

Video Testimony

EXAMPLE SOURCE: Teacher selection from the clips available from the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive: <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/excerpts/>. These are usually 15-30 minutes long.

Shorter clips (< 2 ½ minutes) can be found on the BBC Teach website (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/holocaust-memorial-day-2019/zb3r6v4>). These are individual stories focused on those who were children during the Holocaust

We would recommend starting with one of the “Excerpts” that combine several testimonies that address a theme (the historical context of which should already have been covered in previous lessons or elsewhere in the curriculum). If shorter individual testimonies are to be used, we would recommend showing several of these over the course of the lesson to highlight multiple perspectives. Students might later engage with a full-length testimony as described below.

Please note the age considerations and content warnings stated at the start of the recordings.

Key Considerations

- ❖ Video testimony can appear to be the most “transparent” medium that we address here; that is, it is easy to forget that the witness is not sitting in front of us, that there is a camera and an interviewer, and an institution that has a particular reason for collecting these stories. This means that it can better replicate some of the impact of face-to-face testimony, but also means it can be difficult for students to engage critically with the testimony as a source.
- ❖ The apparent authenticity of the source may mean that students will assume that what the survivor says is

not only subjectively true (that is, their experience), but also objectively (that is, historically accurate or the only possible response). Watching different testimonies around the same topic can help address this as students can notice differences in emphasis. It is also important to encourage students to ask appropriate questions of the source: that means questions about the individual experience of history and how it relates to the present.

- ❖ The excerpted testimonies allow students the time to engage with multiple perspectives; however, it does mean that the focus is on a particular “theme” rather than the life story as a whole. This is why we would suggest – if time is available – also creating space for engagement with a full testimony (perhaps as an extension project).

Starting Point

We would recommend starting with a reflection on what testimony is and what questions can be asked of it. Teachers might take this out of the context of the Holocaust, where students are likely to be unwilling to critically examine witness stories. It may be an opportunity to discuss contemporary concerns about finding reliable information: What sources do students use to find out about the

contemporary events? What sources do they trust and why/why not? Why do news programmes often incorporate interviews with those affected by an event? What can we learn from them?

Focusing on a particular contemporary example, a series of questions can be framed and discussed with students:

- Why is this person being interviewed/recorded?
- What was the person asked at the start of the interview?
- What were the key questions the interviewer asked?
- Were there parts of the testimony where the account was more or less credible – what factors make you think this?
- Are there signals/indicators that the testimony you are listening to/watching has been edited?

Students could then engage with the framework of the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive in particular. What is the history and purpose of this institution? Why and how do they gather testimonies? See: <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/about-us/our-story/>. This will help them to understand the testimonies as a source.

Source Engagement

Before watching the testimonies, students can be asked to write a short paragraph or list of what they already know about the “theme” (as indicated, this should have been covered in class before engagement with the testimony). What questions still remain that might be answered by the testimonies? This activity allows students to direct their own enquiry and also provides an opportunity for the teacher to address misconceptions. Students can then watch the excerpts and re-write their summary, including the new information.

As an extension, students might write questions to which they did not receive an answer and use teacher-supported enquiry to discover answers drawing on other appropriate sources. This activity supports students in exploring which kinds of sources are best at answering different kinds of question. We would particularly recommend the range of materials provided by the Holocaust Educational Trust, Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and National Holocaust Centre and Museum (see **Resources List**).

A second extension might be a creative response to video testimonies. As indicated above, this should be an opportunity for students to reflect critically on the testimony, what it means for the witness and their own response to it. One approach is to ask students to listen to the excerpt (it might even be read aloud to the class) and write down one word, phrase or image that they feel is at the centre of the testimony. That word, phrase or image can then form the starting point for a creative output such as drawing, painting, or poetry. Important in this context is to avoid an attempt to “represent” the testimony in a different form. Instead it is about creating a response to the testimony that reflects student engagement with the account.

Such activities also work with full-length accounts and over an extended period of time. The *Echo Eternal* project provides several successful examples of this kind of work with students of a range of different ages and abilities: <http://echoeternal.uk/>. Note that the success of this project was assured through the involvement of artists-in-residence.