



Densho Curriculum Guide

# Examining Racism and Discrimination Through Oral History



D E N S H Ō

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## Introduction

This curriculum will help you use oral histories to prompt conversations about racism and discrimination in middle and high school classrooms. The learning activities are aligned to Common Core State Standards. Please use this guide alongside the [accompanying PowerPoint](#).

Please note that this curriculum is still under development. If you have any questions or feedback you would like to share, please email [education@densho.org](mailto:education@densho.org).

### Essential question:

How can oral histories inform our thinking about racism and discrimination today?

### Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze primary source material to gain a deeper understanding of racism and how it operates in society.
- Students will identify and learn skills for empathizing individual experiences of racism and discrimination.

### Discussing Racism and Discrimination in the Classroom

Racism and discrimination are incredibly sensitive subjects and should be treated with care in the classroom. Mentally prepare by thinking through the lesson and seeking greater understanding of any topics that are new or unfamiliar to you. Plan to make a safe classroom space for having open discussion. *Facing History and Ourselves* offers an excellent [guide for fostering civil discourse in the classroom](#).

Finally, we recommend establishing group agreements with your class prior to introducing this curriculum. Here are some [group agreements](#) that we have used in presenting this curriculum at teacher workshops; other versions are available on the web.

### Curriculum Quick Links

PowerPoint Slideshow (Download from [Google Drive](#) or [Dropbox](#))

[Historical Background Info](#)

[Group Agreements](#)

[Oral History Transcripts](#)

[Frank Yamasaki oral history](#)

[Mary Jenkins oral history](#)

[Saffiyah Hrahsheh oral history](#)

## About Densho

Densho is a Japanese term meaning “to pass on to the next generation,” or to leave a legacy. The legacy we offer is an American story with ongoing relevance: during World War II, the United States government incarcerated innocent people solely because of their ancestry.

Densho is a nonprofit organization started in 1996, with the initial goal of documenting oral histories from Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II. This evolved into a mission to educate, preserve, collaborate and inspire action for equity. Densho uses digital technology to preserve and make accessible primary source materials on the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. We present these materials and related resources for their historic value and as a means of exploring issues of democracy, intolerance, wartime hysteria, civil rights and the responsibilities of citizenship in our increasingly global society.

Learn more at [www.densho.org](http://www.densho.org).

## Acknowledgements

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To promote thinking and inquiry, oral histories in this curriculum have been paired with thinking routines—a process and structure developed by Harvard Project Zero’s [Visible Thinking](#). Thinking Routines have a few simple steps to evoke deep thinking, which can prompt questions and learning. They can be used in many different contexts with a variety of content, and we have found them to be effective in deepening thinking about racism and discrimination.

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## Section One: Racism and Immigration in America

**I. History of Racism and Immigration Slide Show** (play slides 2-11 in PowerPoint, downloaded from [Google Drive](#) or [Dropbox](#))

### II. Discussion

After the slideshow is over, use these questions to prompt discussion:

- Where are we today -- this slideshow ends in 2013, what could we add since then? (Prompts: Muslim Ban, DACA repeal, etc.)
- Who is impacted by the laws and policies we saw? How?
- Who had the power to make these laws and policies? Why?
- What does this say about the role race plays in the history of this country?

Explain to the class: An underlying assumption of this lesson is that we are situated within a system of structural racism. This means that racism and discrimination have been part of our country since the beginning and still exist today. Policies, practices, procedures, institutions, and individuals routinely favor white people while disadvantaging people of color. This happens both intentionally and unintentionally, but it has real life consequences for everyone. In order to try and make that system more fair, we need to better understand how racism works and how it impacts individuals. Today, we are going to view oral histories to do just that.

### III. Definitions

Before we go further, we need to make sure we all have a shared definition of three key terms:

**Discrimination:** To discriminate is to make distinctions on the basis of preference or prejudice. It involves any situation in which a group or individual is treated differently and sometimes unfairly, based on something other than individual reason, usually their membership in a socially distinct group or category. Such categories would include race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, or disability.

**Racism:** Racism is a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the white race. These beliefs and behaviors are conscious and unconscious, personal and institutional; they result in the oppression of people of color and benefit the dominant group, whites. A simpler definition is racial prejudice + power = racism.

**Structural Racism:** A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. This system privileges white people while disadvantaging people of color in ways that endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.

## Section Two: Oral Histories

### I. Oral History Viewing

Explain to the class: We're going to watch some oral histories of people talking about racism in their own lives. Oral histories are an important primary source for understanding experiences of racism because they allow us to hear perspectives that aren't typically included in the historical record.

Introduce the narrators, then play the clips from the YouTube links or from the PowerPoint.

**Frank Yamasaki** recalls a childhood experience in 1930s Seattle, where anti-Japanese sentiment was common even though Japanese Americans were active in many aspects of the city's life, including as farmers and vendors at Pike Place Market. Frank was interviewed by Densho in 1997 about his life before, during, and after World War II.

Online clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jHXF-gY1-l>

**Mary Jenkins** talks about growing up and then being a mother in Albany, Georgia in the Jim Crow era. She was interviewed in March 2013 by Will Griffin as part of the Civil Rights History Project (a collaboration between the National Museum of African American History and Culture and National Library of Congress).

Online clip: <https://youtu.be/EGq0fBcnp44>

### II. Oral History Activities

#### a. Thinking Routine: Phrase-Word

Hand out [transcripts](#) for the two oral history clips. Instruct your students to select one and read the transcript carefully. They should then select and highlight one phrase and one word that stand out to them. Working in pairs or small groups, have them share their word and their phrase, explaining why they selected each.

#### b. Found Poem

(We recommend watching this [Found Poem demo](#) before teaching this unit.)

Instruct students to write their phrase and their word on separate strips of paper (accounting tape works well for this activity). They should write in markers and large print.

Next, form two circles, one for students who selected the Mary interview and the other for the students who selected the Frank interview. Explain that you will be creating a "Found Poem" -- a literary equivalent of a collage -- using the words and phrases from the oral histories.

Each student will have three turns. On the first two rounds, each student can place or move a word/phrase strip in the center of the circle on the floor. On the final round, they can place, move, or pass.

After you have gone around the circle three times, your poem will be complete. Ask for a volunteer to read the poem out loud to the class. Tape the poem to chart paper and hang it up so the whole class can read it.

Ask questions for further reflection:

- What themes from the oral history does the poem draw attention to?
- Does it give us any new insight into the oral history?
- Is there anything in the oral history that is missing from our found poem?
- What commonalities do you see between the found poem based on Frank's story and the one based on Mary's story?
- Do you see those themes in any experiences you have had or in stories you hear in the news today?

Encourage students to share personal stories if they feel comfortable doing so.

To close, note that both Mary and Frank were experiencing racial discrimination and that their experiences are part of a long history of racism that is still ongoing in the United States today.

## Section Three: Historical Background

Explain to the students: In these oral histories, you saw individual stories of racism and discrimination, but it's important that we see those stories within the context of structural racism. So we're going to look at that history now, first at Frank Yamasaki's story as a part of broader anti-Japanese discrimination and in the lead-up to WWII incarceration, then at Mary Jenkins' story as a part of other policies and practices in the Jim Crow South.

### I. Historical Background Lecture

Provide historical context using PowerPoint slides 22-45 and [this script](#) (also included in the notes embedded in the slideshow).

### II. Discussion

Lead students in discussion to connect individual experiences to the larger context of racism and discrimination in America.

- What parallels do you see between the oral histories and the larger story of racism in America?
- What other historical or contemporary examples of racism does this make you think about?
- What questions does this raise for you?



## Section Four: Contemporary Oral History

### I. Contemporary Oral History Clip

Introduce Saffiyah and then show her oral history clip.

Saffiyah Hrahsheh was interviewed by Densho in March 2017 as a result of our collaboration with the Washington chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations. She is 21 years old and moved to Seattle in 2016 from Alabama. She identifies as mixed race European and Cherokee, and was educated in the Indian Education Program before moving to Holland with her mother. It was in Holland that she was exposed to Islam and decided to convert at age fourteen.

Online clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-qKRftluVc&t=8s>

### II. Thinking Routine: Where else?

(Adapted from [Where else? Who else? When else?](#) Thinking Routine)

This routine is about finding patterns, comparing and contrasting the three oral history interviews.

Ask students: What strikes you or stands out? Prompt students to reflect on the clip they just saw, and share their ideas with others in a small group.

Ask students: Where else do you see this happening across the stories, in history, now? Prompt students to think of all the oral history clips they watched (Frank, Mary, and Saffiyah). In small groups, have them write patterns they see on paper strips.

Post all of the paper strips so that the entire class can review them. Engage the entire class in a discussion about the patterns:

- What do you notice?
- What commonalities do you see across the stories?
- How does this connect with other stories you know about?
- What questions does this raise about racism and discrimination?
- What else do you need to know to better understand racism and discrimination?

## Section Five: Making Meaning

### I. Thinking Routine: Making Meaning

(Adapted from [Making Meaning](#) Thinking Routine)

(Examples of finished Making Meaning diagrams [here](#) and [here](#). We encourage teachers to review these prior to facilitating this lesson, but not to show students to avoid influencing their thinking.)

Explain to students: We've talked about both individual and systemic racism and discrimination today. Now we're going to think more about your understanding of racism. To get started, you're going to work in a small group.

Provide each small group with a piece of chart paper, and each student in the group with a different color marker/crayon. Write the word "racism" in the center of each piece of chart paper. Students will take turns writing on the group's piece of chart paper, each student responding to each of the following prompts (taking care to read, reflect on, and connect to what others in the group have written):

Round 1: Write one word that comes to mind when you think about racism anywhere on the piece of chart paper. Each person's word must be unique. Example: "anger"

Round 2: Add on to someone else's word with an additional word/phrase to elaborate the original word in some way. Example: "hidden anger"

Round 3: Make a connection between ideas noted on the paper. Pick two ideas or phrases that are already written on the chart paper and draw a line to connect them. Write your explanation about how these ideas are connected on the line you just drew. Phrases can be connected more than once.

Round 4: Review what's written on the chart paper. Each person writes a question on the chart paper based on the emerging ideas.

Ask each group to post their chart paper once they've completed the four rounds of prompts.

### II. Review and discussion

Have students review each other's work. As a class, discuss:

- What do you notice/what strikes you?
- What commonalities/differences do you see?

Finally, ask each student to write independently about what new meaning or understanding they have gained about racism after participating in this activity.

## Section Six: Wrapping Up

### I. Discussion and Reflection

Lead your class in an open discussion or reflective writing activity:

- What were some of the main themes we learned about in this lesson ?
- How are you feeling about what we learned?
- What actions does this knowledge make you want to take?

### II. Thinking Routines (optional)

#### a. Headlines (for summing up, capturing essence)

(Adapted from [Headlines](#) Thinking Routine)

Prompt students to think about how headlines in a newspaper sum up the essence of an event, story, etc. in words that grab a reader’s attention. Ask students to think about what they’ve learned in this lesson, and to write the most important aspect in the form of a headline.

These can be written on strips of paper (same as in the Found Poem) and posted in the room. OR Students can share their headline with another student. This can be followed up with a discussion about what headlines are particularly effective at capturing an idea and what makes them so. Further prompt students about how their thinking has changed from before this lesson.

#### b. I used to think, but now I think... (for reflecting on how and why my thinking has changed)

(Adapted from [“I used to think....,but now I think”](#) Thinking Routine)

Ask students to think about their thinking prior to this lesson, and what they might have learned through the course of the lesson about racism and discrimination in America and respond in writing to these prompts:

(before the lesson) “I used to think . . . “

(after the lesson) “But now I think . . . “

Have students share their responses and explain how/why their thinking has changed.