

# Tips for Teaching Difficult History

**Disclaimer:** The Canadian Museum of History created this list with the help of teacher advisors from across Canada. It is not exhaustive and some tips may not apply in your classroom situation. You know what is appropriate for your students, and so we recommend you use your discretion when teaching difficult history.

## WHAT IS DIFFICULT HISTORY?

While hard to define, the museum community generally considers content to be difficult if it elicits a strong emotional reaction from an audience. Subjects often include oppression, violence and trauma. Difficult history can force us to confront our own world view, which can be challenging.

## WHY TEACH DIFFICULT HISTORY?

We teach difficult history so that important stories and perspectives are not forgotten. With information, we can acknowledge silenced perspectives, give space for those who are grieving and advocate for social justice. We teach difficult history because these lessons can guide how we act in the future.

## BEFORE THE LESSON

- **Create a safe and trusting place in your classroom.** Discuss ideas and values openly, without judgement. Consider the idea of a classroom collective agreement that outlines expectations for you and your students.
- **Follow culturally responsive pedagogy.** Know your students and their unique viewpoints. Build your lesson on their existing knowledge and experience.
- **Research the resources available to you.** Some school boards can recommend staff members, resources and publications to help you teach difficult, sensitive or controversial topics.
- **Be transparent with your students, administration and parents.** Explain what will be discussed or shown in class, why it might be triggering, and why it's important to the lesson. Permission forms may be useful for you.
- **Inform your colleagues.** Some students may take feelings or reactions into their next classes. Informed colleagues can offer empathy to students.
- **Be aware of your own comfort levels and understanding.** Make sure you are aware of current cultural and linguistic pedagogical practices. Reach out to a local organization if you need more support or resources.

- **Plan ahead.** To avoid surprises, read and watch everything you plan to use in class. Choose your materials carefully and use reputable sources.
  - **Don't teach a difficult lesson on a Friday.** It's important to give students time in class to digest and reflect on content constructively. Bottling up strong emotions could be traumatizing.
  - **Don't start a lesson if you're pressed for time.** Make sure you and your students have enough time to complete and process the lesson.
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## DURING THE LESSON

- **Safely in, safely out.** Prepare your students for difficult discussions, and give the opportunity for reflection. If possible, end the lesson with a hopeful message for the future.
  - **Remove distractions.** Ask your students to put away phones or other screens for the duration of the lesson.
  - **Scaffold your lessons.** Give difficult content historical perspective. Understanding world views and the events around a difficult time in history will help your students put it in context.
  - **Anticipate real-world connections.** Be aware of students' backgrounds: what you describe as difficult history may echo or have shaped their lives today. Be open if a student volunteers their own story, but never single out anyone to do so.
  - **Include individualized stories.** First-person testimonies that students relate to can be a powerful means of explaining broader historical themes. They can also help avoid harmful group stereotypes.
  - **Be explicit about the difficult content ahead.** Let your students know, for example, that there may be discussions about death and torture, and not just violence.
  - **Prepare for reactions.** Students can react in different ways. Emotions may include anxiety, anger, guilt, shame or defensiveness. Some reactions, such as laughter, may seem inappropriate. Try to create a safe classroom space before the lesson, to help your students express themselves productively.
  - **Allow students to leave the classroom.** If a student feels uncomfortable, let them know there is a space where they can go to process content privately.
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## AFTER THE LESSON

- **If possible, end with a hopeful message.** After a lesson on difficult history, actionable ideas can help students feel there is a way forward.
- **Allow time for decompression and reflection.** Students may not be ready to discuss or share after the lesson. Give them time, and options for expressing themselves.
- **Offer different means of communicating.** Not all students will feel comfortable communicating their feelings in the same way. Give some options for sharing thoughts, such as small group discussions, drawing, colouring or writing.