

Facing History and Ourselves:

Syllabus and Term One Guide

“Being human does not make us humane. We learn our humanity over time and in our interactions with others.” ----Hannah Arendt

Course Description

The quote above cuts straight to the heart of the Facing History curriculum. Over this year we will ultimately be examining together what it means to be *human*, what it means to be *humane*, and conversely, why so many cases of extreme *inhumanity* continue to exist. This may sound like a lofty undertaking, one that is perhaps overwhelming in its scope. Therefore, I am providing you with a general outline of what this overall course will look like, in terms of case studies, themes, and concepts.

While this class will devote a considerable amount of time to the study of the Holocaust, our starting point of analysis will be in fact with *ourselves*. If we are to understand societal forces that shape history, we must understand the forces that motivate our own actions as *individuals* who are necessarily part of a larger society. In this way, our study of the Holocaust will not merely be a study of foreign circumstances and far-away issues, but it will be a study of the ingredients of evil, the dangers of indifference, and the flaws of humanity—all of which are reflected in the past and present of our own nation’s history.

During the first term we will concern ourselves with the following broad thematic questions:

- What factors contribute to one’s sense of individual identity?
- What factors contribute to a sense of collective identity?
- How do individuals’ choices impact the course of history?
- How does identity shape societal and global responsibility? How does identity dictate our “universe of obligation”?
- How do we define *Human Rights*?
- How do we define what it means to be *American*? What is the *American dream*?
- To what degree has participation in American society and access to the *American dream* been open or closed to various peoples throughout history? In the present?
- How have issues of *identity* and *rights* been at the heart of social and political conflict throughout the course of American history?

To explore these questions, we will examine a variety of issues in both the present and past of the United States. It should be noted the above questions are ongoing queries—the answers to these questions are not so easily found in any one specific unit of study or lesson. What you initially believe to be the answers to these questions will shift, evolve, and expand throughout our study and will hopefully continue into your adult life. Thus, while the themes of *identity* and *responsibility* will be introduced at the beginning of the year, each case study that we examine will either draw into question, shed light on, or perhaps confuse your previous notions or definitions.

In the second and third term we will delve into the roots and events of the Holocaust. However, the curriculum of the first term has been developed to illustrate that victimization,

marginalization, and ethnic hatred (the roots of genocide) are not characteristic merely of far away places, but also of our own “land of the free and home of the brave.” The themes and dilemmas that will be introduced in this first unit you will later recognize in our study of Weimar Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust, making an in-depth study of the Holocaust resonate with necessity and significance across time and space.

Our final term of study will focus on other cases of modern genocide and human rights abuses, including but not limited to:

- Japanese atrocities during World War II
- Cambodia
- Bosnia
- Rwanda
- Sudan/Darfur

Class Format/Expectations

Many classes will begin with an *icebreaker activity* that is designed to push you to clarify your own values and sense of morality. Such an icebreaker may take the form of a reading, a photograph, or a video clip. You will be introduced to early on and will grapple with issues of injustice, along with the roles of *victim, perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, rescuer, and survivor*. Your job is to *think critically* about all that you encounter, *to reflect thoughtfully*, and *to share your thoughts with others*. Let us take seriously Hannah Arendt’s words of wisdom and realize the necessity of discussing and negotiating urgent and controversial issues *with each other*.

Ultimately, the goal of this course is to heighten your awareness of the world around you and to render you a more caring and sensitive individual.

My hope is that the issues you will be presented with will motivate you to *learn more, read more, and question more*—in short, *GET INVOLVED* in the world around you!

As with so many things in life, YOU WILL GET OUT OF THIS COURSE WHAT YOU PUT IN!!

Textbook

Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

Published by Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc. (1994),
Brookline, MA.

In addition, we will be reading from a magazine entitled “Us and Them,” published by the *Teaching Tolerance Organization* of Montgomery, Alabama. This magazine is a compilation of 14 different case studies of examples of “intolerance” throughout United States history.

Additional newspaper articles, primary sources, and video footage will supplement this study. Contemporary news stories that have application and relevance to the topic at hand will be woven into our discussion.