

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

Teaching Holocaust history demands a high level of sensitivity and keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The following guidelines, while reflecting approaches appropriate for effective teaching in general, are particularly relevant to Holocaust education. For more detailed explanations and examples, please visit <http://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>

1. DEFINE THE TERM “HOLOCAUST”

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups for racial reasons: Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals.

2. DO NOT TEACH OR IMPLY THAT THE HOLOCAUST WAS INEVITABLE

Just because a historical event took place, and it is documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and can help your students to become better critical thinkers.

3. AVOID SIMPLE ANSWERS TO COMPLEX QUESTIONS

The history of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual decisions are made. Seek to convey the nuances of this history. Think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and that often made decision making difficult and uncertain.

4. STRIVE FOR PRECISION OF LANGUAGE

Any study of the Holocaust touches upon nuances of human behavior. Because of the complexity of the history, there is a temptation to generalize and, thus, to distort the facts (e.g., “all concentration camps were killing centers” or “all Germans were collaborators”). Avoid this by helping your students clarify the information presented and encourage them to distinguish, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Remind your students that, although members of a group may share common experiences and beliefs, generalizations about them without benefit of modifying or qualifying terms (e.g., “sometimes,” “usually,” “in many cases but not all”) tend to stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Thus, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis, nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

5. STRIVE FOR BALANCE IN ESTABLISHING WHOSE PERSPECTIVE INFORMS YOUR STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST

Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. However, it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and for students to thus place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves. One helpful technique for engaging students in a discussion of the Holocaust is to think of the participants as belonging to one of four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, or bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making.

Students should investigate sources of information. Students should be encouraged to consider why a text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was.

6. AVOID COMPARISONS OF PAIN

A study of the Holocaust should always highlight the different policies carried out by the Nazi regime toward various groups of people; however, these distinctions should not be presented as a basis for comparison of the level of suffering between those groups during the Holocaust. 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.

7. DO NOT ROMANTICIZE HISTORY

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide important, and compelling role models for students. But given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic actions in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history.

8. CONTEXTUALIZE THE HISTORY

Events of the Holocaust, and particularly how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. The Holocaust must be studied in the context of European and American history as a whole to give students a perspective on what may have contributed to it.

9. TRANSLATE STATISTICS INTO PEOPLE

In any study of the Holocaust, the number of victims challenges comprehension. Show that individual people—grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize the diversity of personal experiences within the larger historical narrative. Diaries and memoirs add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics.

10. MAKE RESPONSIBLE METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the lesson objective. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful to the victims themselves.