



Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust

As determined by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)

For a complete text of the guidelines with details please visit www.ushmm.org.

Staff at the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center would be happy to answer questions, provide consultation, and assist in finding appropriate resources and lessons. www.wsherc.org; info@wsherc.org.

1. Define the term “Holocaust.”

The Holocaust refers to a specific genocidal event in 20th century history: the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims – 6 million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

2. Avoid comparisons of pain.

One cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides.

3. Avoid simple answers to complex history.

Allow students to contemplate the various factors that contributed to the Holocaust; do not attempt to reduce Holocaust history to one or two catalysts in isolation from the other factors that came into play.

4. Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable.

The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups and nations made decisions to act or not to act.

5. Strive for precision of language.

Encourage students to distinguish the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct orders and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

6. Make careful distinctions about sources of information.

Students should be encouraged to consider why a particular text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was, whether there were any biases inherent in the information,

whether any gaps occurred in discussion, whether omissions in certain passages were inadvertent or not, and how the information has been used to interpret various events.

7. Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions.

Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same.

8. Do not romanticize history to engage students' interest.

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. However, given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation (estimated at .005%) helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of history.

9. Contextualize the history you are teaching.

Frame your approach by considering when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences to oneself and one's family of one's actions; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations; and the availability, effectiveness, and risk of potential hiding places.

Students should be reminded that individuals and groups often behaved differently depending upon changing events and circumstances. [A person who was a bystander in 1933 may become a rescuer in later years.]

Include a discussion on pre-war Jewish culture and life. By exposing students to some of the cultural contributions and achievements of 2000 years of European Jewish life, you help them to balance their perception of Jews as victims and to better appreciate the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust.

10. Translate statistics into people.

Show that individual people are behind the statistics and emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience.

11. Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content.

Graphic materials should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson.

12. Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust.

Often too great an emphasis is placed on the victims of Nazi aggression rather than on the victimizers who forced people to make impossible choices or simply left them with no choice to make.

13. Select appropriate learning activities.

Avoid simulation activities and activities that attempt to re-create situations. Such activities oversimplify complex events and can leave students with a skewed view of history. Even worse, they are left with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they now know what it was like during the Holocaust.

14. Reinforce the objectives of your lesson plan.

A strong closing should emphasize synthesis by encouraging students to connect this history to other world events and to the world they live in today. Students should be encouraged to reflect on what they have learned and to consider what this study means to them personally and as citizens of a democracy.