

LESSON: Exploring Holocaust-era Diaries

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 7–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: The introductory portion of this lesson is estimated to take 40 minutes. The length of time needed for the activities varies, but an estimate of 30-40 minutes per activity is reasonable. Activities can be completed in class or as assessments.

This is a *thematic* lesson that builds upon fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic.

RATIONALE

Students will examine Holocaust-era diaries as both historical and as deliberately-created literary texts, and will understand how the Holocaust affected the lives of the individuals.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What types of choices do diary writers make as they are writing? What can we learn about individuals' experiences from reading diaries?
- How do diaries give us unique information about how the events of the Holocaust and World War II affected the lives of individuals?
- How can the information included in a diary by a person recording for their own private use be different than the information that would be included for an outside audience?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand the Holocaust as an event that affected individuals differently
- Identify that diary-writers made choices when writing about their own experiences
- Enhance their skills in reading comprehension and identifying context clues
- Consider how punctuation and the use of literary devices impact the tone and mood of a piece of writing

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Read [Holocaust-era Diaries](#)
- Watch [Holocaust Diaries](#) online lecture with Dr. Alexandra Garbarini (20 minutes)

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MATERIALS

- Copies of all or part of the [Holocaust-era Diaries](#) for each student (either printed or as a digital resource)
- [Reading Diaries worksheet\(s\)](#), however many you need for the activities you choose
- [Map of Europe, 1939](#) (useful for reference and for completing activity #6)

MODIFICATIONS

This lesson is intentionally flexible for both in person or remote instruction. Teachers can also feel free to create their own lesson, utilizing the USHMM Diaries packet as a resource. Teachers may also choose to use any of these activities as introductions to reading a Holocaust-era diary, autobiography, or memoir.

It is assumed that students will already have a basic knowledge about the Holocaust. If not, it is recommended that teachers utilize the two-day *Introduction to the Holocaust* lesson prior to this lesson. If that is not possible, teachers should review the [Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#) and have students read the article [Introduction to the Holocaust](#) in class or as homework. Take the time to answer any questions or provide definitions for any terms students find confusing, using the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) as a reference.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

- Preview and post key definitions
- Class activities can be modified for group or individual instruction
- Class activities can be modified for online instruction
- Although the *USHMM Diaries* packet includes a timeline, which has been shortened from the USHMM foundational [Timeline](#) lesson, teachers may opt to print and post the relevant timeline cards as reminders for students.
- Teachers can project the diary entries and discuss them as a class, or have students read along with written copies

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. As homework prior to beginning this lesson or as a free-writing exercise, ask students to write for two minutes about their day today, and for two minutes about what they remember about the first day of school last year. Teachers should not give directions on what to include, but inform students that this writing will be shared with another student.
2. In class, have the students exchange their text with another student. Ask students to quietly read the first paragraph they were given (about today).

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ASK THE STUDENTS

- If you didn't know the person who wrote this, what would these paragraphs tell you about them?
- Would these paragraphs tell you that this person went to school?
- What would it tell you about their life?
- Does the writing express likes or dislikes?
- What age would you think this person was?
- What is something you now wonder about the author?

3. Ask them to quietly read the second paragraph, about the first day of school.

ASK THE STUDENTS

- What is the difference between a paragraph written today, and one looking back at the first day of school?
- Did one have more detail than the other?
- Did the writer foreshadow anything--a relationship, an athletic victory, a favorite class--that they might not have thought much about if they were writing that day?

4. Ask students to reflect on both paragraphs, and think about the fact that they knew someone else would read their entries.

- If you knew you were writing your entry just for yourself, how would that have changed what you shared?
- Did knowing that you were going to share your writing affect how you wrote your entry (punctuation, spelling, writing style)? If yes, did conforming to proper punctuation and spelling help or hurt your ability to put thoughts and experiences into words?

5. Define:

A **diary** is personal writing describing events and personal reflections, written around the time the writer is experiencing these events.

A **memoir** is personal writing looking back on a specific period in the writer's life.

An **autobiography** is personal writing looking back on the writer's entire life.

(You may wish to project and fill in a Frayer model to assist students with these definitions.)

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Brainstorm as a class: Can students think of examples they have heard of or read of each kind of writing?

How might the same person describe the same events differently if they were writing about it in a diary, a memoir, or an autobiography? (*answers include: in a diary, the writer doesn't know what will happen next; in a memoir or autobiography, they can identify important things that might not have seemed important at the time, they know how the things turn out*)

How else do people creatively capture and record their daily lives today?

6. Explain to students that they will be reading portions of diaries written during the Holocaust. Using the first exercise in the [Holocaust-era Diaries](#) packet, have the students read Hermann Pressman's diary entries silently.

Have students think/pair/share:

- What can we learn about the diary's author from these entries? List five things about his life.
- How would you describe the author's writing style? (informal, polished, stream of consciousness)
- Using the timeline, what events does he describe? How does he feel about these events?

What questions would students have for the diarist, if he were here to answer them?

(*Learner modification: You may wish to have students fill out the [Reading Diaries worksheet](#), either on their own, or project the worksheet and answer the questions together as a class.*)

PART TWO: OPTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES

Teachers can choose any or all of the activities below, or use them as in-class or at-home assessments. These activities can all be modified for remote learning.

1. Assign students to read entries written by specific diarists (either by splitting the class up and assigning a variety of diarists, or choosing a diarist that best fits your goals.) Have the students fill out the [Reading Diaries worksheet](#) as they read.

Pair and share:

If students have read the same diarists, have them compare answers and evidence. Do they agree? Did they find the same evidence for their answers?

If students read different diarists, have them describe the diaries to each other and compare worksheets. In what ways are the diaries similar? In what ways are they different?

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Encourage students to also compare and contrast the diarists' writing style. Does the diarist write formally or informally? Were these diaries written for personal use, or were they meant for a wider audience or specific group of people? How might that change what was written?

Alternatively, have students read diary entries written by two different diarists and compare/contrast them using the questions above.

- Using the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#), have students research how the Holocaust happened in the countries where “their” diarist was living. (see the teacher key for suggestions on which encyclopedia articles to suggest for each diary)

Ask students: How did the diarist’s location--what country they were in, whether they were in an urban or rural setting--affect their experiences during the Holocaust?

Using the Holocaust Encyclopedia, have students research an event described by “their” diarist. (see the teacher key for suggestions on which encyclopedia articles to suggest for each diary)

Answer:

- Does your diarist describe experiences or details in their entries that are also included in the encyclopedia article?
- What details does the diarist describe that aren't in the encyclopedia article?
- What is in the encyclopedia article that the diarist might not have known when they were writing?
- Based on the timeline, what sort of events might have been left out of the diary intentionally? Why would someone keeping a diary choose not to include some information?

Teachers may opt to have students create presentations to share the results of their research with the rest of the class.

- Ask the students to find one of the diaries on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s [Collections search page](#) (<http://www.collections.ushmm.org>). Students can type the diarist’s name into the search field to find the diary.

Teachers should ask students to print, screenshot, or otherwise record an image of the diary. What language was the diary written in? Is the diary the only thing in the collection? If not, what else is there?

Using images from the collection (which can be downloaded on the bottom left of the image screen), and by using the Collections Search page to locate additional images of historical events or places described in the diary, have the students, working alone or in groups, make a small exhibition or display about “their” diarist.

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Post these displays online, or in the classroom, and do a gallery walk, having students present about their diarist.

4. Ask students to create a collage, image, or piece of art including a line or entry from the diary that stood out to them. Use the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website or collection to find images from that person's country or of the events they describe to include in or inspire the artwork. Gather the works related to each person together, do a gallery walk and end with a moment of silence to honor the lives and words of the diarists.
5. Create a "found poem." (This activity has been adapted from the [Densho project](#).) Have students select a phrase that struck them as meaningful or important, selecting either from different diarists or from entries written by a single diarist. Ask them to write the phrase on a strip of paper (for in-person classrooms) or on a shared platform (for remote learning).

Each student will have two turns. In the first round, each student places their phrase somewhere into the poem. In the second round, they can move a phrase within the poem. After the turns are complete, make sure everyone can see the finished poem and ask for a volunteer to read the poem aloud to the class.

Discuss:

- What themes are evident in the poem?
 - What is included in the diary entries that is missing from the poem?
 - What does the poem reveal about the *tone* of the diary/diaries (the author's attitude towards their work)?
 - What *mood* (the emotions you feel as you read) does the poem evoke?
6. Distribute copies of the [Map of Europe 1939](#). Ask students to read the introductory paragraphs for each diarist, and, using an online resource (like Google maps), add dots and descriptive information (name, date) for each diary. You may also opt to have them trace a person's movement, if that is included in the diary. ([Answer Key](#)) How does this exercise help us understand the Holocaust? (*sample answers: that it took place all over Europe, that it affected people differently at different times and places*)
 7. Using the US Holocaust Memorial Museum collections site, find [a Holocaust-era diary](#) that is not included in the USHMM diaries packet. (Students should be able to search "diary" and find nearly 200 diaries.) Who did this diary belong to? Explore the catalog entry and look at the diary.
 - Describe the person who wrote this diary (their name, age, location)
 - What does the diary look like?

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- What language was the diary written in?
 - What events are included in the diary?
 - Is there anything else in the person's collection (photographs, documents, etc.) or is it only a diary?
 - Is there information in the record about how the Museum received the diary?
 - Why is it important for diaries from the Holocaust to be preserved?
8. Individually or as a class, have students examine three sentences from a chosen diary. (Consider using Padlet to discuss the diaries as a class.)
- What do these sentences tell you about the tone of the diary?
 - What mood do they evoke in the reader?
 - Can you identify any literary devices used by the author?
 - How did the author employ punctuation, and how do those choices impact the reader?
 - What is required to make a piece of writing "perfect?" (possible answers: *editing, time, education, privilege*)
 - Does a written work have to be technically correct to convey a clear message to readers? Should it be valued less?
9. Ask students to read both the diaries of Charles Phillip Sharp (a British soldier who liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp) and Waław Głouszek (a non-Jewish Polish prisoner liberated from Bergen-Belsen).
- How do the two men describe the same experience from different perspectives?
 - What emotions do they convey?
 - What challenges do they face?
 - How do their word and punctuation choices contribute to the tone of the writing?
10. Several of the diarists included in the *Holocaust-era Diaries* packet also recorded oral testimonies. Compare their memories, as recorded in the oral histories, with their diary entries. Why might their description of their experiences in their diaries differ from the way they describe their experiences in their testimonies?

[Susi Hilsenrath \(Susan Warsinger\)](#)

[Selma Wijnberg Engel](#)

[Charles Phillip Sharp](#)

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EXTENSIONS

1. These activities could be used as an introduction or in conjunction with the USHMM lesson [Exploring Anne Frank's diary](#).
2. After students read the diarists who write about immigration (Lucien Dreyfus, Hans Vogel, Susi Hilsenrath), encourage them to look at [What did Refugees Need to Obtain a US Visa in the 1930s](#). What documents or steps do they reference in the diaries? Consider incorporating activities from [Challenges of Escape, 1938-1941](#) or [The Refugee Crisis](#).