

LESSON: Holocaust Literature Guide

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 7–12

SUBJECT: English/Language Arts

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 60 minutes to introduce *Before the Reading*. Student work continues while they read the text.

This instructional framework provides a structure adaptable to different resources, lesson plans, teaching styles, content areas, and student needs.

RATIONALE

Students frequently learn about the Holocaust in English classrooms, presenting a unique opportunity for English educators to balance best practices in English instruction with historical accuracy and context, which is critical for understanding the Holocaust.

This guide to Holocaust literature frames texts in historical context, encouraging students to understand how and why the Holocaust happened.

NOTE: This guide works with all types of Holocaust literature and pairs with any book. **Completing the [Timeline Activity](#) is a necessary part of this lesson.**

OVERVIEW

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this activity, students understand:

- Why historical context is crucial for understanding Holocaust literature
- Historical context for the selected text
- How historical understanding changes over time
- How genre impacts the teaching of Holocaust history
- The unique perspective presented in the text

TEACHER PREPARATION

- This guide is designed to complement the reading of Holocaust literature and can work alongside existing English lesson plans for the book you're teaching.
- The Museum has a [bibliography](#) of recommended books and a [rubric](#) you can use to evaluate the books you choose for your classroom. Taking time to review any work of Holocaust literature you select for your students is critical. If books are selected for you, the rubric is still essential for you to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the book. **The completed rubric is necessary for this activity.**
- Before or during the reading of the book, students should complete the [Timeline Activity](#). This activity is flexible and [available online](#). You can integrate the activity in the best way for your class.
- Preview the film [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#) (38:00) and decide if the film will enhance student understanding while reading the book.
 - Suggested Schedule:
 - Before reading: Chapter 1: Aftermath of World War I and the Rise of Nazism
 - During reading: Chapter 2: Building a National Community and Chapter 3: From Citizens to Outcasts
 - After reading: Chapter 4: World War II and the Holocaust

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- Preview the [student interactive](#) and determine how to integrate it into your study of the book.
 - Based on your students' skills and needs, you may choose to assign this to students to complete individually or in groups, or you may elect to complete it as a whole-class activity before, during, and after reading.
- Choose a map that corresponds to the narrative in the book to share with students. You can use [this option](#) if your text is based in Europe.

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 and accommodations 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 or provide definitions for new vocabulary before reading.
 - Students can define *historical* and *context* separately.
- Provide the audio version of the book for readers as needed.
- *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.
- Reference the [Glossary](#) in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* for definitional support.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.
- Students can research and annotate their maps, or it can be one class map as a group project.
- Teachers can add additional instruction on genres of literature, bias inherent to point of view, and how to read a copyright page.

PART ONE: BEFORE READING

1. Share with students that they will be exploring the historical context and assessing historical accuracy of the work of Holocaust literature they are going to read.
2. Students examine the physical or digital copies of the book and take notes on the [student interactive](#) (which they will use while reading the book):
 - Look at the cover: note anything they may already know about the book and clues the cover provides about the story.
 - Can they determine:
 - i. Genre of book
 - ii. Date of *original* publication
 - iii. Name of author(s)

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1. If more than one author is credited, can you determine their roles?

Discuss

- What is the genre of the book? How does the genre impact the narrative?
 - **NOTE:** It's important to emphasize the distinctions between genres: how do memoirs, diaries, fiction, non-fiction, and testimony differ when dealing with historical content?
 - Ex: Anne Frank's diary and *Night*. Both books are nonfiction and written in the first person by people describing their own life experiences. Anne Frank wrote a diary, and Elie Wiesel wrote *Night* as a memoir.
 - A diary is written over time, conveying specific things that happened to a person during that time. The diarist does not know what will happen to them next. A memoir is a person's memories looking back at a specific time in their life. Most memoirs include scenes instead of a day-to-day description of events.
 - Why might works of fiction and first-person accounts contain historical inaccuracies? Could the causes of these inaccuracies be different? What might explain discrepancies in a first-person account? (ex: traumatic events impact memory, author doesn't know what is happening elsewhere) What about works of fiction? (ex. the author not doing research)
- What is the *original* publication date? How might that impact the narrative? (ex. More information is known about the Holocaust now, the writer might be responding to things happening in the world as he/she was writing)
- Who wrote the book?

3. Next, ask students to define **historical context**. Gather student responses, and then have students look at the definition on the [student interactive](#).

Note: Students can read the definition before class, read silently, read in pairs and complete a jigsaw activity, or you can read them aloud while they follow along and flag words that need further clarification.

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In summary:

- **HISTORICAL CONTEXT** means details about the time and place in which a story occurs. Those details enable us to interpret and analyze events of the past rather than evaluating them only by today's circumstances.
- Contextualization is like a puzzle. Each piece you uncover and place correctly about the event gives you a fuller understanding of the overall picture.

4. Students brainstorm a list of items and technologies that are common today but were unavailable during the time period of the book. **Examples:** mobile phones, internet access, social media.

5. Tell students they will be gathering concrete historical references they see in the text while reading the book.

NOTE: The teacher can share one example from the book to help students understand.

6. Review the [student interactive](#), answering questions and providing the scaffolding you need to integrate it into reading the text.

7. Begin the first step: introduce students to the map and instruct them to note locations mentioned throughout the book as they are reading. Share with students [this map](#) OR share another map that represents the geographic location of the book.

PART TWO: DURING READING

While students read the book they use the [student interactive](#) to:

- Determine the point of view the story is based on. How does knowing more about what's going on in the world outside of the story broaden your understanding of the author's point of view?
 - **Options for student work:** Research the author or do additional work exploring the genre of the book
- Look for geography references (cities, countries) and add them to your map
 - **Options for student work:** Choose one city or town mentioned in the book and research it on ushmm.org.
 - **Options for student work:** If the book takes place between 1942-1945, have students view [this animated map](#) and compare the geographical setting in the book to the location of American troops at the time.
- Note references to historical events or laws and decrees that match those on the [timeline](#), and note references to any historical events and laws and decrees NOT on the timeline.
 - **Options for student work:** create timeline cards for additional historical events and/or laws and add them to the existing timeline
- Note illustrations, maps, and photos in the book.
 - **Options for student work:** create their own illustrations or find relevant photos from the [USHMM collections](#).

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PART THREE: AFTER READING

Students use the historical information they noted on the student interactive and cross-check the book's information using the [Timeline Activity](#), [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#), and in the USHMM's [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#). This activity can be completed independently, in groups, or as a whole class based on what meets the needs of your class. Note: Pay attention to student sources of information, and direct them to credible historical sources, like the Encyclopedia.

Students also consider the perspective presented in the text and think critically about how historical information and understanding change over time.

DISCUSS (from student interactive)

1. Name your historical event(s). Did you find any information about the event that was different from what you read about in the book?
 - a. What could be the reason for differences?
 - b. How might the genre account for these discrepancies?
2. Note the publication date of the book. How might the date of publication impact historical accuracy?
3. What responsibilities does an author have to represent history accurately?
4. Whose point of view is presented in the book?
 - a. What is unique about this perspective?
 - b. How does the narrator's perspective affect the story?
 - c. Who and what does it (the narrator's perspective) include? Who and what does it exclude?
 - d. How does the narrator help you understand the Holocaust?
5. How does geography (places where the story takes place) impact the story told in the book?
 - a. How did the places mentioned change throughout the war, and how did that impact the story?
6. How do illustration, art, and photographs in the book impact the story told in the book?
7. How did the historical context provided by the timeline, *The Path to Nazi Genocide*, and information from the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* broaden your understanding of this book?

CONCLUSION

Return to the definitions of historical context and discuss examples students found in the text that corresponds to the prompts below:

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Discuss

- No work of literature can be fully appreciated or understood without historical context. **Name examples from the text where knowing the historical context is particularly important.**
- Without understanding historical context, a person might be tempted to interpret past events based on what the world is like today. Return to the list of items common today that are unavailable during the time setting of the book. How does knowing these things didn't exist during the era of the book impact how you understand events?

ASSESSMENT

Holocaust survivor and author Ruth Klüger wrote, “The [Holocaust] involved millions of people, it was a unique experience for each of them.” What unique experience did your book tell? Did it help you understand how and why the Holocaust happened? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Lesson Plan: [Exploring Night as Literature](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Exploring Anne Frank's Diary](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Exploring Holocaust-Era Diaries](#)