

Diaries as Historical Sources Lesson

****Students do not need to have read *The Diary of Anne Frank* to participate in this lesson.****

Grade Level: Appropriate for grades 6-12

Subject: Multidisciplinary

Time required: Approximately 30-45 minutes, with optional at-home activity

Note: It is appropriate for in-class or remote instruction.

Overview: Anne Frank, a German Jewish teenager who kept a diary while in hiding in Amsterdam between 1942-1944, is likely the most famous victim of the Holocaust. Her words have inspired generations of students. As she dreamt of becoming a famous writer, Anne also composed her diary entries carefully, documenting both her emotions and the realities of life in “the Secret Annex,” details she hoped would be of interest to people in the future. This lesson focuses on the act of documenting one’s experiences. Learning about Anne Frank and others who kept diaries during the Holocaust encourages students to evaluate diaries as important historical sources. Through the activity suggested, students will creatively document their own lives and experiences, considering what they would want future historians to know.

Essential questions:

- What can we learn from diaries written during the Holocaust?
- Can we evaluate Holocaust-era diaries as historical sources?
- In what ways can young people today document modern life for future historians?

Educational Outcomes:

After this lesson, students will:

- Learn about other young people who kept diaries during the Holocaust
- Think critically about diaries as historical sources
- Recognize that as individuals and members of communities, their voices matter; they too are historical actors

Instructional sequence:

Optional Pre- Reading for Teachers and/or Students

- [Children's Diaries During the Holocaust](#) summarizes types of diaries written by children and their historical significance

1. Introduction to Diaries
 - a. Have students watch at least two of the following episodes of the USHMM's series "Curators Corner":
 - i. [Peter Feigl's diary](#) (4:36)
 - ii. ["I Have to Write Everything Down: Selma and Chaim Engel's Diary"](#) (4:20)
 - iii. [Testimonies of Survival: Diaries from a Slave Labor Camp](#) (3:09)
 - iv. ["To the Memory of My Parents": Michael Kraus's Diaries](#) (8:42)
 - b. Discuss or have students provide written responses: Who is the audience for these diaries? Why is the author writing? Is it for someone to read, or is it private? How might that change what the author includes in his or her diary?
2. Have students read the [Anne Frank biography](#) and the [Anne Frank diary](#) articles in the USHMM's Holocaust Encyclopedia.
3. Analyze Anne Frank's Diary Entries
 - a. Inform students: Anne Frank began her famous diary for herself, as a way to express her emotions in writing. In March 1944, she heard on the radio that the Dutch government planned to collect diaries after the war to document how people experienced life in the Netherlands under Nazi German control. She began to rewrite her diary, calling the new version *Het Achterhuis* [The Secret Annex]. She introduced new names for some of the residents of the Secret Annex, calling the van Pels family the "van Daans" and Fritz Pfeffer "Albert Dussel." She added new entries and edited old ones, softening descriptions of her relationship with her mother, editing entries about her feelings for Peter, and eliminating some about her changing body.
 - b. Either as a class or on their own, students should read these three diary entries:

20 June 1942

For *Het Achterhuis*, Anne added this paragraph to one of her first diary entries:

‘Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I’ve never written anything before, but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I feel like writing, and I have an ever greater need to get all kinds of things off my chest.’

23 December 1943

Anne’s original diary entry:

‘Cycling again, dancing, flirting and what-have-you, how I would love that; if only I were free again! Sometimes I even think, will anybody understand me, will anybody overlook my ingratitude, overlook Jew or non-Jew, and just see the young girl in me who is badly in need of some rollicking fun?’

For *Het Achterhuis*, Anne rewrote this entry, changing it to:

‘Cycling, dancing, whistling, looking out at the world, feeling young, to know that I’m free—that’s what I long for; still I mustn’t show it, because I sometimes think if all 8 of us began to pity ourselves, or went about with discontented faces, where would it lead us?’

19 January 1944

Anne’s original diary entry:

‘You know that I always used to be jealous of Margot’s relationship with Father. There’s not a trace of my jealousy left now; I still feel hurt when Father’s nerves cause him to be unreasonable toward me, but then I think, ‘I can’t blame you for being the way you are. You talk so much about the minds of children and adolescents, but you don’t know the first thing about them!’...I forgive Mother too, but every time she makes a sarcastic remark or laughs at me, it’s all I can do to control myself. I know I’m far from being what I should; will I ever be?’

For *Het Achterhuis*, Anne deleted this section.

- c. Discuss, or have students answer in writing: Why might Anne have decided to make these changes? How did they change? Think back to the diaries you learned about in the Curators Corner films. Were these also deliberately created for an outside audience? What was the diarist trying to document in his or her diary? What might they have chosen to specifically include or leave out?
4. Historians study diaries and letters from the 1930s and 1940 to learn about how ordinary people experienced the Holocaust and World War II. Discuss as a class, or have students provide written answers: What methods of communication should historians in fifty years study to learn what your daily life is like in the 2020's? Would it be a diary, or something like TikTok or a group chat? How can historians in the future learn about the inner thoughts and feelings of students? Or about what students are seeing and hearing in the world around them?

Conclusion: Discuss or have students answer: Can we think about the diaries we learned about as historical sources? What information would you include for future historians if you wrote a diary? What might you leave out and why?

Extension Assignment: Have the students choose one method of communication and create something that would explain to future historians what their life is like (for example: a video, a diary entry, a chat—be creative in interpretation). Ask them to consider: What would they want future historians to know? What would give future historians insight into their lives as students in the present? Remind your students: They should not make comparisons between their own lives and the Holocaust.

Evaluation and Assessment: Teachers can choose to grade the homework assignment and/or the written answers to the questions.

Additional Resources:

1. Online exhibition [Anne Frank the Writer: The Unfinished Story](#)
2. [Curators Corner](#) with Louise Lawrence-Israels (in hiding in Amsterdam)
 - a. Ask the kids about similarities and differences between Louise's situation and Anne's, about life in hiding
3. Oral history interview with [Eva Schloss](#), Anne Frank's stepsister
4. ["German Bombs and US Bureaucrats"](#): Article on the Frank family's attempt to immigrate to the United States (coauthored by the USHMM and the Anne Frank House)