiesel in their journals. What message is he trying to express to students? Follow-up prompts you might use include:

- What does it mean to “become sensitive”? Is it important to be sensitive to others’ stories? Why or why not?
- If you are having a survivor visit your classroom, you might ask students to consider what it means for them to be sensitive to their guest. What are examples of “sensitive” questions? What does it mean to be a “sensitive” listener?

Reading Poetry: We suggest having students read the poem aloud, at least two times.

- Have students underline particular words or phrases that stand out to them as they read. You can have students share one of the words or phrases they underlined using the [wraparound strategy](#).
- After reading, ask students to respond to these questions in their journals: What does this poem mean to you? What questions does it raise for you? You can begin a discussion of the poem by having students share their responses to these prompts.

You may consider the following who represent a range of experiences:

“Death Fugue” by Paul Celan

“More Light, More Light” by Anthony Hecht

“Oh, the Chimneys, Chorus of the Survivors” by Nelly Sachs

“Yom Ha Shoah” by Sonia Weitz (Appendix B)

Discuss Testimony: You can find [scholarship about testimony](#) to have your students prepare to explore testimony. You might have them read these scholars to help them consider questions about the role of memory, second generation stories, and the legacies across different genocides.

Listening to Voices: Experiencing Survivor Testimony

Bringing the voice of survivors into the classroom can be done in different ways. You may be able to invite a survivor to your classroom, read a memoir, watch video testimony, or use the [Facing History and Ourselves Online Resource Collection](#). Providing space for your students to make connections between history and themselves, head and heart, universal and particular, and to reflect on the history that they are studying is an important piece of using survivor testimony. *You will find below ideas to use with different types of testimony as well as lesson ideas depending on the particular way that students will interact with the voices.*

Suggested Activities: One or more of these ideas, in addition to your own, can be used to create a lesson plan relevant for your students.

Identity charts: Before listening, reading, or interacting directly with the survivor testimony, have students create an [identity chart](#) of the survivor from a brief bio. After they have had time watch, read or listen to the testimony and take notes, have students (individually or in small groups) add to the identity chart that they created.

Note-taking: Whether working individually or in groups, we suggest giving students a template or graphic organizer they can use to record information about the survivor/s they are studying. For example, you might give them sentence starters to complete, such as:

- I wonder why...
- I noticed....
- I learned...
- I have a question about...
- I am interested in...
- I was surprised by...
- An important fact about this person is...

Timeline activity: Timelines are an effective way to help students see how a survivor's individual experience fits into the larger historical context.

1. You might begin by having students create a timeline of events (e.g. the rise of the Nazis and the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Cambodian genocide, etc.). The events from this timeline can be posted on the classroom wall in chronological order. Refer to the [human timeline](#) teaching strategy for another idea for how to structure this.
2. Ask students to record significant events in the survivor's life as they read or watch the testimony.
3. Give students 8x10 pieces of paper (perhaps 5-10 sheets) in different colors, so that each survivor is represented by the same color of paper. Ask students to record one important event from the survivor's life on each piece of paper.
4. Have students post the papers in the appropriate spot on the class timeline.
5. Ask students to do a [gallery walk](#) of the timeline. As they walk they can consider questions such as "What events influenced survivors' experiences? What strikes you about the ideas presented on this timeline? What questions does this raise for you?"
6. Facilitate a class discussion about what students have learned from engaging with survivor testimony. How has their understanding of this historical event changed, if at all, from learning about the event from the perspective of a survivor? Students can first reflect on this question in writing as preparation for the discussion.

Poetry as response to survivor testimony - Students can write poems as a response to engaging with survivor testimony. For example, students can create [found poems](#) based on the language from survivor testimony. Or, you can create a collaborative poem as a class. In a collaborative poem, each student contributes one line. This could be a question or comment students generate in response to exploring survivor testimony. You can go around the room with each student reading their line. The text of these collaborative poems provide fruitful material for a class discussion.

Survivor Visits

Margot Stern Strom, Facing History and Ourselves' Executive Director, wrote that, "The shared experience of listening to a survivor bearing witness is like no other experience. Those of us who have had the opportunity to create such a shared experience for our students and colleagues, as part of a course or workshop on the Holocaust, know that it inevitably affects us deeply and literally changes the way we feel about history and ourselves" (*Elements of Time* xiii).

Logistics:

Having this type of extraordinary dialogue in the midst of a regular school day can be a challenge. Consider logistics. For example, make sure to talk directly to the speaker who will be visiting about what they feel will make the visit most successful. The way that you arrange your room can foster dialogue. For example, a semi-circle might be more inviting than rows. The number of students that can participate and engage meaningfully is another consideration that depends greatly on the comfort of the speaker and the preparation that you do with your students. The amount of time that can be carved out of the school day will determine how much time you can leave for questions and also to debrief.

Please use the checklist (Appendix B) as a way to think through the preparation that you are doing and contact your Facing History Program Associate if you would like to talk more about preparing for survivor testimony in your classroom.

Survivor Profiles

Facing History and Ourselves has developed an online [Facing History and Ourselves Online Resource Collection](#) to help students engage with authentic voices from history. This resource collection gives students access to survivor testimonies as well as primary source documents, photographs, and video clips that will help students prepare for a survivor visit. This lesson idea provides suggestions on how to use this resource collection with students.

Jigsaw and Group Presentations:

1. Divide your students into groups of three or four. Assign each group one survivor from [the Survivor Profile page](#).
2. Explain that it is their job to teach other students about this survivor. What do they hope to learn about the survivor? What kind of information would be important to share with others? Students own ideas can be used to generate a set of questions that groups would answer based on the evidence they find in the resource collection. They could record their answers on a note-taking template or on an [identity chart](#) for that survivor.
3. After students have had ample time to explore the website and answer their questions, [jigsaw](#) the students into small groups so that each new group has a student who learned about each profile. In these new groups students should present their identity chart or notes about their assigned survivor. Alternatively, you could have small groups present what they learned about their assigned survivor to the whole class.
4. As students learn about other survivors, ask them to listen for similarities and differences. What is common about these experiences? What is unique?
5. As a final step, you can have students turn in an [exit card](#) where they complete a statement such as: From survivor testimony, I learned_____. Students can also share their responses as a [wraparound](#).

Voices from Art and Literature

We can learn so much from Literature, memoirs, and diaries of survivors. Of *Night* and Elie Wiesel, Lawrence Langer in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* writes that it "drew this portion of history into the unlimited aspirations of literary art, and gave it resonance and universality which only imaginative literature could achieve." Facing History provides many resources to look at these texts.

Suggested Activities: One or more of these ideas, in addition to your own, can be used to create a lesson plan relevant for your students.

Choosing a text: Facing History and Ourselves has a number of texts that can be borrowed as class sets or individual copies. You can find them on our [Library Resources collection](#).

Video Testimony

Facing History has produced a 23-minute video montage called [Challenge of Memory](#), a collection of seven short vignettes of survivor voices that was created to be used while teaching the memoir [Night](#). It also can be used independently of the book. Each testimony covers a different aspect of the Holocaust, from deportation to life in the camps: Shari B begins by sharing how her family could not believe the accounts they heard about the gassing of Jews. Edith P describes being locked in a cattle car on her way to Auschwitz. Helen K recalls an act of courageous resistance by inmates in Auschwitz, and Leon Bass, a retired U.S. Army sergeant, remembers the shock of entering Buchenwald concentration camp at the end of the war.

You might also look to the pivotal film *Shoah*, released in 1985 by Claude Lanzmann, a fighter in the French resistance who became gripped by the stories he was uncovering. It is more relevant today than ever before because it is devoid of any historical footage and relies totally on the voices of the perpetrators, bystanders and survivors. It is powerful in the primacy of the oral testimony.

You will also find a number of testimonies online. For example, 20 Voices (www.twentyvoices.com) streams interviews from 20 survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Other streaming videos include a short overview of the Armenian Genocide, and a brief film where survivors talk about their experiences arriving at Ellis Island and their life as immigrants to the United States. This virtual museum is organized by The Armenian Cultural Center (U.S.) and The Armenian Community Centre (Canada).

Suggested Activities: One or more of these ideas, in addition to your own, can be used to create a lesson plan relevant for your students.

Pre-viewing: Below are some ways you can introduce students to the *Challenge of Memory* film clips.

- In the first clip from the video montage [Challenge of Memory](#), Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel speaks to students about the experience of hearing survivor testimony. He 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." Ask students to respond to Wiesel in their journals. What message is he trying to express to students? Follow-up prompts you might use include:
 - What does it mean to "become sensitive"? Is it important to be sensitive to others' stories? Why or why not?
 - If you are having a survivor visit your classroom, you might ask students to consider what it means for them to be sensitive to their guest. What are examples of "sensitive" questions? What does it mean to be a "sensitive" listener?
- To place these survivors' testimonies in a larger context, you might want to ground students visually in the location and number of Nazi concentration and death camps. Click [here](#) for a map from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Viewing: *Challenge of Memory* includes 7 testimonies, 6 from survivors and a testimony by Sgt. Leon Bass who witnessed the devastation in the camps immediately following World War II. You might focus on just one clip, although typically teachers show several to give students a sense of the range of experiences during the Holocaust. For more information about each clip, as well as background information and discussion questions, we recommend downloading the chapter, "[Montages](#)" from Facing History's resource book on Holocaust testimonies, [Elements of Time](#).

To help students comprehend and interpret what they view (and to give you evidence of student learning), here are some ways to structure students' response to the video:

- [3-2-1](#) – After viewing, students can record 3 facts from the video, 2 questions raised by the video, and one feeling they experienced while watching the video.
- [Two-column chart](#) – On the left side of a page, students record information presented in the film. On the right side, students record their reactions to this information – a question, a comment, a feeling, a connection to something they know about or have experienced.
- [Levels of questions](#) – By increasing the complexity of the questions students are asked about a text, this strategy helps students to develop and strengthen their literacy skills. Here are several examples of the kinds of questions you can use with this strategy:

Vignette 3 (Edith P) Questions (minutes 8:44-11:15)

In this short clip, Edith remembers a time (she was 24 years old) when she was transported on a train from Auschwitz to a labor camp in northern Germany. It is a simple but personal and powerful moment that focuses on what it is like to live in an “abnormal” world and then to have a glimpse of “normal” life.

Level One Questions (Factual)

- What events are being described? Where are they happening? Who is involved?
- What adjectives do the survivors use to describe what happened to them?

Level Two Questions (Inferential)

- How does this story contribute to your understanding of the Holocaust?
- What changes does Edith seem to have undergone as a result of her experience?
- 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?

Vignette 4 (Helen K) Questions (minutes 11:26-13:45)

Helen K. describes the effort of prisoners to blow up the crematoria at Auschwitz in October 1944. Women prisoners working in an armaments plant at the camp smuggled gunpowder to male prisoners working near the crematoriums. Helen reports in her testimony that the men planned to blow up one or more of the four crematoria, but in fact, the Germans arrived before they could carry out their plan, so they only managed to burn down one. Subsequently the Nazis traced the source of the gunpowder and hung four of the women involved.

See Gideon Greif's "[We Wept without Tears?](#)"

Level One Questions (Factual)

- How did inmates get access to explosives and weapons?
- What did they plan to do with these explosives and weapons?
- What were the consequences of the crematorium uprising?

Level Two Questions (Inferential)

- Despite the odds against them, what do you think motivated the inmates to organize and mount these attacks?
- What did the prisoners gain from these acts of resistance?
- Why do you think these acts of resistance rarely involved older prisoners? (note that most of the older men were killed upon arrival)
- How might these acts of resistance have been viewed from the perspective of the other prisoners quartered outside the area of the gas chambers and crematoria?

Level Three Questions (Universal)

- What is resistance?
- What is the range of ways people respond to the prospect of annihilation?
- Some scholars believe that the right question to ask about resistance is not why there were not more such acts but why there were any at all. What do you think they mean by that statement? Do you agree? What makes resistance sometimes difficult or nearly impossible? Under what conditions might resistance be more likely to occur?

Voices of Legacy

As survivors of the Holocaust age, the legacy of Holocaust memory is passed on to the succeeding generations. This is true for the Armenian descendants and will be true for survivors of the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Sudan. Eva Fogelman, a Holocaust survivor and psychologist, did groundbreaking work to bring the voices of the child survivors and the second generation forward.

“descendants of the Shoah, are challenged to exercise their vigilance as guardians of the integrity of Holocaust memory. As children of survivors, they are themselves witnesses to the eyewitnesses of the annihilation of European Jewry. They have been fulfilling their parents’ hopes and aspirations in the rebirth of the Jewish people out of destruction, and have absorbed the memories, the insights, and wisdom of the survivors as the essence of their being. Their sense of responsibility calls upon them to emulate the survivors’ vision and strength and to play a meaningful role in the intergenerational transmission of memory.”

We have developed a resource collection called [Survivor Testimony](#). This resource collection gives students access to survivor testimonies as well as primary source documents, photographs, and video clips that will help students prepare for a survivor visit. It also provides resources to teachers to study original testimony with the additional context of personal artifacts. Children and grand children of Holocaust survivors—the second and third generation—are contributing to the memory of the Holocaust in various ways—through visual and performing arts, memoir, poetry and story sharing. The story of [Rita Lurie and her daughter Leslie Gilbert Lurie](#), lawyer, Facing History teacher and author of *Bending Toward the Sun*, a memoir of 3 generations of Holocaust survivors can be studied and discussed using the strategies described in [Survivor Profiles](#).

Questions raised by scholars that may be posed to students :

- How does memory change over time?
- What might “inter-generational transmission of memory” mean?
- How might second and third generation descendants play a role in preserving the legacy of the Holocaust?

Discussing and Debriefing Experiences with Survivor Voices

Journal prompt: Why do you think these survivors have chosen to tell their stories to the world? What do they expect you and others to learn from such stories? If you could share a story with others, what would it be? Who would you want to hear it? Why would you select this story to share?

Wraparound: Some Facing History teachers ask each student to share one word that is on their mind after engaging with this material (see [wraparound](#) teaching strategy).

Body Sculpting: This teaching strategy, described [here](#), uses theatre to help students express their reactions to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

Levels of Questions and “Choiceless choices”: Professor Lawrence L. Langer, who has studied the testimonies of many survivors, suggests that prisoners in camps like Auschwitz faced “choiceless choices”—alternatives that were equally impossible. These testimonies help students understand what Professor Larry Langer means by a “choiceless choice.”

Introduce students to this concept by reading together “Choiceless Choice” on pages 351-52 in the resource book [Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior](#). This short

reading draws from the work of both Langer and Primo Levi. Levi, along with Wiesel, is one of the most well-known survivors and writers of the Nazi camp experience.

The [Levels of Questions](#) teaching strategy can also be used to enhance students' understanding of this reading.

Level One Questions (Factual)

- Who was Primo Levi?
- What was a kapo?
- What did the Special Squad do?

Level Two Questions (Inferential)

- Why would the Nazis have prisoners working in the crematoria?
- Why would they create a Special Squad unit?
- Why do you think the Nazis had each new Special Squad unit burn the corpses of the previous squad as its first task?
- Why does Levi say that the Jews who served in the Special Squad units were "not collaborators but victims," even though they participated in the Final Solution?

Level Three Questions (Universal)

- According to Lawrence Langer, what is a choiceless choice?
- When does something become a choiceless choice?
- What criteria distinguish a choiceless choice from other choices?

Appendix A

Questions for teachers to prepare to use Survivor Testimony

What will be the best way to structure the visit?

- *How long do you have? How can you leave enough time for questions and debriefing?*
- *How many students will be in the room? Is this conducive for engagement?*
- *Are there additional adults who can be invited to help facilitate the conversation?*
- *What is the best way to have students ask questions? (Can you ask a few students to plan to go first, second, and third? Can they stand in a line when they have a question? Can each student prepare a few questions ahead of time?)*
- *Are there students for whom participation is not appropriate?*

How can you set up the expectations for your students' interaction with the survivor?

- *Are the students prepared for the visit?*
- *Do the students know the schedule for the speaker including how long they will have to ask questions?*
- *Have I revisited the classroom contract and recontracted if necessary about expectations for a visitor?*

What information will be helpful to share/ discuss with the survivor prior to their visit?

- *Have I asked the speaker what makes their classroom visits most comfortable and successful?*
- *Have I shared basic information about my class including: grade level, number of students, any specific area of interest, involvement with Facing History and Ourselves?*
- *Did I share my hope for the amount of time that the speaker will share and how much time will be for student questions?*
- *Did I clarify any logistics: Will the survivor will need a slide projector, microphone?*
- *Did I send or give specific and clear directions to the school? (in some cases, your speaker may request transportation)*

- Does the speaker have a phone number where they can reach me?
- Did I call the speaker the night before the event to confirm the time and to arrange a specific meeting place and to give the speaker pertinent parking information?

What else can you do to make the survivor feel welcome during their visit?

- Did I let the administrative offices know beforehand that a guest speaker is coming to school?
- Have I made plans for the beginning and end of the class to accompany the speaker to and from the main entrance of the school, parking lot or specific place you have arranged to meet the speaker?
- Have I limited possible distractions and interruptions as much as possible? (turn off the ringer on your classroom phone and ask students to switch off cell phones)
- Did I think through the room/chair set up and try to create a comfortable, intimate and welcoming space?
- Have I provided a table, chair and a glass of water for the speaker?
- Did I ask permission from the speaker beforehand, if I plan to record the speaker session or take photos?

What can you do after the visit?

- Did I plan an activity (i.e. journaling or a focused discussion) that will help my students debrief the survivor's presentation and their reactions to or feelings about the presentation?
- Can I have the students write thank you notes to the speaker?

Appendix B

For Yom Ha'Shoah by Sonia Weitz
 (Excerpted from *I Promised I Would Tell*)

This poem was written by Sonia Weitz, a survivor of the Holocaust. "Yom Ha'Shoah" is Hebrew* for the Day of The Catastrophe, more commonly referred to as Holocaust Day of Remembrance . In this poem, Weitz, a Holocaust survivor, invites others to learn about her experience while also acknowledging that this is an impossible task.

FOR YOM HA'SHOAH
 Come, take this giant leap with me
 into the other world . . . the other place
 where language fails and imagery defies,
 denies man's consciousness . . . and dies
 upon the altar of insanity.
 Come, take this giant leap with me
 into the other world . . . the other place
 and trace the eclipse of humanity . . .
 where children burned while mankind stood by
 and the universe has yet to learn why
 . . . has yet to learn why.

- What does this poem mean to you?
- What questions does it raise for you?
- Yom Ha Shoah means "Day of The Catastrophe" in Hebrew though it is commonly referred to as "Day of Remembrance". Why did Sonia Weitz call this poem "Yom Ha Shoah"?
- What does Weitz mean when she writes, "Come, take this giant leap with me"?
- What does she mean by the line, "has yet to learn why"? Why does she repeat this phrase?