

The Power of Story



Essential Questions

- What kind of an impact can the stories of others have on us?
- How can our own stories be used to build kindness and make connections with others?
- How did acts of kindness during the Holocaust create lasting positive impacts?

Overview

In this activity, students will examine the act of sharing stories and consider its power to create connections between people, broaden perspectives, foster empathy, and spread kindness. By reflecting on the impact others' stories have had on their own lives, students will begin to develop an understanding of the power of personal storytelling.

Target Audience

Grades 6–12

Activity Duration

Two 60-minute sessions

Enduring Understandings

- Stories are an essential component of human connection.
- Listening to others share their stories and sharing our stories with others can build kindness, empathy, and help us envision a better world.
- Small acts like telling our stories can have a ripple effect that makes a lasting positive impact on others.

Historical Background for Educators

In 1932, Adolf Hitler, leader of the nationalistic, antisemitic, and racist National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) was elected to the German Reichstag (Parliament). The Nazis soon established a single party dictatorship referred to as the Third Reich. From 1933 until 1939, the Nazi government enacted hundreds of increasingly restrictive and discriminatory laws and decrees that banned Jews from all aspects of German public life.

Materials

- Index cards
- *Journal Note Taker* handout
- *Testimony Response Sheet* handout
- *Bio-Poem Template* handout
- Sticky notes (5 Per Student)

During World War II, the Nazis systematically targeted Jews in Nazi-occupied territories. Jews were forced to wear identifying symbols, relocate to heavily crowded ghettos, and participate in forced labor. Millions of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. The Nazis also targeted racial, political, or ideological groups deemed “inferior” or “undesirable”—Roma (Gypsies), LGBTQ+, Slavic peoples, the mentally and physically disabled, Socialists, Communists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Within several years, mass murder became the official Nazi policy (officially organized at the 1942 Wannsee Conference). By then, the Nazis had already deployed *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) to massacre Jewish communities in Poland and the Soviet Union. The Nazis also used poisonous gas, in vans and later in gas chambers at six death camps (Chelmno, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka). Even when their defeat was imminent, the Nazi leadership committed resources to the destruction of Europe’s Jewish population. Prisoners were forced to evacuate in what are now known as Death Marches.

During this time, very few people had the courage to help Jews escape, and those who were willing to act were often motivated by their own opposition to Nazi antisemitism and racism. Individuals and groups who chose to help those targeted by the Nazis did so at great risk, as in most cases providing shelter to Jews or others the Nazis targeted was punishable by death. Across Europe, resistance to Nazi antisemitism and racism took many forms, including aid, rescue, and spiritual resistance by those who made conscious, courageous choices to help those in need.

When the Allied troops (led by the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union) defeated the Nazis, they encountered evidence of genocide: documentation, witnesses, mass graves, and concentration and death camps. Europe was in disarray; millions were displaced, and entire cities were destroyed. Even still, many Jews continued to face antisemitism and violence and most Jews decided to emigrate.

SOURCES

- <https://vhap.usc.edu/vhap.iwitness.appdata/historicalcontext/en/Holocaust.pdf>
- <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/teaching-about-antisemitism/educational-modules-based-on-audio-podcasts/rescue-and-resistance>

Procedure

ASK

- Introduce the activity by telling students that today they will consider the question, “*How can others’ stories impact us?*”
- Distribute an index card to each student. Prompt students to think about a story another person has shared with them about their life or experiences that has stuck with them. Ask students to record their reflections on their index card.
- Encourage students to consider the following questions to promote deeper thinking:
 - How did the story make you feel?
 - Did hearing the story cause you to change your mind or think differently about anything?
 - Why do you think that story has stuck with you over time? Did it change you?
 - How can sharing our own stories and hearing the stories of others help people connect with each other and show kindness?
- Next, allow volunteers to share their reflections with the class. As they share, emphasize commonalities between responses and lines of thinking that involve the themes of connection, kindness, and empathy. The teacher may prompt students to think about the potential difficulties involved with sharing stories, how it might have felt for the people who shared them, and why it is important that they did.
- To conclude, ask the class to revisit the opening question: “*How can others’ stories impact us?*”
- Emphasize the idea that sharing our stories is a powerful act; in doing so, we can build kindness and empathy, forge stronger connections with others, and even create a ripple effect of kindness that leaves a lasting impact on others. Tell students they will build upon this understanding as they investigate several memorable acts of kindness experienced during the Holocaust and reflect on the impact of those stories, as well as their own.

ANALYZE

- Inform students that they will now analyze the power of story by examining several acts of kindness that occurred during the Holocaust through testimonies using the *Journal Note Taker*.
 - The *Journal Note Taker* allows students to process what they hear and respond with their own reflections.
- As students prepare to view the testimonies, help them understand the importance of:
 - Paying attention to the speaker’s tone of voice and body language.
 - Considering the context and perspectives of the witness.
 - Focusing on the personal story of the testimony as opposed to facts and figures.

When viewing testimony, help strengthen the experience by:

- Providing students with the biographies of the survivors and witnesses providing testimony.
- Pausing clips to allow time for students to reflect, record thoughts, questions, and ideas.
- Engaging students in investigations using active inquiry.
- Promoting interdisciplinary thinking and learning through common, recurring themes.
- Creating connections to their own lives and personal experiences.

- Testimonies for Analysis:
 - [Vera Gissing](#) (6:33) recalls her friendship with a non-Jewish girl named Marta before and after the war.
 - [Norbert Friedman](#) (6:54) describes how one man's act of self-sacrifice and kindness returned everyone being deported with him to dignity.
 - [Itka Zygmuntowicz](#) (5:17) remembers the kindness of Bina, a girl she met in Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- After completing the testimony analysis, invite students to discuss their journal responses and share key takeaways from the testimonies and their reflection question.

APPLY

- Inform students they will now apply their understanding of the power of stories they developed in the opening activity as they reflect more deeply on one of the testimonies they just watched.
- Pass out the *Testimony Response Sheet* to each student. Divide students into small groups of three to four. Assign each group to focus on one of the stories of kindness they just heard in the testimonies.
- Instruct the groups to watch their assigned testimony once more. As they watch, students will collaborate to respond to the guiding questions on their handout.
- During this time, circulate to each group to monitor conversations. As they collaborate to complete their handout, student groups are prompted to:
 - Contextualize the act of kindness by considering the circumstances surrounding it.
 - Recognize the positive impact of the act, both in the moment and over time.
 - Evaluate the role of identity in shaping the sharing of story.
 - Identify how sharing the story can spread kindness and build empathy in others.

- After students have completed their *Testimony Response Sheet*, invite groups to share their responses with the whole class. As they share, highlight the power of stories to build connections with others, allow us to relate to one another more deeply, and create lasting positive impacts that can ripple outward.

ACT

- Students will get the opportunity to act on what they have learned about the power of story by sharing aspects of their own experiences through the creation of bio-poems.
- Introduce this activity by explaining that stories can be shared in many different forms, and poetry can be an impactful way to elicit compassion and build connections between people.
- Distribute the *Bio-Poem Template* to each student. Review the template as a class. Emphasize to students that there is no right or wrong way to write a bio-poem if it shares features of each person's identity and experiences.
- Before drafting their poems, allow students time to complete the "Brainstorming" section of the *Bio-Poem Template*. Here, students are prompted to think about which aspects of their own stories they would like to feature through their poem and reflect on how they can make a positive impact on others by sharing about their own experiences and identities.
 - **Educator Note:** *at this point, it may be helpful to ensure students know they should not feel pressured to share anything about themselves they do not wish to, and clarify that students have the option to keep their poems anonymous or private.*
- Invite students to spend 20 minutes drafting their bio-poems. Circulate around the room as students work, providing support as needed. Affirm to students that whatever they choose to share is valid and valuable. They may choose to use the template provided, but are not required to do so.

ACTIVITY EXTENSION

- After drafting their bio-poems, students may be invited to participate in a "silent poetry slam" activity.
 - **Educator Note:** *prior to this exercise, it may be helpful to establish or revisit classroom norms to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment.*
- Students may respond to the poems they read on sticky notes. The teacher may display sentence frames for students to refer to for support as they respond. Sentence frames could include:
 - "I can relate to _____ because..."
 - "This makes me think about..."
 - "A question I have is..."
 - "A line that stands out to me is _____ because..."

- Conclude by inviting students to discuss the importance of telling our stories, the power of listening to the stories of others, and the kindness, empathy, and understanding that can ripple outward as a result.

CONNECTIONS

| Connection to Students' Lives | Connection to Contemporary Events | Connection to the Future |
|--|--|--|
| Students will recognize the importance of sharing their own stories and listening to the stories of others to form meaningful connections and spread kindness. | Students will reflect on how stories of kindness from the past might relate to opportunities to show kindness in the face of identity-based hate in the present. | Students can apply their understanding of the importance of sharing our stories to speak out about their own experiences, and better value listening to the testimony of others in the future. |

Clips of Testimony

Vera Gissing, a Jewish survivor, recalls her friendship with a non-Jewish girl named Marta before and after the war.

Norbert Friedman, a Jewish survivor, describes how one man's act of self-sacrifice returned everyone being deported with him to dignity.

Itka Zygmuntowicz, a Jewish survivor, remembers the kindness of Bina, a girl she met in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

National Standards and Frameworks

C3

- D2.His.4.6–8: Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- D3.1.6–8: Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- D4.2.6–8: Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.
- D4.8.6–8: Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms and schools, and in out-of-school civic contexts.

Common Core ELA

- SL.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- SL.8.2: Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.
- SL.8.4: Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

Survivor and Witness Biographies

Vera Gissing was born on July 4th, 1928, in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic) to Karel and Irma Diamantova. Her father owned a wine and spirits business, and her mother managed the business office. She had an older sister named Eva. In March of 1939, Vera's town of Celakovice was occupied by Nazi forces, and soon afterward her family was forced to house a German officer, who treated them brutally. Without the family's knowledge, Irma registered Vera and Eva for the *Kindertransport*, the organized movement of refugee children, most of them Jewish, from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia to Great Britain. The sisters escaped to Great Britain in June of 1939 on one of the last *Kindertransport* trains to make it out of Czechoslovakia before the outbreak of World War II. After arriving, the sisters became separated. Vera lived with a foster family in Liverpool, and eventually began attending a school for Czech refugee children. After the war, Vera learned that her mother and father were killed in concentration camps. She later returned to Prague to study, then moved back to England where she worked as a writer and literary translator. Vera was interviewed in 1996 in Wargrave, England, United Kingdom.

Norbert Friedman was born on December 20th, 1922, in Kraków, Poland. He grew up in a working-class household with his father, Josef, his mother, Gusta, and a younger brother. Josef worked as a kosher butcher, and Norbert and his brother grew up attending Jewish school. In 1935, Poland passed anti-Jewish laws that included limitations on ritual slaughter, forcing Josef to conduct his business on the black market. Norbert's life changed dramatically in 1939, when the Nazi forces invaded Poland. That year, his father's illicit butchering business was discovered, and the family went into hiding in the town of Wielopole. In 1941, the Nazis declared that women, children, and the elderly would not be forced into "resettlement" if the men in their families served in concentration camps. As a result, Norbert and his father were sent to Mielec labor camp, where they were forced to work in an airplane factory. He later learned his mother and younger brother were killed a few months after his departure. For the next four years, Norbert was moved to and imprisoned in eleven different labor camps. After the war, he studied in Germany before immigrating to the United States. Norbert was interviewed in 1995 in Hempstead, New York.

Itka Zygmuntowicz was born on April 15th, 1926, in Ciechanow, Poland, to Eljo and Simo Frajman. The eldest of three siblings, she had a brother, Srulek, and a sister named Zysl. Itka grew up in a poor but loving, tight-knit orthodox family. Following Germany's invasion of Poland, Itka and her family were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto, and in 1942, they were deported by cattle car to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After arriving, Itka was separated from her family, whom she never saw again. At the camp, Itka was tasked with sorting clothing, which she damaged whenever she could as an act of resistance. In 1945, Itka was forced on a death march toward Ravensbrück concentration camp. She was later transferred to Malchow concentration camp, where she was liberated by the Swedish Red Cross. After the war, Itka immigrated to the United States. Itka was interviewed in 1996 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The [USC Shoah Foundation](#), [Lionsgate](#) and [Kingdom Story Company](#) partner to educate young people about the courage to choose kindness in connection with the film *White Bird*.

Journal Note Taker



STUDENT HANDOUT

Directions: As you listen to each testimony, paraphrase ideas or stories that stand out to you in the column on the left in the chart below. Then respond to those ideas with your own reflections, thoughts, or questions in the right-hand column.

| Testimony Speaker | Something I heard that stuck with me | My response, questions, or thoughts |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Vera Gissing | | |
| Norbert Friedman | | |
| Itka Zygmuntowicz | | |

Reflection Question: What were the common themes of the testimonies?

Testimony Response Sheet



STUDENT HANDOUT

Directions: Together with your small group, watch the testimony you have been assigned once more. As you watch, pause to discuss the questions below and record your responses.

| Speaker Guiding Questions | |
|---|--|
| <p>Who is the speaker? <i>Provide their name, date of birth, experience, group, and any other relevant info.</i></p> | <p>What perspective does the speaker bring to this situation being described?</p> |
| <p>What emotions is the speaker conveying? <i>Consider tone, body language, pauses, word choice, inflection, etc.</i></p> | <p>How does the speaker's emotions affect your response to the message he or she is sharing?</p> |
| Story Guiding Questions | |
| <p>Describe the act of kindness recounted during this testimony. <i>What happened? Where? When? Whom did it involve?</i></p> | <p>Who acted with kindness and who benefited from it?</p> |
| <p>What difficulties or obstacles were involved in carrying out this act? Why might the person who acted with kindness have chosen to act despite those challenges?</p> | <p>What is the significance of this story to you?</p> |
| Impact Guiding Questions | |
| <p>How did hearing this story affect you? How might it impact others?</p> | <p>What is the importance of sharing our stories?</p> |
| <p>Why might the speaker have chosen to share this story with others? What might he or she hope to accomplish by sharing it?</p> | <p>How can acts of kindness like this one inspire lasting positive impacts?</p> |

Bio-Poem Template



STUDENT HANDOUT

Part I: Brainstorming

Directions: You will soon create a bio-poem to share important features of your identity and experiences. Before doing so, answer the questions below to brainstorm the story you would like to share.

| | | | |
|---|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| If you were asked to share a story about a moment of kindness in your life, what would you choose to talk about? Why? | | | |
| Why is it important to share your story? Why is it important to listen to the stories of others? | | | |
| Adjectives that describe you: | Home (location): | Things you need: | Dreams and hopes: |
| Relationships in your life (ex: sister, son, niece, friend, etc.): | Things you love: | Accomplishments: | Fears: |

Part II: Drafting

Directions: Now, you will draft a bio-poem to share your own story. Your bio-poem can take any form, but an optional template is provided below. If you choose to use this template, fill in the blanks with information you think is important to share about yourself. Keep in mind, you may change any of the lines or add additional lines to make your bio-poem your own.

_____ (first name)

_____ (adjective), _____ (adjective), _____ (adjective), _____ (adjective)

Son/Daughter of _____ (parent/guardian name(s))

Who loves _____, _____, and _____ (3 things you love)

Who needs _____, _____, and _____ (3 things you need)

Who fears _____, _____, and _____ (3 things you fear)

Who _____ (important accomplishment or experience)

Who dreams of _____ and _____

Who is from _____ (place)

_____ (last name)