

ACTIVITY: HOLOCAUST-ERA ARTIFACTS

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 6–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

SUGGESTED TIME: 10-minute preparation during the class period before the activity; 45-minute activity, with optional extensions

This activity encourages students to think about the value of primary sources, and how everyday objects can provide greater understanding of historical events.

RATIONALE:

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has an unparalleled repository of Holocaust artifacts that traces the experiences of millions of people, documenting what happened during the Holocaust. These primary sources are tangible pieces of evidence that advance understanding of these historical events.

NOTE: This activity involves students bringing in or photographing a personal item, so it will need to be introduced before the class period begins.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can personal artifacts also be historical evidence?
- How do Holocaust-era artifacts add to our understanding of how and why the Holocaust happened?

TEACHER PREPARATION

This activity is meant to support a Holocaust lesson or unit.

- The teacher should select a personal object to use when demonstrating the activity. The object you choose should be an ordinary object, but one that has personal importance to you, like a mug or a child’s drawing. You can either bring your object to class, or take a digital image of it to show to the class.
- Search the [Museum’s collections catalog](#) for a similar item to the one you have selected. (For example, if you selected a bell, search the Museum’s collection for a bell. You can use the tools on the left side of the screen to limit your results to “objects.”) Select an artifact with a lot of information about who owned the item, where, and when. Be ready to demonstrate how to search the catalog to locate that item again.
- Distribute [worksheets](#) for each student.

RESOURCES

- [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions for Educators](#)

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The activity is intentionally flexible, allowing individual teacher modifications to achieve educational outcomes. The instructional sequence suggests technology and teaching strategies; please use other options if they support your student's learning needs.

ACTIVITY: HOLOCAUST-ERA ARTIFACTS

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Provide students with choices regarding how they access information, e.g., reading print alone, reading print with a partner, reading along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

INTRODUCTION TO ARTIFACTS

Note: This introduction should be completed **at least one day before** the main activity to give students the opportunity to select their own personal item as homework.

- **Time: 10 minutes**
- **Activity: Short film (1:13) and introduction to activity**
- **Resources: Ability to show the film**
- **Skills practiced: film comprehension**

1. Inform students that you will be discussing how some ordinary objects became historical evidence during the Holocaust.

Note: You may wish to remind your students of the definition of a primary source. The [Library of Congress defines](#) a primary source as “an article, document, diary, manuscript, object, or information written or created at the time an event actually took place. Primary sources serve as an original source of information.”

2. As a class, watch the short video (1:13) on “[The Teddy Bear](#).”

Additional videos in the “Artifacts Unpacked” series are located [here](#). If you are doing this activity in conjunction with a Holocaust-related book or film, you may wish to search for a video about an artifact that relates to the themes of the book or film, and adjust the student questions accordingly.

ASK STUDENTS

- What did the Butzke family experience?
- How did the teddy bear help them escape?
- How does the bear still tell the story of their escape?
- How did the bear’s meaning change over time?

3. Ask students to identify a physical object of their own, something they can hold in their hands. They should choose something personal that tells a story. Tell them to either bring

ACTIVITY: HOLOCAUST-ERA ARTIFACTS

their object to class, take a photograph of their object, or write a paragraph describing the object. Emphasize this can be a simple everyday item and that students do not need to choose anything of monetary value. Teachers may wish to remind students of any school policies regarding prohibited items.

ARTIFACT ACTIVITY

- **Time:** 45 minutes
 - **Activity:** Searching United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, [worksheet](#)
 - **Skills practiced:** searching for accurate information, reading comprehension and analysis
1. You may choose to allow several students to share about the personal object they selected and why they selected it. You can have individual students volunteer or use a shared physical or virtual space for all students to participate.

ASK STUDENTS

- Why is this object important to you?
 - Do you have a story about this object??
 - Has the meaning of your object changed over time?
 - Is there anything about the object physically that hints at why it is important (like the bear in the Museum video)? Or does it look like an ordinary object if someone doesn't know the story?
2. Explain that the background, or backstory, of an object—who owned it, when it was used, and why it is important—is called “historical context.” An item does not have to be old to have historical context. An “artifact” is an object with personal or historical importance.
 3. Now display for your students the personal object you selected and share its story, either by showing the original object or a photograph of it. Break down the historical context. When do you think this object was made? Who made it? How did you get it? How do you use it? Why is it important to you?
 4. Demonstrate searching the Museum’s [online collections search](#) for an object similar to the one you chose. (You should have already selected the Museum artifact as part of your class prep, but make sure you demonstrate how to search, don’t just go to a link.) Click on the object and, as a class, look at the information included in the record. Allow at least 10 minutes for this demonstration so that students understand how to search the catalog.

ASK STUDENTS

- What does the Museum catalog say about this object?
- Does the record include who owned the object, where, and when?

ACTIVITY: HOLOCAUST-ERA ARTIFACTS

- Why do you think the Museum has this object?

4. Distribute the artifact [worksheet](#) to each student. Give them time to fill out the left side of the worksheet, about their own object. To provide your students with an example, you may wish to project a filled-out worksheet with the information about the objects you used in your demonstration.
5. Assist students in searching the Museum catalog for an artifact similar to the one they chose. Give them time to select a similar object (and help them brainstorm if their object couldn't have existed in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, encourage them to search for “notebook” if they brought a tablet, or think about the purpose of an item and search for an object with that same purpose.)

If your students need extra support or you are short on time, here are some examples:

[Doll](#)

[Notebook](#)

[Boots](#)

6. After students have each selected a similar object in the Museum's collection, have them fill out the right side of the worksheet.
7. Ask for volunteers to share.

ASK STUDENTS

- What does the Museum catalog say about this object?
- Does the record include who owned the object, where, and when?
- Why do you think the Museum has this object?
- What are the similarities and differences between your object and the Museum's object? Are they similar or different in appearance? In how they are used?

8. Give students a few minutes to think about the three questions on the second page of the [worksheet](#). If students need support, use the artifact related to your object to demonstrate how to answer the questions. This page can be completed in class or as an assessment opportunity.

ASK STUDENTS

- How can personal artifacts also be historical evidence?
- How can objects help us understand how and why the Holocaust happened?

ACTIVITY: HOLOCAUST-ERA ARTIFACTS

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS OR ASSESSMENT

- If the class has completed the Museum’s foundational [timeline activity](#), have students create “profile” cards for the Holocaust-era artifact they selected. The cards can include a drawing or the photograph of the item from the catalog, a description of when, how, and where the artifact was used, and why it is important. Students can then place the cards on the timeline related to when the item was used.
- Students can practice writing paragraphs by turning the answers to their worksheets into a paragraph-length description of the Holocaust-era item. Each answer can become a sentence. Use this [paragraph writing tool](#) with students.
- Students can create a video, piece of artwork, or piece of creative writing from the point of view of the Holocaust-era artifact. The creative work could describe the creation of the artifact, who owned it, how it was used, and how it survived the Holocaust and came to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. It should include why this artifact is important to understanding Holocaust history.