

Guidelines for Teaching about Genocide

Teaching genocide 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 genocide education.

1. Define the term “genocide”

The term “genocide” was introduced in 1944 by Polish Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin.

Derived from the Greek word *genos* (race or tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing), Lemkin believed that genocide was an international crime and should be prosecuted accordingly. Therefore, following the Nuremberg trials, in which Nazi leaders were indicted and tried on crimes against humanity, among other charges, “Lemkin devoted himself to persuade the newly formed United Nations to ‘enter into an international treaty which would formulate genocide as an international crime, providing for its prevention and punishment in time of peace and war.’”¹

On December 9, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Article II of the Convention states:

In this present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

This definition was and is intended for legal purposes and limits the groups that it protects. For example, despite Lemkin’s recommendation to include political groups, they are not. The Convention definition of genocide should not be used as the be-all, end-all definition. Rather, it should be used to propel a variety of discussions such as: why are certain groups protected and others not? should there be another definition that is not confined to legal parameters?

[Click here](#) for more information about Raphael Lemkin and the journey of the term “genocide.”

¹ Reading 7 Raphael Lemkin and the Genocide Convention <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-11/raphael-lemkin-and-genocide-convention>

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust”. <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, “Teaching the Holocaust”. https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf

2. Define the term “Holocaust” +

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum defines the Holocaust as “the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.” During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived “racial inferiority”: Roma, 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 gay men.

3. Explain why it is important to study genocide

To study genocide is to study human behavior. Therefore, genocide should not be solely taught as a historical event, but as a way for individuals to learn, understand, and reflect upon how humans are capable of and come to commit atrocities.

As noted by the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education: *We study genocide to study ourselves: to examine our responsibility in an interconnected world where injustice persists on a grand scale. We study genocide to examine our connections to each other.*

4. Do not teach or imply that genocides are inevitable +

Just because a historical event took place and has been documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it was fated to happen. Students and teachers often overlook this seemingly obvious concept. Genocides take place because individuals, groups, and nations make 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.

5. Avoid simple answers to complex questions +

Studying genocide raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual and group decisions are made. Be wary of simplification. Seek instead to convey the nuances of this history. Allow students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to a genocide that made choices difficult and uncertain.

6. Strive for precision of language +

Any study of genocide 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 Hutus were collaborators”). Avoid this by encouraging students to distinguish, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, armed and spiritual resistance, direct and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust”. <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, “Teaching the Holocaust”. https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf

Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, is often referred to as a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be thought of as willful disobedience, such as continuing to practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating fine art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply maintaining the will to live in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. 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. Essentially, no nationality or experience should be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description. For example, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis, nor are two Jews’ experiences in one ghetto, let alone a different ghetto, the same.

Be mindful and critical of the language you read and use as it may uphold perpetrator vocabulary. The terms exterminate or extermination implies killing bugs, insects, or something pestilent. In this manner, the Nazis used the word to dehumanize Jews and convey their unworthiness of life.

The questions you ask help to shape the narrative we understand. Questions such as “Why didn’t the Jews leave” place blame on the victims rather than the perpetrators. Rather, the question should be phrased as “What difficulties did Jews face if and when they tried to escape?” In this way, our view of history changes from assuming Jews did not attempt to escape, to knowing that Jews actively tried to leave but faced numerous obstacles.

7. Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study +

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 thus students place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves.

As with any topic, students should 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 any biases were 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. Because scholars often base their research on different bodies of information, varying interpretations of history can emerge. Consequently, all interpretations are subject to analytical evaluation. Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the Internet.

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust”. <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, “Teaching the Holocaust”. https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf

8. Avoid comparisons of pain +

A study of genocide should always highlight the different policies carried out by the perpetrators 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. One cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the perpetrators was any more or less than that experienced by victims of other genocides.

9. Do not romanticize history +

People who risked their lives to rescue victims provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. An overemphasis on heroic actions can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature, you run the risk of fostering cynicism. Accuracy of fact, together with a balanced perspective on the history, must be a priority.

10. Contextualize the history +

Genocidal events, and particularly how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. For example, the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it.

Similarly, genocide should be studied within its contemporaneous context so students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged particular actions or events. For example, when thinking about resistance, consider when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences of one's actions to self and family; the degree of control the perpetrators had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations toward different victim groups historically; and the availability and risk of potential hiding places.

Encourage your students not to categorize groups of people only on the basis of their experiences.

Contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims. For example, exposing students to the group's cultural contributions or achievements prior to or after the genocide helps them to balance their perception of the victim group and helps them to appreciate more fully the traumatic disruption caused by the genocide.

11. Translate statistics into people +

In any study of genocide, the sheer number of victims challenges easy 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. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives, and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics.

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust". <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, "Teaching the Holocaust". https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf

12. Make responsible methodological choices +

One of the primary concerns of educators teaching genocide is how to present horrific, historical images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. 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 as many did not give consent for their photos to be taken. Do not skip any of the suggested topics because the visual images are too graphic; instead, use other approaches to address the material.

In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely upon simulation exercises meant to help students "experience" unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during a genocide. Additionally, asking students "What would you do?" or placing them in the "victim's shoes" could trigger underlying or unknown trauma. It is best to draw upon numerous primary sources, provide survivor testimony, and refrain from simulation games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Furthermore, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and other gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of genocide curricula, trivialization of the history. If the effects of a particular activity, even when popular with you and your students, run counter to the rationale for studying the history, then that activity should not be used.

13. Do not attempt to explain away the perpetrators as "inhuman monsters"*

Genocide is a human event and experience with human causes. Therefore, it is necessary to "rehumanize" all the people in genocide — to see victims, rescuers, collaborators, bystanders, and perpetrators as ordinary human beings in extraordinary circumstances. This is not to normalize the perpetrators, but rather to help students recognize that the majority were not sadistic psychopaths and that "evil" is not a sufficient explanation for genocide.

The more difficult question is: how was it humanly possible that ordinary men and women, loving fathers and husbands, could participate willingly in the murder of innocent men, women, and children?

You must study the perpetrators' motivations in depth, and students should use primary documents, case studies, and individual biographies to weigh the relative importance of ideology, antisemitism, ambition, peer pressure, economic opportunism, criminal psychopathology, and other factors in explaining why people acted as they did.

The book, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* by James Waller is a great resource for educators to better comprehend this concept. [Click here](#) to watch a short video of James Waller speaking about the importance of studying perpetrator behavior.

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust". <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, "Teaching the Holocaust". https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf

14. Avoid legitimizing the denial of the past*

Genocide denial is ideologically motivated. The deniers' strategy is to sow seeds of doubt through deliberate distortion and misrepresentation of the historical evidence. You should be careful not to unwittingly legitimize the deniers through engaging in a false debate.

Take care not to give a platform to deniers — do not treat the denial of a genocide as a legitimate historical argument or seek to disprove the deniers' position through normal historical debate and rational argument.

Many teachers believe, however, that the phenomenon of genocide denial must be explored with their students, either because their young people raise the question themselves or because teachers are concerned that their students might come across these views later in life and be unprepared for the deniers' rhetorical techniques and ability to confuse or mislead. If this is the case, then genocide denial should be treated separately from the history of that genocide. It might be relevant to a separate unit on how forms of antisemitism or racism have evolved over time or as a media studies project exploring the manipulation, misrepresentation, and distortion employed by groups for political, social, or economic ends.

15. Be careful to distinguish between the perpetrators of the past and present-day societies*

In the example of the Holocaust, students should not form the opinion that all Germans were Nazis, nor that the German people were uniquely disposed to genocide. They should have opportunities to study the varied responses of the German people to Nazi policies, including enthusiastic support, cooperation, discontent, apathy, and active resistance.

Be careful to distinguish between the Germany of the past and Germany in the present. The events of the Holocaust need to be located in their historical context so that the people, politics, society, and culture of modern Germany are clearly distinguished from that of its Nazi past. This does not mean that parts of Germany's past do not impact the Germany of today. Rather, students should be encouraged to critically analyze how various aspects of Nazi Germany impacted and are addressed in present day Germany.

Students should also recognize that antisemitism is a worldwide and centuries-old phenomenon, and there were many non-German perpetrators and willing collaborators across Europe at the time. Other nationals served alongside SS units or as concentration camp guards, local police assisted in the round-ups and deportations of Jews to the death camps, and at times local people instigated pogroms against their Jewish neighbors or betrayed Jewish people in hiding. Also, countries and governments pursued collaborators allied to Nazi Germany.

+ Adapted from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust". <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>

* Adapted from Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, "Teaching the Holocaust". https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/TeachingGuidelines_Grades7-12_2010-05-06.pdf