

Identity, Belonging, and Legacy: How Testimony Makes Us Stronger



Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define testimony.
- Reflect on the personal impact of testimonies they have heard.
- Describe how stories are connected to our identities.
- Reflect on a variety of factors that shape our identities, including belonging and legacy.

Pre-VFT Activity

As preparation for the *How Testimony Makes Us Stronger Than Hate Virtual Field Trip*, students will reflect and explore the power of their own identity and the connection identity has to belonging and legacy. Students will review the concept of testimony and then reflect on their own identity by considering how it is shaped, as well as the role legacy and belonging play in shaping their identity. As a class, students will understand that our identities are rooted in our groups, the history of our groups, and that the way we face the world is impacted by the different legacies we hold from these identities and histories.

Procedure

1. Begin class by explaining to students that they will be exploring the power of identity and its connection to memory and belonging. Share with students that they are going to be reflecting on the many facets of their own identity while also exploring how identity is rooted in belonging to many different groups. Sharing stories and testimonies helps to understand identity.
2. If students have not previously viewed testimony from the Teaching with Testimony website, explain that a testimony is also a kind of story in which someone reflects on a life experience, often with the benefit of distance and time, and shares what that experience means to them. Instruct students to reflect individually on a time when they have heard, seen, or watched a testimony that stuck with them long after the story was told. Help students make the connection that a person's testimony and life experiences help construct their identity.
3. Next, distribute copies of the **Identity Chart** handout to each student. Allow students a few moments to look over the reflection prompts and the graphic. Explain to students that they are going to use the prompts to help

Materials

- Identity Chart Handout
- Narrative Poem Handout (back of Identity Chart)
- VFT Theme Notetaker

get them started in considering parts of their identity and story. Some parts of our identity come quickly to mind, while others may not be so obvious. Some important questions to highlight may be:

- What groups do I consider myself to be a part of?
 - What do I consider to be defining parts of me? What are most important?
 - How does my experience and my family's history impact my identity?
4. When students have had time to consider a few of the reflection prompts, instruct them to begin creating their own identity chart. Tell students that they are not limited to the lines already around the graphic and they can create as many identifiers as they wish. It will be helpful for students to see during this activity that identity is rich and expansive.
 5. As students finish their reflections and identity chart, ask students to turn their paper over. Then explain that they use their charts to participate in a creative writing exercise called a narrative poem. In this exercise, students will construct a brief poem using guiding prompts that highlight important parts of their own identity. *Remind students that they are going to share their poem, so they should be conscious of anything that they do not want to share with others.*
 6. After students have completed their poems, allow time for them to participate in a "meet and greet" to share their writing and stories. To do this, instruct students that they will rotate around the room stopping to meet, share, and listen to others. You may choose to play and stop music, or use a timer to indicate when students should move around the room. Encourage students to listen while another student speaks and be sure to ask questions or share connections that arise.
 7. After students have shared with a few others, bring the class back together for a brief discussion to help connect important themes that may have been shared during their discussions. These prompts may help get the conversations started:
 - Did you notice any shared experiences or stories?

- How do stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it, and our ability to change it?
 - How can understanding our own identities and stories create empathy to build across differences?
 - Why does understanding the past mean so much to our identity and own story?
8. Wrap up the discussion by explaining that the class is about to experience how identity, legacy, and belonging are connected firsthand. As they participate in the *How Testimony Makes Us Stronger Than Hate Virtual Field Trip*, students will listen to the testimony of survivors and witnesses of genocide, as well as other accounts from young people around the country. To help students process through some of the important themes, provide each student with the **VFT Theme Notetaker**. Instruct students to use the notetaker as a tool to reflect on emotions, questions, and connections they may have as they watch. Be sure to remind students that they will have time at the end to write their notes.

Post-VFT Activity

Following the *How Testimony Makes Us Stronger Than Hate Virtual Field Trip*, students will discuss what they learned about the three central themes and their relationship to stories and testimony. Next, students will analyze and discuss a news article to explore how using our individual and group identity can help make us stronger than hate. Finally, students will apply their understanding of identity, belonging, and legacy by researching and sharing how some groups are currently challenging stereotypes and hateful speech by telling their own stories and leveraging a collective group identity.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the value of testimonies and how they help shape the way we understand the world.
- Explain how the relationship formed between a storyteller and listener can connect both to their shared humanity.
- Describe how we all can be stronger than hate through the power of testimony.

Materials

- VFT Theme Notetaker
- Los Angeles Times Article: *Armenian Genocide Survivors are Subject of Art Exhibit at Grand Park*
- Stronger Than Hate Narrative Handout
- Highlighter
- Internet access

Procedure

1. Begin by providing students with a few moments to individually complete their **VFT Theme Notetaker**. During this time, students should consider connections between the themes and their own identity and stories. Using their handout as a guide, students will then break into small-groups to discuss the virtual field trip and the testimonies they witnessed. Encourage students to discuss with their peers any thoughts, questions, or emotions that are on their mind after completing the notetaker.
2. Bring the class back together for a full-class discussion around the reflection they just completed. Consider facilitating the discussion with the following questions:
 - Was there a particular testimony or segment that resonated with you? Why?
 - Were there testimonies you heard that helped you learn something new, such as a historical or current event?
 - What did these testimonies teach you about the interconnectedness of identity, legacy, and belonging?
 - Where do you see examples of groups using their shared identities and stories to fight hate and intolerance?
3. Next, distribute copies of the **Los Angeles Times Article**: *Armenian Genocide Survivors are Subject of Art Exhibit at Grand Park* to each student. Before students begin reading the short article, explain to students that they will be performing a close read of this article to help provide more context to the Armenian Genocide and to understand how identity, legacy, and belonging can help fight hate.

For more information and teaching resources on the Armenian Genocide please visit, [teachingwithtestimony/thepromise](https://teachingwithtestimony.thepromise.org/)

4. To assist students in close reading and connecting to the text, display the following close reading protocol on the board or around the room
 - **First Read:** Read the article all the way through once and write a brief summary.
 - **Second Read:** Briefly read the article a second time but this time highlight or circle portions of the text that connect to identity, legacy, and belonging.
 - **Third Read:** Finally, browse the text a final time and use the margins and spaces between the text to write in questions you may have.
5. When the class finishes their close read, spend a few moments helping students make connections to the importance of history and identity as well as fielding questions that students wrote in the margins. After reading the article, students will have an important example of how testimonies and shared identities can be a powerful force for building empathy and countering hate. This is exemplified in the article by the continued fight on behalf of the Armenian community to fully recognize the events of 1915-1923 as genocide.
6. During the pre- and post-VFT activities, students may have connected their identity to a larger group that is currently using testimony to take action and counter hate. Students have learned

that history plays an important role in shaping identity, it is equally important to recognize and understand how identity and belonging can be a powerful force for collective action.

7. To help students extend learning and apply their understanding, allow them time to consider groups that they identified with in the pre-VFT activity. After selecting a group, students will research how members of this group are using their stories and a shared narrative to challenge negative stereotypes and counter hate. One example could be to have students use a resource like the website Re-Imagining Migration to read testimonies and stories from individuals who have immigrated that challenge stereotypes that often find their way into mainstream culture.

National Standards

National Standards The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards:

- D2.Civ.10.6-8: Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D.4.7.6-8: Assess their individual and collective capabilities to take action to address local, regional, and global problems, taking into account a range of possible levers of power, strategies, and potential outcomes.
- D2.Civ.14.6-8: Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12: Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interest and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.Civ.14.9-12: Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.
- D4.7.9-12: Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy, identification, and complex causal reasoning.

Common Core English Language Arts:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Identity Chart

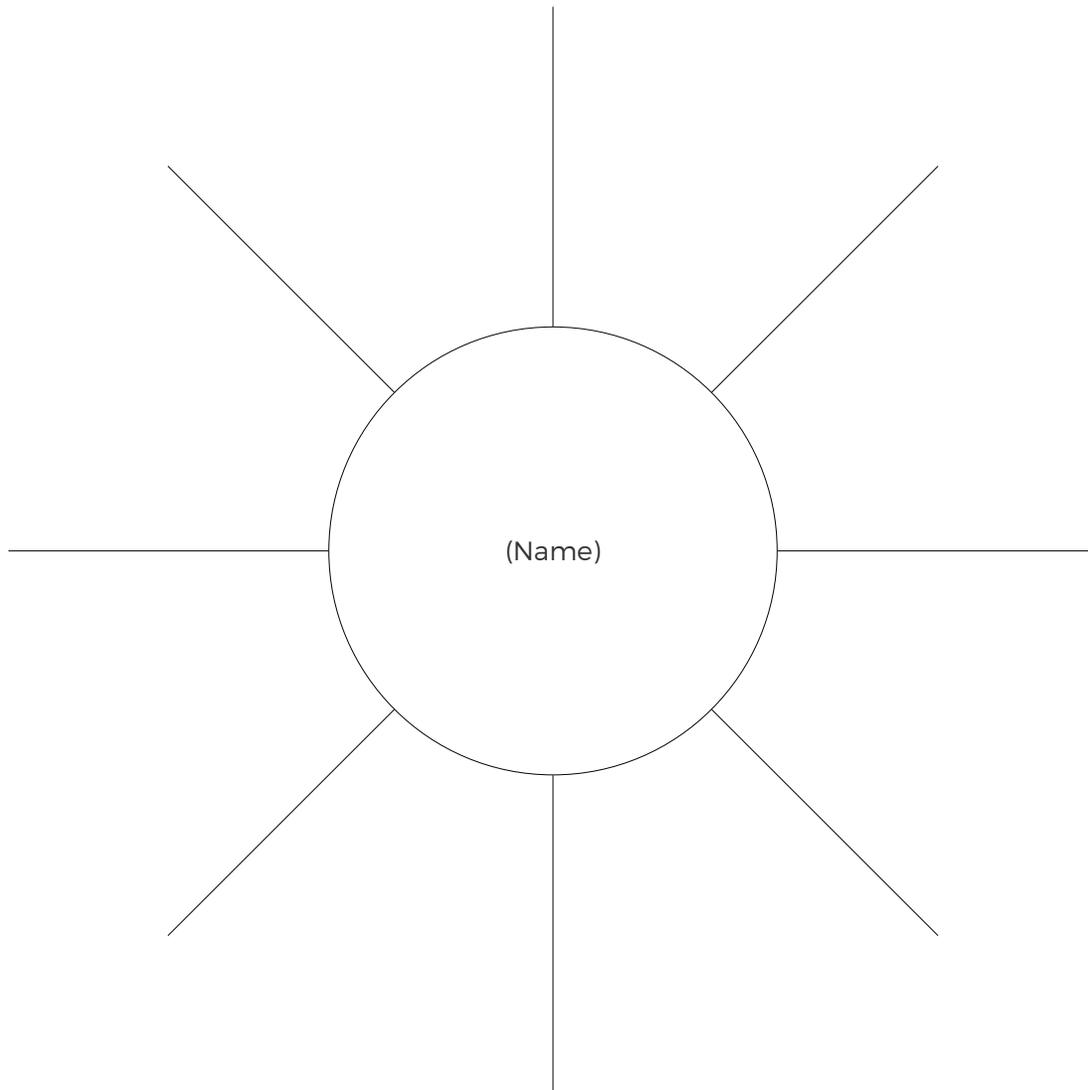


STUDENT HANDOUT

Reflection Prompts

- What groups do I consider myself to be a part of?
- What do I consider to be defining parts of me? What are most important?
- How does my experience and my family's history impact my identity?
- How much do I know about my family's history?
- What memories are most important to me?
- How might my identity be connected to legacy?

Identity Chart



Narrative Poem



STUDENT HANDOUT

How to write a Narrative Poem

(Line 1) First name

(Line 2) Three or four adjectives that describe me

(Line 3) Important relationship (daughter of. . . with description/story)

(Line 4) Place where I am from (community. . .or family ancestry)

(Line 5) Favorite family memory

(Line 6) Accomplishments (where did I succeed. . .what am I proud of)

(Line 7) Three fears

(Line 8) Two or three goals I have

(Line 1) I am...

(Line 2) I am...

(Line 3) I am...

(Line 4) I am...

(Line 5) I am...

(Line 6) I am...

(Line 7) I am...

(Line 8) I am...

VFT Theme Notetaker



STUDENT HANDOUT

Testimonies can shed light on our shared human experience and help build empathy for one another. As you watch the Virtual Field Trip, use the notetaker and the stories you hear to reflect on the three themes below. Consider how the stories made you feel, what questions come to mind, and how your own experience is connected to these themes and the experiences others have shared.

<p>Identity Emotions Questions Connections</p>	<p>What connection do these three themes have?</p>
<p>Belonging Emotions Questions Connections</p>	
<p>Legacy Emotions Questions Connections</p>	

Armenian genocide survivors are subject of art exhibit in Grand Park



STUDENT HANDOUT



A woman walks through a portion of “iWitness,” the first public art installation in Grand Park, featuring large-scale photographic sculptures bearing portraits of Armenian Genocide survivors and their stories. (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

Vahida Dekmejian didn’t want to remember. Living in her garage apartment in Pasadena, she preferred to cook. Lahmacun—Armenian pizza—was one of her specialties. She taught the recipe to her children and left the remembering to them. “Unless asked, she didn’t like to open up,” said her granddaughter Paulette Geragos. “It was a brutal story. She saw a lot of violent death.”

Sitting on a bench in downtown’s Grand Park, Geragos looked across the terrace at a large portrait of Dekmejian, one of 45 black-and-white photographs on display through Sunday, each a survivor of the Armenian genocide. “There is a lot of determination in her eyes,” said Geragos, “as well as melancholy.”

The exhibit, the first outdoor art installation in Grand Park, was created by Ara Oshagan and Levon Parian, who for 20 years have been taking photographs and collecting the stories of Armenian survivors. The project, *iWitness*, opened last month to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the genocide. Tightly cropped and brightly lit but for a black background, the portraits gazed out at Saturday visitors: families, picnickers, children splashing in the fountain.

Geragos, 52, was joined Saturday by her parents and other family members for a photograph of three generations to be taken with her beloved *medz mayr*, who died in 2005 at 103. Born in Aintab in the Ottoman Empire, Dekmejian saw the deportations, the hunger and murder wrecked upon Armenians by the Ottoman Turkish government in 1915. She was 13 at the time. After 1915, Dekmejian moved to Aleppo in modern-day Syria, where she made sure that her family left the Middle East and moved to the United States. She emigrated in the 1950s.

“She never said, ‘Never forget,’” Geragos recounted. “She never asked us to carry on her legacy. It was implicit.”

The expression of the other survivors—like Dekmejian’s, neither recriminating nor judgmental—convey a solemn dignity despite what they saw and experienced in their childhood. Mounted on trapezoidal prisms



nearly 7-feet tall, their faces are etched by time: hair gray and wispy, eyes clouded by cataracts, the stubble of beards, the elegance of an earring. Names are marked by the year and the place of their birth. Phrases from their lives are printed beside them.

Sandstorms uncovered bones everywhere in Meskeneh where thousands of Armenians were buried. The last thing my father did was to give my mother his pocket watch.

The idea for the project came to Oshagan after attending an event for the 80th anniversary of the genocide. “There were 80 survivors there,” he said, “and I remember thinking, they’re so fragile. Tomorrow they’re going to disappear.” Oshagan and Parian began photographing and collecting the oral histories of these men and women, who seldom took the time to recount their experiences. Speaking to the Times in 1999, Parian said the survivors they met had gotten on with their lives, raising children and making good in their new countries.

“But the guilt of it, the unfinished sorrows,” he added, “are a huge wound opened in the Armenian psyche, and it’s far from healed.”

Three years ago, Oshagan and Parian conceived of this installation, these large prisms with faces wrapping the corners and no right angles. Its structural design was meant to convey that the world is out of balance, Oshagan said.

“They are transferring what they witnessed to us,” he added. “We’ve become the next generation to remember.”

As Oshagan and Parian photographed gathering families—and took a group portrait of all the families who had come out Saturday to stand beside the portraits of their parent, grandparent, great-grandparent—they talked about the prospect of taking the installation to San Francisco, Sacramento, New York, Paris and even Istanbul.

“Can you imagine that?” Oshagan said. “Twenty years ago, this would have been completely out of the question.”

Source: <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-armenian-genocide-survivors-art-exhibit-20150530-story.html>

Stronger Than Hate Narrative



STUDENT HANDOUT

Directions: Complete these steps to learn more about how our stories can be used to counter intolerance and hate.

Step 1: Select a group

Using your identity chart, what group do you strongly identify with?

Step 2: What resources will you use?

Take time to research resources that share uplifting and empowering stories about this group. List them here.

Step 3: What misconceptions exist about this group?

Identify any narratives, stories, or stereotypes that exist about this group, and list them here.

Step 4: How is this group showing they are stronger than hate?

Summarize examples of how members of this group are using their stories and collective identity to combat hate.

Step 5: What do you want others to know?

In the space provided, use your research to explain how the shared power of identity, belonging, and legacy are being used to show how groups can be stronger than hate.