



# BIG SONIA

SURVIVOR. GRANDMA. DIVA.



INFLATABLE FILM & ARGOT PICTURES PRESENTS A FILM BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SIFF / TRUE PRODUCTIONS & WOMEN YOU SHOULD FUND & BYEN | DIRECTED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY | PRODUCED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI | ORIGINAL SCORE BY BRAD ANTHONY LAINA | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TOM WRIGHT  
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Journeys in Film  
USC Rossier Center EDGE





# *Big Sonia*

## Curriculum Guide

*Journeys in Film*

[www.journeysinfilm.org](http://www.journeysinfilm.org)



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JOURNEYS IN FILM: BIG SONIA



# Educating for Global Understanding

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# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION

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About <i>Journeys in Film</i>	6
A Letter from Liam Neeson	8
Director's Statement	9
Introducing <i>Big Sonia</i>	11
To the Teacher	12

## LESSONS

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<b>LESSON 1:</b>	<b>AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST IN POLAND</b>	13
	(Social Studies)	
<b>LESSON 2:</b>	<b>GETTING TO KNOW THE REAL SONIA</b>	23
	(English Language Arts, Film Literacy)	
<b>LESSON 3:</b>	<b>LEARNING FROM THE PAST: AN ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT</b>	39
	(Social Studies, English Language Arts)	
<b>LESSON 4:</b>	<b>VIEWING A DOCUMENTARY FILM</b>	49
	(Social Studies, Film Literacy)	
<b>LESSON 5:</b>	<b>MALADAPTIVE STRESS RESPONSE AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA</b>	65
	(Psychology, Human Development)	



## About *Journeys in Film*

### Teaching Core Curriculum with Film

Founded in 2003, Journeys in Film operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to help our next generation gain a richer understanding of the diverse and complex world in which we live. Our goal is to help students recognize cultural biases and racism (including their own), cultivate human empathy and compassion, develop a deeper knowledge of universal issues and current challenges, and encourage civic engagement as competent world citizens.

Award-winning feature films and documentaries act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to other topics that have become critical for students to learn about: human rights, environmental sustainability, poverty, hunger, global health, diversity, gender, and immigration. Prominent educators on our team consult with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the development of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides complement teachers' existing lesson plans and meet mandated curricular requirements, providing teachers with an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

We prepare teachers to use film effectively in the classroom through customized professional development workshops and online webinars.

Journeys in Film is an organization with proven results. Individual teachers worldwide and entire school districts in the U.S. have employed our interdisciplinary film-based curricula.

- Millions of students have learned about our multicultural world through Journeys in Film's middle school series, based on films from Iran, South Africa, South Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, Tibet, India, China and Saudi Arabia.
- Students are becoming inspired by the courageous contemporary and historical figures portrayed in films such as *Hidden Figures*, *The Post*, and *He Named Me Malala*.
- Films like *Schindler's List*, *Defiant Requiem*, and *Big Sonia* not only teach about the Holocaust, but also demonstrate how one person can make a difference in the lives of others.
- Teachers are using our outstanding documentary series to teach about historical events, American prison systems, the critical role of photojournalists, and positive psychology.

Journeys in Film guides help teachers integrate these films into their classrooms, examining complex issues, encouraging students to be active rather than passive viewers, and maximizing the power of film to enhance critical thinking skills and to meet the Common Core Standards.



### Why teach with film?

Today's students are the most visually literate generation in history. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are primarily visual learners. Today's students are more affected by media than ever before. They seldom need to be coaxed into watching films; after all, everyone loves a good movie. Through their own desire to be entertained, students become captivated learners.

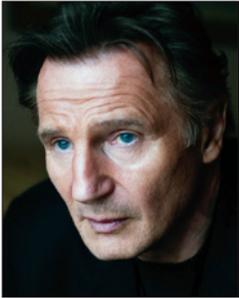
Films have long been overlooked as an educational tool. We teach our students literature that originates from many places around the world, but we tend to forget that what often spurs the imagination is both visual and auditory. Film, which in minutes can be screened and beamed to every country in the world, is this extraordinary educational tool that goes right into the heart of different cultures. One of its strengths lies in its ability to present information rapidly and convey atmosphere, making that world come to life. It allows viewers to “feel” and thereby develop empathy skills, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content, which in turn helps with understanding and analyzing concepts.

In teaching with films, we encourage our students to be critical consumers of what they see and teach them to consider the perspective of the filmmaker and challenge generalizations. Analyzing film and media is an empowering skill and one that is increasingly important for young people. To this end, it is imperative to integrate the film into a larger lesson, using it as a launching pad for historical and cultural exploration, as well as an examination of narrative perspective, character development, and media literacy.

**In one 7th grade student's words, “I like Journeys in Film because it just doesn't teach you like a book. It's better when you can actually see it happening. Films give a first-hand view of places and stories.”**

*Journeys in Film* is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

# A Letter from Liam Neeson



Working in films such as *Michael Collins* and *Schindler's List*, I've seen the power of film not only to entertain, but also to change the way audiences see themselves and the world. When I first met Joanne Ashe, herself the daughter of Holocaust survivors, she

explained to me her vision for a new educational program called *Journeys in Film: Educating for Global Understanding*. I grasped immediately how such a program could transform the use of film in the classroom from a passive viewing activity to an active, integral part of learning.

I have served as the national spokesperson for *Journeys in Film* since its inception because I absolutely believe in the effectiveness of film as an educational tool that can teach our young people to value and respect cultural diversity and to see themselves as individuals who can make a difference. *Journeys in Film* uses interdisciplinary, standards-aligned lesson plans that can support and enrich classroom programs in English, social studies, math, science, and the arts. Using films as a teaching tool is invaluable, and *Journeys in Film* has succeeded in creating outstanding film-based curricula integrated into core academic subjects.

By using carefully selected documentary and international films that depict life in other countries and cultures around the globe, combined with interdisciplinary curricula to transform entertainment media into educational media, we can use the classroom to bring the world to every student. Our film program dispels myths and misconceptions, enabling students to overcome biases; it connects the future leaders of the world with one another. As we provide teachers with lessons aligned to Common Core Standards, we are also laying a foundation for understanding, acceptance, trust, and peace.

Please share my vision of a more harmonious world where cross-cultural understanding and the ability to converse about complex issues are keys to a healthy present and a peaceful future. Whether you are a student, an educator, a filmmaker, or a financial supporter, I encourage you to participate in the *Journeys in Film* program.

Please join this vital journey for our kids' future. They are counting on us. *Journeys in Film* gets them ready for the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Liam Neeson". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

## Directors' Statement



Sometimes the really big stories come from the smallest places. As filmmakers, we travel all over the world chasing stories about people making an impact. In making *Big Sonia*, we realized some of those stories are right in our own backyards and that you don't have to go *far* to come *home*.



When we began filming in 2011, Leah's grandmother Sonia Warshawski was 85 years old, and we had just started dating. On the heels of our last feature documentary, *Finding Hillywood*, our intention was to make

a short film about Sonia's small tailoring shop, John's Tailoring, and the steady stream of loyal customers that came in for the conversation as much as for tailoring. Sonia's extended family had joked for years about using the shop as the subject of a reality show. We'd all long witnessed Sonia holding court from her counter-top podium, doling out marriage advice, recommending books about WWII to teenagers, and doing interviews for local news stations. We knew Sonia had a gift for making anyone in her shop feel like the most important person in the world. And we knew the shop was her own refuge from the horrors of her past as a teenage Holocaust survivor.

However, once we started filming for our short, our anticipated *weeks* of production turned into *months*. It soon became apparent to us that customers were drawn to John's Tailoring not just for gossip and a bit of human connection, but for their

own redemption. They came in because Sonia sets a glowing example of how an ordinary person can move past deep personal and historical trauma to find peace and heal others.

Still, our time with Sonia revealed her complex side. Her interactions with customers — many of whom she sees as her best friends — are very different from her relationships with her own family, which have often been tense and tender, overshadowed by decades of survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress. During the course of production, we began to perceive the trauma suffered not just by Sonia, but by my aunts and father, who had survived their own brand of trauma in a household gripped by grief and loss. We also began to see the ways in which Sonia's pain had branded Leah, as a third-generation survivor, the grandchild of refugees, and the child of a parent who'd long grappled with his own mother's distance and pain.

Then, suddenly, the plot turned. Sonia got an eviction notice for John's Tailoring, her home-away-from-home for 35 years. Her panic was palpable. And while we knew Sonia would survive the physical loss of her shop, we were also compelled by her store's powerfully symbolic role as a forum for human connection—a stronghold and a place of safety for Sonia and so many others. We continued to fundraise and film, and our "short" turned into a feature. Oh, and somehow in the middle of it all, we got married. The store was now woven into the fabric of our lives, too.

Despite featuring a Holocaust survivor, *Big Sonia* is not a "Jewish movie." And it's not a "Holocaust movie." More than anything, *Big Sonia* is a story about humanity: our human potential to overcome even the worst of the world's sins and atrocities with love, compassion and understanding. It's a tale about survival, yes, but not only the heroic kind—the kind

that was forced upon Sonia and is forced upon other victims of genocide and hatred. It's also about the everyday acts of survival we must all undertake just to be human: to overlook slights and disappointments, to rise above bigotry and ignorance and self-doubt, to push for peace and forgiveness even when our instincts urge retribution or bitterness.

We premiered *Big Sonia* at bi-coastal film festivals the day after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, we had no way of knowing that the themes of our film would find new relevance in our current political moment. Sonia's life story has been called an antidote to the hate and fear we see around us, and we hope that is true. But the real lesson of *Big Sonia* is that we've *all* got the capacity to combat the worst humanity has to offer. Like Sonia, we all have the opportunity to create for others the places of comfort and connection where survival takes root.

With love and gratitude,

Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

Co-Directors

*Big Sonia*



## Introducing *Big Sonia*

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential, and yet recent statistics show that many Americans simply do not know about it.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the overwhelming numbers that died as a result of Hitler's rise to power is hard for the human mind to comprehend. In this film, however, the viewer learns about the Holocaust through the eyes of one person who lived through it and her family, who were forever shaped by the events of the 1940s.

Teenage Sonia Warshawski was living with her mother, father, sister, and brother in Międzyrzec, Poland, when the German army invaded. Her father and brother were shot, her sister disappeared and her survival was uncertain, and Sonia and her mother were forced to work as slave laborers until the day they were deported to the Majdanek death camp. After her mother died in the gas chamber, Sonia was sent first to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Bergen-Belsen, where she was finally liberated as the war drew to a close.

This film by her granddaughter gives students insight into both the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole and the profound effect that it had on one individual and succeeding generations. Now in her nineties, Sonia is a vibrant, busy woman who loves interacting with family and with the customers who come to her tailor shop. She speaks to school groups, prison inmates, and others about her experiences. Her story is one of unimaginable suffering, but also of hope, of resilience, and of a refusal to let herself hate. Classes viewing this film will have a memorable experience, a blend of factual knowledge of history and the personal story of a remarkable woman.

### **Film credits:**

**DIRECTORS:** Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

**WRITTEN BY:** Eric Frith

**PRODUCER:** Leah Warshawski

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:** Dwayne J. Clark, Thomas Lee Wright

**CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:** Claude and Bertina Thau,  
Ni'Coel Stark

**MUSIC:** Brad Anthony Laina

**CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Todd Soliday

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/study-shows-americans-are-forgetting-about-holocaust-n865396>

# To the Teacher

This curriculum guide, like other *Journeys in Film* resources, is based on a few fundamental beliefs:

- That a well-made, relevant film is an excellent way to convey information and teach students important critical thinking skills.
- That an interdisciplinary approach will reach students who have different learning modalities and interests.
- That talented teachers interacting with real students on a daily basis are best positioned to write good lesson plans.

There are five lessons in this guide. Although it is possible to use all of these lessons, most teachers will select just one or several for their classes. You might wish to consider a team approach built around *Big Sonia* for a memorable experience for your students.

Lesson 1 is a social studies lesson that provides context for the film by giving students background on the invasion and occupation of Poland by Nazi troops and the subsequent efforts of the Third Reich to eliminate all Polish Jews. Students use the IWitness archive of the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California to hear the video testimony of survivors of these years and complete a research project using these and other primary and secondary sources.

Lesson 2, primarily an English language arts lesson that also has value for film literacy, gives students a chance to be active viewers of the documentary. They take a close look at Sonia Warshawski's history, family, and personality as they screen the film to analyze the traits that helped her survive and the impact of her horrific experiences on the rest of her life.

Lesson 3 asks students in social studies and English language arts classes to become historians themselves, through locating an older person who has struggled through a significant challenge, preparing open-ended questions, and conducting an interview. Students then write a report on this experience.

Lesson 4, primarily a film literacy lesson, explores the distinctive techniques used by the makers of this documentary to create a narrative structure that the viewer can follow. They employed observational footage, interviews, voice-over, music, photographs, and even animation to tell their story. This lesson provides an opportunity to do a "close reading" of the opening of the film and then to analyze techniques used in the film as a whole.

Lesson 5 is a psychology lesson that delves into stress caused by trauma, human physical and mental responses to that stress, and intergenerational trauma. By looking at three generations of the Warshawski family, students learn about how past events can have a profound influence on the present and even the future.

For more information about this and other free *Journeys in Film* curriculum and discussion guides, please see the *Journeys in Film* website at [www.journeysinfilm.org](http://www.journeysinfilm.org).



# An Introduction to the Holocaust in Poland

## Enduring Understandings

- The actions and decisions of political leaders affect families on a deeply personal level.
- The Holocaust was the result of a series of events over a long period of time.
- First-hand accounts of events provide history with a sense of humanity and generate empathy for those who lived through those events.

## Essential Questions

- What were the events that led to the separation of Sonia Warshawski's family?
- What was life like in a concentration camp?
- How were some of the camps liberated?
- How were other families affected by these same events?
- Did these kinds of events continue to happen after World War II?

## Notes to the Teacher

For students who sometimes think their own parents are ancient, *Big Sonia* will be an eye-opening film. Sonia Warshawski is a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor who runs her own tailor shop and still finds time to speak to school groups, prison inmates, and others about the occupation of her home country of Poland by Hitler's army and its effort to destroy the Jewish community there. This lesson gives students some initial context for viewing the film and then asks them to research additional information.

In this lesson, students will research the historical events of the 1930s and 1940s that shaped the lives of families and individuals like Sonia. In small groups, students will use the IWitness video testimonies available from the archives of the USC Shoah Foundation as well as other resources to gain a broader perspective on the experiences of people in this time. Their research will be presented to their classmates in the form of a PowerPoint, video, blog, or other style of oral presentation.

To use the IWitness archive at USC, go to <https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>, which will require you to create an educator account prior to the start of the lesson. You should use your school email to set up your account to gain access to the full range of resources that the website has to offer. Once you have your account set up, you will want to watch the "What is IWitness" video on the homepage just to acclimate yourself with the project broadly so that you can provide guidance to students as they do their research.

The presentations require that the students use both primary and secondary sources in their research. Be sure to remind

students that primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event from people who were alive at the time. Examples of primary sources are the IWitness videos, diaries, letters, interviews, newspaper articles, documents, artifacts, and photographs. Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources and often contain analysis or interpretation of how an event affected history. They often quote and refer to primary sources in their text. Examples of secondary sources include documentaries, textbooks, and other books about a subject written by people who did not experience events directly, and scholarly articles.

The lesson begins with a review of events leading up to the occupation of Poland by Germany and eventually to the ostracization of certain groups of people. Useful timelines for preparing yourself to review these events for your students can be found at these websites:

<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1933-1938>

<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1939-1941>

Both of these sites are part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website. This is an excellent resource for your students to use for their presentations as well.

If time permits, the Shoah Foundation also has testimonies from people who experienced other genocides and attempts by governments to eliminate groups of people; they would be very useful if you choose to develop an extension activity exploring other countries and places in the world that have traumatic histories.

For guidance on general principles for teaching about the Holocaust, you will find excellent advice at <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>.

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3**

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6**

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.



## Duration of lesson

3-4 one-hour class periods plus time to view the film

## Assessments

Oral presentations

Research organization worksheets

## Materials

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1** and **2**

Access to the internet through computers, iPads, or other personal devices for the following websites:

The USC Shoah Foundation

<https://sfi.usc.edu/collections>

The End Genocide website

<http://endgenocide.org/learn/past-genocides/>

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum site

<https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide>

## Procedure

1. Before viewing *Big Sonia*, take sufficient time to go over with your students the events from 1933 to 1939 leading up to the invasion of Poland, drawing on your own knowledge and the first timeline suggested in Notes to the Teacher.
2. After reviewing the events that occurred from 1933 to 1939, tell students that they are going to view a film about a Holocaust survivor named Sonia Warshawski. Write her name on the board. Explain that they won't see the same horrors and hear the same stories they perhaps already know about the atrocities suffered by so many during this incredibly dark period in history. Tell them that this story is subtler than that and, most importantly, it is a story about hope. Explain that Sonia Warshawski is a Jewish woman from Poland who survived the Holocaust and started a new life with her husband in the United States. The film is about her choices and how she has made a life for herself as a mother, a widow, and a businesswoman while slowly affecting the lives of those in her community. The world continues to change around her and Sonia learns how to survive every step of the way.
3. Next, inform the students that after viewing the film, they will be doing research projects in small groups about various events in Sonia's life in the period leading up to and during the Holocaust.
4. Show the film, which has a run time of 93 minutes.
5. After viewing the film, ask students to make a list of the various events that occurred in Sonia's lifetime that led to the Holocaust and one of the events that happened during

her time in captivity. You may need to prompt them with questions to help them remember what they saw. For example: When did Germany occupy Poland? Why did the Nazis move into Poland? What happened to Sonia's family once Poland was occupied? Where did she go with her mother when the Nazis found their hiding place? What was life like in the concentration camps? What happened during liberation?

6. These questions should help your students compile a list of events similar to the ones below. These events will be the basis for their presentations. You should have at least one event for each of the small groups that will be researching these topics; a few more to give every group a choice would be a good idea.
  - A. September 1, 1939—German invasion of Poland
  - B. May 20, 1940—Auschwitz Concentration Camp is established
  - C. November 15, 1940—The Warsaw Ghetto is sealed
  - D. September 1, 1941—Jewish badges are required
  - E. April 1941, 1941—Krakow ghetto is sealed
  - F. October 1942–November 1943—Operation Reinhard
  - G. April 15, 1945—Liberation of Bergen-Belsen camp
7. Arrange students into groups of 2 or 3 based on the topic they are most interested in. Have them do some initial research on their event and determine which aspects of the event they would like to highlight in their presentation. Explain to them that they are responsible for researching more than what happened during their event. They must also research how people felt, what it was like to live under the new conditions, and what the motives were behind the event. Remind them that Sonia's experiences with some of these events are mentioned in the movie, but there is

room to explore each of them with greater depth. Push your students to consider what they would do if they faced these situations.

8. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: RESEARCH ORGANIZATION** and explain that it is designed to help the students approach researching their topic from both an academic and an empathetic view.
9. Allow students one class period to do their research and ask you questions. If you have not reviewed primary and secondary sources, you may want to work with your librarian to remind them of the difference. Encourage students to use the USC Shoah Foundation—<https://sfi.usc.edu/collections>, the End Genocide website—<http://endgenocide.org/learn/past-genocides>, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum site —<https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide> when doing their research; be sure to demonstrate how to access the websites. Students can also use clips from interviews, interactive maps, diary entries, etc. to enhance their findings.
10. Once students have completed their research, they should begin creating their presentations. They have a choice of how they would like to present their findings. Once they decide if they will be making a video, PowerPoint, or some other type of oral presentation, give them the rubric for the presentation. Review the rubric with the class. It is important that they see everything that is required of them before they begin creating their presentations. There is some flexibility in the rubric to allow for their creativity and to encourage them to work together. It is up to your discretion if you will allow another class period to create the presentations.

# Lesson 1 (SOCIAL STUDIES)



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11. During the third or fourth class meeting, allow students to present their research. Each presentation should run no longer than 8 minutes but should be at least 6 minutes to really cover the event. After each presentation, allow time for the audience to ask questions.

## Extension Activity

After they complete their presentations, consider assigning students an extension assignment that explores other genocides that have occurred. The USC Shoah Foundation site contains many interviews from survivors of genocides and massacres in other parts of the world.

For homework or classwork, ask students to watch an interview on the USC Shoah Foundation website from a survivor of a massacre other than the World War 2 Holocaust. Ask them to write a 3–5 paragraph paper that either compares the experiences of their chosen interviewee to the experiences of the people they researched in their project OR let them write a reflective response that asks them to consider why genocides and massacres happen.



Handout 1 ► P. 1

# Organizer for Research

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_

Event to Research: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Use at least two primary sources such as interviews and two secondary sources such as historical research to learn about your event. Remember to include responses to the “W” Questions (Who, What, Where, When, and Why) to explain the event. Also include research that explains what happened to the people involved in the event. How were they affected? How did their lives change? Continue on a separate sheet of paper if necessary.

## Primary Source 1:

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Publication \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

Information found/significance:



**Handout 1 ▶ P. 2**

# Organizer for Research

**Primary Source 2:**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Publication \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

Information found/significance:

**Secondary Source 1:**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Publication \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

Information found/significance:



**Handout 1 ▶ P. 3**

# Organizer for Research

**Secondary Source 2:**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Publication \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

Information found/significance:

**Additional Source:**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Publication \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

Information found/significance:



**Handout 2**

# Presentation Rubric: An Introduction to the Holocaust in Poland

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_

Category	10	7	4	1
<b>Research</b>	Student accurately quotes, cites, and references researched material. Contains an MLA- or APA-formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation.	Student mostly quotes, cites and references researched material. Contains an MLA- or APA-formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation.	Student attempts to quote, cite, and reference researched material. Contains an attempted Works Cited Page at the end of the presentation.	Student makes no attempt to quote, cite, and reference researched material. Does not contain a formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation.
<b>Content</b>	Demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of the topic and answers all research questions.	Demonstrates some knowledge of the topic and answers at least 5 research questions.	Demonstrates knowledge of the topic and answers at least 3 research questions.	Reflects little to no understanding of the topic and does not answer the questions.
<b>Analysis</b>	Presentation clearly assesses the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources.	Presentation mostly assesses the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources.	Presentation attempts to assess the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources.	Presentation does not assess the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources.
<b>Presentation</b>	Presenters were engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Engaged their classmates through interactive, creative activities.	Presenters were mostly engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Engaged their classmates through interactive, creative activities.	Presenters struggled to be engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Attempted to engage their classmates.	Presenters were not engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Did not engage their classmates through interactive, creative activities.
<b>Length</b>	Presentation is at least 6-8 minutes in length.	Presentation is at least 5 minutes in length.	Presentation is at least 4 minutes in length.	Presentation is fewer than 4 minutes in length.
<b>Group Work</b>	Presentation clearly illustrates that the group worked well together.	Presentation attempts to illustrate that the group worked well together.	Presentation was clearly designed by only one or two members of the group.	Presentation was created and delivered by one group member.
<b>Primary Sources</b>	Includes at least 3 primary sources in the presentation.	Includes at least 2 primary sources in the presentation.	Includes 1 primary source in the presentation.	No primary sources in the presentation.





## Getting to Know the Real Sonia

### Enduring Understandings

- One person has the potential to affect the lives of many others.
- Great suffering can have an indelible effect on a person's character and choices.
- Getting to know someone is a complex process that involves listening, observation, and thought.
- People tend to respond positively to courage, honesty, and love.
- People who go through terrible experiences can move forward to meaningful and purposeful lives.

### Essential Questions

- What are Sonia's most notable personality and character traits?
- Why does Sonia share her painful experiences during the Holocaust instead of trying to forget them?
- Why do so many diverse people respond to Sonia with appreciation and affection?
- How can viewing and discussing *Big Sonia* affect an individual's life?
- How can a person who experiences great suffering at the hands of others move forward though life without despair or bitterness?

### Notes to the Teacher:

Audiences of *Big Sonia* have an opportunity to meet and understand a remarkable and complex person. Sonia Warshawski's nine decades of life, as they are reflected in the movie, reveal a far-from-easy past: loss of family and experiences of human cruelty during the Holocaust; the struggle after World War II and liberation from Auschwitz to go on with life and raise a family in the United States; her husband's debilitating illnesses and death; hearing people deny the very realities to which she was a witness as a teenager; the impending loss of the tailor shop that has become an anchor in her life.

As Sonia says, she has been damaged by things that have happened, but this very fact seems to connect her in deep ways with the small and large groups with whom she interacts and with members of the film audience. (Who has not been damaged by life experiences? Who has not faced the challenge to go on?) Despite the damage, what we see in Sonia is a person who is remarkably whole: honest, compassionate, humble, purposeful, creative, friendly, and resilient.

*Big Sonia* is a documentary, which makes it different from other types of movie experiences. Unlike fictional films and docudramas, documentaries are bound to facts. The Academy Award criteria for documentary nominations emphasize factual accuracy as well as theatrical and creative excellence. Documentaries allow for great latitude in directorial choices, including juxtaposition of reenactments, animation, and interviews with real-life footage.<sup>1</sup> For many students this type of film is relatively new territory requiring discussion before they can comfortably get into the film as a whole. (Note:

<sup>1</sup> [www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility](http://www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility)

Lesson 4 of this guide engages students in a detailed analysis of the complex processes involved in creating *Big Sonia*.)

The first part of this lesson uses the movie's trailer to accomplish this purpose. **HANDOUT 1** helps students to anticipate ways *Big Sonia* enables viewers to listen in on Sonia in various contexts, to observe her at work in the tailor shop, to view animation about the Holocaust, to glimpse aspects of Sonia's rich post-Holocaust family life, and to hear how people respond to her. Students discuss the challenges involved in making a good documentary; the assessment activity involves planning elements of an original documentary. This assignment promotes active viewing of the choices made in the documentary to characterize Sonia. (Note: The activity also lays a foundation for Lesson 3, which leads students to development of an oral history.) By the conclusion of Part 1, students are ready to truly get to know her.

Part 2 involves viewing the entire film, which takes about an hour and a half. You will probably want to stop it occasionally to allow students to ask questions, make clarifications, and answer the questions on **HANDOUT 2**. After discussing the handout, which garners first impressions and understandings of Sonia's personality and experiences, student groups focus attention on understanding and reaching conclusions based on specific elements emphasized in the documentary: John's Tailor Shop; interview settings; family and personal friends; Sonia's meeting with the small group of students; her session with the prison inmates; her words and responses when she talks about the Holocaust. Groups' presentations provide a useful assessment tool. By the conclusion of this section

of the lesson, students should have a growing awareness of personal characteristics stressed in the documentary: courage, strength, resilience, love, purposefulness, compassion, and cheerfulness.

Part 3 begins with a look at "The Optimist Creed," which was written over a hundred years ago by Christian D. Larson and which is displayed prominently in the tailor shop. Students reflect on ways Sonia's life reflects elements of the creed. They consider ways we get to know other people and identify specific traits they see in Sonia, as well as evidence to substantiate those traits. You will want to emphasize careful word choices with attention to nuances in denotation and connotation. (For example, *resilient* and *flexible* are near-synonyms, but the first suggests a strength not necessarily conveyed by the second.) Finally, students choose among options for a culminating writing assignment.

This lesson is very thorough. If time is short, feel free to adapt the activities as needed.



## COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually quantitatively, and orally.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. (Note: In this case, the movie itself is the primary text.)

## Duration of the Lesson

Approximately five or six class periods

## Assessments

Completion of **HANDOUTS 1, 2, 3, and 5**

Completion of an original documentary plan (Part 1)

Participation in group presentation (Part 2)

Completion of summative writing assignment (Part 3)

Evidence of active viewing of the trailer and the movie

Participation in class discussion

## Materials

Videos of *Big Sonia* and of the movie's trailer

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1** through **6** for each student

Optional: Poster displaying "The Optimist's Creed" (available through sources such as Amazon)

## Procedure

### Part 1: Beginning *Big Sonia*

1. Start the class by explaining that students are going to view a movie about a Holocaust survivor. Explore briefly what this term means. How old would a Holocaust survivor be today? Point out that the number of intervening decades means that the number of survivors is constantly diminishing.

2. Explain that students will first view the movie's trailer (about 2 minutes long), which you will show several times. Before starting the trailer, distribute **HANDOUT 1** and review the questions. Then show the trailer at <https://bigsonia.com/trailer-media>.
3. After students have viewed the trailer and completed the handout, conduct a discussion based on their answers.

Suggested Responses:

- A. The title frame may seem ambiguous, even fanciful. Who is Sonia? Is she big? Why is the frame embellished with flowers?
- B. Scenes juxtapose Sonia at work at the tailor shop, her being interviewed and speaking with audiences, animated sequences about the Holocaust experiences, and others speaking about Sonia.
- C. We see an outgoing and friendly person who is willing to talk about her terrible experiences decades ago. She is given to colorful clothing. We also see firm determination, resilience, and the choice to live a purposeful working life long after the age when most people have retired.
- D. The film is probably intended to acquaint audiences with Sonia and to inspire responses, perhaps of admiration or emulation.
- E. For example, how are all of the people in the trailer connected? What is going on at the shop? Why does Sonia persist in talking about painful memories?
- F. Quotations from the trailer:
  - In the first quote, we seem to be overhearing Sonia during an interview. She seems to be talking about the Holocaust and the impossibility of forgetting what happened. Many people can identify with the

experience of powerful events that become indelible memories.

- In the second quote, we again listen in as Sonia describes one of her coping strategies--keeping active and busy, not just dwelling on the past.
  - The third quote comments on her purpose in the speaking engagements--an effort to connect with others and touch their hearts.
  - The fourth quote shares a response of someone who has listened to Sonia. In truth, most people have "been through something" and appreciate others' compassion and understanding.
4. Explain that *Big Sonia* is a documentary, meaning that it is nonfiction in all of its elements, but that it is also theatrical and creative. A person making a documentary faces the challenge of combining elements to convey reality. Ask students to consider possibilities for several documentary topics and elements that might be included in creating a film about them. For example:
    - The Battle of Gettysburg (film sequences from Civil War reenactments; images of newspaper articles from the mid-1800s; interviews with historians)
    - The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or another prominent person (interviews with eyewitnesses; TV news clips; video of the person addressing an audience or responding to interview questions)
  5. Tell students that Sonia's granddaughter Leah Warshawski produced and directed the film *Big Sonia*. She was in a unique position to gather materials, create film ideas, and present the subject matter in a theatrical manner.



6. Ask students to select a person they know well and also admire as a topic for a possible documentary. Assign short essays or oral presentations in which they identify the person, explain reasons for choosing this person, and describe three distinct approaches they would use in the project. If necessary, provide examples of topics, such as a relative who has dealt with a serious medical challenge, someone who has endured a traumatic event, or someone who has worked to address a significant local issue. What footage of the person in action would be appropriate? Would reenactment be helpful? What persons might be interviewed? Would photographs, home movies, letters, or diary entries help?
7. When these decisions have been completed and recorded, have students share their writings or presentations. Close with discussion of the following questions:
  - What sorts of techniques do you find most interesting as ways to convey an understanding of a person?
  - What can make it difficult to convey that understanding?
  - What do you expect to find when you view the entire film about Sonia Warshawski?

### Part 2: Getting to Know Sonia Better

1. Point out that the trailer has prepared students for the many ways the film presents Sonia. After thinking about ways they could depict a person in an original documentary, students are in a position to view *Big Sonia* with active and discerning minds.
2. Before starting the film, distribute **HANDOUT 2: ACTIVE VIEWING OF *Big Sonia*** and review the questions. You may want to pause the film at the following moments:
  - A. about ten minutes in, when Sonia says, “I was fourteen.”
  - B. after she says, “So I am damaged—there is no doubt about it.”
  - C. after her meeting with the small group of students.
  - D. after her son breaks down while trying to read aloud a poem he wrote years ago.
3. Encourage students to feel free to ask you to stop the film or replay sections along the way to ask questions and make clarifications.
4. When students have seen the film and completed the handout, conduct a general discussion based on responses.

#### *Suggested Responses*

- A. *Cheerful, work-oriented, friendly, compassionate, creative, honest, etc.*
- B. *It seems as if everyone Sonia meets is important to her. Among these are her children Regina, Morrie, and Debbie, and her granddaughter Leah, but also others she meets in a variety of situations, including work at the tailor shop, speaking engagements and even grocery-shopping.*
- C. *She is, of course, busy with work and customers in the tailor shop, as well as with public speaking commitments. She spends time and attention on her personal appearance. She likes to draw and make flower arrangements.*
- D. *Many people seem to feel that they can connect with Sonia in a significant way. They seem to sense genuine integrity, openness, and compassion.*

- E. Examples might include the John's Tailor Shop sign, flower arrangements, the tattoo on Sonia's arm; the tattered remnants of her mother's scarf, photographs, vivid fabrics, and the "whatever" pillow.
  - F. There are numerous possibilities, including, for example, the comment from the prison inmate about strength and physical size.
4. Ask students to explain how we learn about characters from a film. (Their appearance, their facial expressions, what they say, what they do, what others say about them.) Tell students that they are going to look at some lines from the film that tell about Sonia. Distribute copies of **HANDOUT 3**. Do the first quotation on the handout together as a class and then have students work to identify the speakers and explain their contributions to our knowledge of Sonia.

#### *Suggested Responses*

1. Sonia expresses this idea, amazement that she somehow survived, more than once in the course of the movie.
  2. Sonia expresses an understanding that terrible experiences can have lasting effects, among them chronic fear.
  3. Caroline voices this during Sonia's meeting with the small group of students, voicing a reaction shared by many who hear her story.
  4. This statement from Sonia is central to her entire message. While she admits that forgiveness is beyond her capacity, she rejects hatred as a response.
  5. Sonia's son Morrie says this about her. Like his sisters, he is aware that growing up the child of Holocaust survivors had its own set of challenges and limitations.
  6. Sonia remembers this advice from her mother; the idea is that self-pity in a difficult circumstance leads nowhere, and a change in perspective on the situation is necessary.
  7. This quote from one of the prison inmates links directly to the film's title and the idea of tiny Sonia as an incredibly big and strong person.
  8. This comment from SuEllen Fried, the woman who connected Sonia with the prisoners, means that others, like Sonia, can move past painful experiences to live purposeful lives.
  9. Olivia, the young girl whose essay about Sonia won first prize, articulates one of the film's central messages about connecting with and understanding people.
  10. This tribute from a customer at the tailor shop reflects the respect and admiration Sonia evokes from many people.)
5. Remind the class that many aspects of a film contribute to our understanding of the characters. Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group one of the following topics:
- A. John's Tailor Shop
  - B. interview settings
  - C. family and personal friends
  - D. Sonia's meeting with the students
  - E. the session with the prison inmates
  - F. Sonia's words and memories about the Holocaust.

Explain that each group is to focus intensively on sections of the movie that deal with the assigned topic for detailed analysis of what is conveyed about Sonia. Direct the groups to select one brief clip (no more than 2 or 3 minutes) and to prepare to present that as well as their conclusions to the class as a whole. (Note: This activity will be most effective if groups have access to the film so that they can fast-forward to



and closely examine the scenes most directly related to their assigned topic.)

6. Have groups complete presentations. Among a wide variety of possible conclusions are the following:

- A. **John's Tailor Shop:** For Sonia, the shop has been a long-term place for purposeful and creative work as well as meaningful connections with others. It shows her love for colors, for fabrics, and for flowers. It is a place for the busyness she values as a way to avoid focusing too much on negative events. The shop sequences also show the powerful impact that Sonia has on others' lives. The relocation of the shop at the end echoes the film's theme that life can go on after setbacks.
- B. **The interview settings:** A little nervousness, even about unfamiliar technology, does not deter Sonia from her purpose. Her answers reflect both heart and mind connections, as well as honesty and humility. She makes an effort to look her best, too, and she treats the interviewer with courtesy and respect.
- C. **Family and personal friends:** After the war, Sonia went on to a successful marriage and raised three children (Regina, Morrie, and Debbie) to become likable and responsible adults who have tremendous respect for her. It is evident that consequences of the Holocaust lingered in their childhood home, among them fear, sorrow, and an awareness that really terrible things can happen. In Sonia's case, this made her a somewhat demanding mother, and probably one with little tolerance for petty foolishness. Family is clearly a central value.
- D. **Sonia's meeting with the students:** Sonia seems to know and understand that the young people also have individual sufferings and relational ties that matter as

much as her own. Her main concerns seem to be to connect with them compassionately and to encourage them to stand up and speak out for what is right, to believe that one person can have an impact, make a difference. The movie stresses her lasting impact on Caroline.

- E. **The session with the prison inmates:** Sonia meets them with the respect and openness we see between her and everyone else, and they seem to connect with her because of the sense that she, too, "has been through something." The fact that she has come through not unscathed, but nonetheless certainly alive and successful, is encouraging. There is also recognition that Sonia's unearned experiences in the 1940s make the current prison situation seem much less unbearable. The Optimist Creed is a link between Sonia and this particular group.
- F. **Words and responses about the Holocaust:** Sonia tries to relate these in a somewhat factual manner and with tight emotional control. Even seven decades of time have not been enough to make this easy. She does not claim the power to forgive but refuses to harbor hatred. She sees herself as a witness obligated to attest to what she has seen, heard, and experienced. This is a concept also included in the poem her son Morrie wrote long ago.

### Part 3: Understanding and Responding to Sonia

- 1. Remind students of the question the newspaper reporter asked Sonia when the tailor shop was being closed. Ask how she responded to the question about how she could deal with so many losses. (She pointed out a prominent display of "The Optimist Creed.") Ask students to define

the word *optimist*. (An optimist is a person who expects and believes the best, who sees a glass as half-full rather than half-empty.) Then ask students to define the word *creed*. (A creed is an articulation of fundamental beliefs.) [Note: This is a good opportunity to explore two important Latin language roots of English: *optimus*, meaning “best” and *credo*, meaning “I believe.” Some other English vocabulary words stemming from them are “optimize,” “suboptimal,” “credible,” “incredulous,” and “credential.”]

2. Distribute **HANDOUT 4: THE OPTIMIST CREED**, project it on a screen, or direct students’ attention to a poster of the creed displayed in the classroom. Have volunteers read each of the tenets aloud. Discuss each tenet as you work through the list.
3. Ask students, working individually or with partners, to select one tenet and apply it to Sonia as she is depicted at a specific moment in the film. Follow with a general pooling of observations and conclusions. (For example, Sonia is strong enough not to lose her equilibrium at the prospect of losing the tailor shop. She meets each customer with a cheerful greeting and a smile.)
4. Remind students that they have considered how character is conveyed in film. Ask students to brainstorm ways we get to know people in real life. (We listen to what they say, both in words and in body language, about what they think and feel; we observe what they do and what they avoid doing. We talk with them and also hear what others have to say. Getting to know someone well takes time.)
5. Point out that *Big Sonia* lets us get to know Sonia through all of these ways, and the time factor is accomplished through the voices of people, including Vernon at the mall,

who have known her for many years. Through the activities in Part 2 of this lesson, students have heard Sonia speak about her life and thoughts; they have seen her struggling for control as she tells her story and also cheerfully and affectionately greeting people; they have heard her children speak about her; they have witnessed her impact on diverse individuals.

6. Have the class brainstorm a list of character and personality traits they see in Sonia and record them on the board. Encourage careful and precise word choices. (Examples: courage, compassion, commitment, resilience, friendliness, diligence, truthfulness, gratitude, loyalty, love, purposefulness, cheerfulness.)
7. Distribute **HANDOUT 5: SONIA WARSHAWSKI’S MOST IMPORTANT TRAITS**, and have students complete it individually. When they have finished, have them post results on the walls around the room and invite them to walk around to view others’ responses. Use the handouts as evaluation tools, considering both the traits selected and evidence from the film.
8. Distribute **HANDOUT 6: CULMINATING CHARACTER ASSIGNMENT** to explain options for the final writing assignment. Establish a day for peer conferencing and a final due date.



Handout 1 ► P. 1

## A First Encounter with *Big Sonia*

**Directions:**

Carefully view the trailer for the film and answer the following questions.

1. What responses do the film's title and the images around it evoke?

2. What diverse kinds of scenes does the trailer suggest? Which of those interest you the most?

3. What are your initial observations about Sonia's personality?

4. Judging from the trailer, what do you think is the purpose of the movie as a whole?



Handout 1 ► P. 2

## A First Encounter with *Big Sonia*

5. What questions does the trailer leave in your mind?

6. Read the following quotations from the film. Who are the speakers? What do they mean? Do you agree?

“You live with it all your life, and you can never forget.”

“I keep myself always busy and this helps me not to think so much about it.”

“If I reach one heart, I accomplish something.”

“It takes people who have been through something to reach people who are going through something.”



**Handout 2**

# Active Viewing of *Big Sonia*

**Directions:** As you view the movie, take notes on the following questions.

1. What personal characteristics seem to you to be most prominent in Sonia's personality and motivation?

2. Who are the people that seem most important to her?

3. With what activities does she fill her life?

4. How do other people respond to her? Why?

5. What objects and images does the film stress in connection with Sonia? Why?

6. Jot down two or three quotes by or about Sonia that seem particularly significant. What do they mean to you?



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**

# Learning about Sonia by Listening

**Directions:** The following quotations are presented in the same order as they occur in the movie. For each, identify the speaker and explain how the quotation illuminates the character of Sonia Warshawski.

“How I made it—it was a miracle.”

“When you have such horrible experiences as a youngster—it left a fear.”

“I just respect you so much.”

“But I will not hate because the hate will destroy me, and I will be a hater like them.”

“On the one hand, she is a woman who is very, very loving, but she is also very demanding.”



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 2**

# Learning about Sonia by Listening

“Remember: Whenever you are down, look more down and you will be on top.”

“Strong things don’t come in the biggest packages. It can be very small, but incredibly strong.”

“No matter what has happened to you, it does not have to be a defining experience of your life.”

“I believe the connections Sonia Warshawski makes with all people from all generations can teach us to understand each other better.”

“She’s a Kansas City treasure.”



**Handout 4**

# The Optimist Creed

**Directions:**

This poem was written over a century ago by Charles D. Larson. As you read it, consider both your own responses and ways it connects to *Big Sonia*.

Promise Yourself . . .

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.

To talk health, happiness, and prosperity to every person you meet.

To make all your friends feel that there is something worthwhile in them.

To look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.

To think only of the best, to work only for the best and to expect only the best.

To be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.

To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.

To wear a cheerful expression at all times and give a smile to every living creature you meet.

To give so much time to improving yourself that you have no time to criticize others.

To be far too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.

To think well of yourself and to proclaim this fact to the world, not in loud word, but in great deeds.

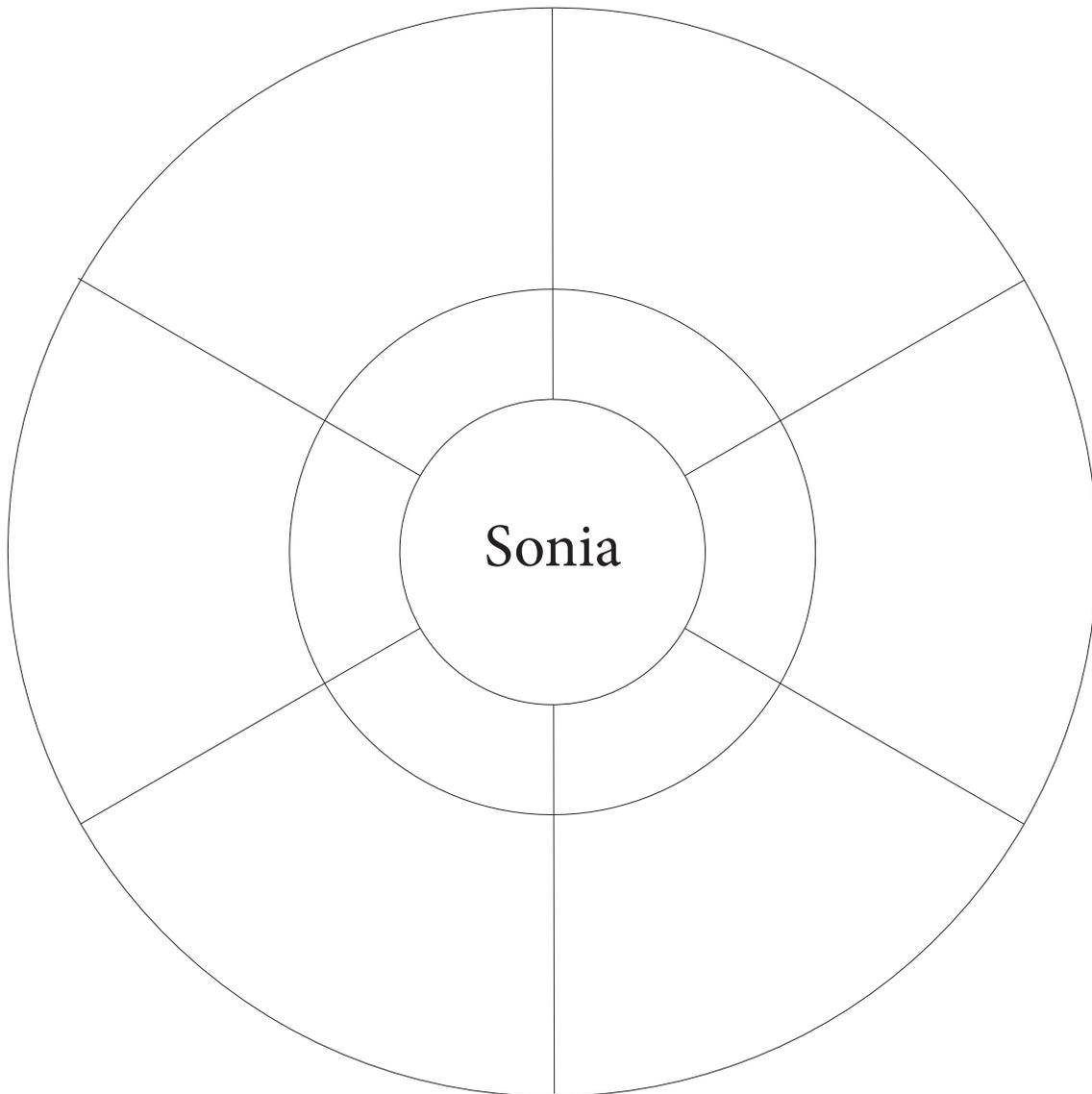
To live in the faith that the whole world is on your side, so long as you are true to the best that is in you.



## Handout 5 Sonia Warshawski's Most Important Traits

**Directions:**

Use this graphic organizer to identify six of Sonia's character or personality traits that you find most important or interesting. Using careful and precise word choices, write each trait in a space in the inner ring. In the outer ring, cite a specific moment in the film in which that trait is evident.





**Handout 6**

# Culminating Character Assignment

**Directions:**

Wrap up your consideration of the character of Sonia with one of the following writing assignments.

1. Write an essay in which you discuss what you see as Sonia's most impactful or impressive character trait(s). Be sure to include both evidence from the film and why you consider it/them so important.
2. Write a script for a drama in which Sonia speaks with a specific group such as members of Alateen, refugees or immigrants detained at a border, or a support group for people struggling with a family member's experience of Parkinson's Disease or street violence. Make sure that Sonia's voice in your script is consistent with her voice in *Big Sonia*.
3. Write an essay in which you analyze Sonia's character as it is evident in one limited arena of her life, for example, at the tailor shop, as a wife and mother, as an activist for Holocaust awareness, as a child in the 1940s, or her care for herself as a woman in the closing years of her life.
4. Select several objects or images that seem important to the character presentation in the film and explain what they show about Sonia's personality and motivation.
5. Write and deliver a speech about your perspectives on how learning about Sonia Warshawski, an elderly woman in Kansas City, can touch a person's mind and heart and lead to action.
6. Write a series of letters to Sonia in which you respond to what she says or does or to what others say about her at five specific moments in the documentary.



# Learning from the Past: An Oral History Assignment

## Enduring Understandings

- Oral tradition has been a critical method of history sharing.
- Storytelling is a way to connect with others.
- Oral and written history are equally valid across many societies that have relied on both to maintain cultures and traditions.

## Essential Questions

- What is oral history and why is it important?
- How can we learn about historical events directly from people's lived experiences?
- How can we share the stories of others with integrity and authenticity?

## Notes to the Teacher

The power of *Big Sonia* is that Sonia Warshawski is able to tell her story, and no one can tell it as she can. All societies rely on oral tradition to hold on to the histories of their people in their lifetimes, but more important, oral tradition is passed down so that our histories live on beyond those present during a given time period. Griots, elders, and others entrusted to carry oral histories often wear the responsibility like a badge of honor—with good reason. Whether it be early iron societies in West Africa or modern families in the American South, we connect with one another when we share stories, especially when we place ourselves within historical context. It helps for students to see themselves and others as primary sources, as people who have valid experiences and histories to offer to the world. Sonia was able to connect with the students in the documentary on a very deep level, and your students will have the opportunity to do the same with someone they know personally but whose history may surprise them.

In this lesson, students begin by examining the elements of oral tradition and testimony. Part 1 of the lesson relies heavily on the IWitness archive at USC (<https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>), which will require you to create an educator account prior to the start of the lesson. You should use your school email to set up your account to gain access to the full range of resources that the website has to offer. Once you have your account set up, you will want to watch the “What is IWitness” video on the homepage just to acclimate yourself to the project. You should also view several testimonies and choose which 2–4 video testimonies you will show in class. Some categories to begin with are *family*, *fear*, *human rights*, *hate*, *justice*, *religion*, and *racism*. Remember that for each

video you decide to show, each student will need a separate copy of the accompanying graphic organizer **LOCATING AND ANALYZING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE** from [https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/Documents/University/GraphicOrganizer\\_Locating%20Evidence.pdf](https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/Documents/University/GraphicOrganizer_Locating%20Evidence.pdf) to complete.

Part 2 of this lesson prepares your students to conduct a great interview so that they get information that will help them complete their reports later. They first review resources to help them understand the best elements of good interview preparation and execution, as well as the depth that is required when writing interview questions. This is a time when your presence and availability to provide guidance are critical. Some additional resources for you to review are below:

<https://blog.enwoven.com/home/2016/5/23/how-to-interview-others-to-capture-their-life-stories>

<https://blog.ted.com/5-tips-for-conducting-an-interview-with-someone-you-care-about/>

<https://liveboldandbloom.com/10/mindfulness/questions-to-ask-people>

<https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>

Part 3 of this lesson consists of having the students piece together the information gathered in their interviews and produce reports on their subjects' greatest challenges. It is likely that this will take more than one class period because it is important to give students the opportunity to review the audio from the interview to pull pieces that resonate with them and to reflect on the significance of the oral history they have been told. Additionally, students should not feel rushed when writing thoughtful and engaging reports on their subjects. It is all right if some students do not want to use **HANDOUT 2:**

**MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE** because their time spent with their subject may have been so impactful that they decide to take a different route for their write-up.

Because this lesson requires students to reach out to a family member, family friend, or community member and to schedule an interview time, it will be important to give students enough notice and time to solidify their subjects and times to meet. If two nights do not provide enough time, you may want to think about announcing the general assignment a week before the lesson begins or perhaps over a weekend.

While watching *Big Sonia* and throughout this lesson, it will be very important for you to regularly check in with your students about the pulse of the class as a whole so that you are in tune with where they are emotionally. These topics are challenging to process and teachers must be prepared to strike a balance between supporting a student through sharing something difficult and not pressuring students to share what they are not ready to.



## COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.1.D

Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2.B

Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

## Duration of lesson

3 or 4 class periods

## Assessments

Completion of iWitness Archives graphic organizers

Completion of **HANDOUTS 1** and **2**

Completion of interview write-up

## Materials

### HANDOUT 1: PREPARING TO COLLECT A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

### HANDOUT 2: MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Access to laptops, tablets, or other electronic devices for writing

Access to personal smartphones or recording devices to conduct interviews

Access to the following online sources:

- “The Lasting Power of Oral Traditions” at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/29/lasting-power-oral-tradition>
- The iWitness Archive at USC website at <https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/> including the “Locating and Analyzing Textual Evidence” graphic organizer download
- “Katie Couric on how to conduct a good interview” at <https://youtu.be/4eOynrlzeTM>
- “Life Interview Questions” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.html>
- “Life Interview Tips” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>
- “Life Interview Sample Questions” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>
- iWitness graphic organizers

## Procedure

### Part 1: What Is Oral History?

1. The day before the lesson, inform students that they will be required to interview an older person about a difficult experience in that person's life, so they should begin thinking about whom they might interview and solidify that person's availability in the coming days. Additionally, instruct students to read and take notes on the article "The Lasting Power of Oral Traditions" at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/29/lasting-power-oral-tradition> in preparation for the lesson.
2. On the day of the lesson, ask students to recall the brief article they read the previous evening. Ask students to share what information they learned from the article and what questions they have about oral tradition, storytelling, and primary sources.
3. As a class, watch the "What Is Testimony?" video found on the Dashboard on the homepage of the IWitness archive at USC <https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>. Ask students to draw connections between testimony and history. Why are testimonies important? Why is oral history important? What is the significance of Sonia Warshawski telling her story?
4. Go to the "Watch" tab on the IWitness archive and cue up 2-4 videos to show and discuss, depending on the amount of time available.
5. Distribute several copies of the **LOCATING AND ANALYZING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE** graphic organizer found on the IWitness archive website and instruct students to watch each video that you show, paying close attention to the

elements listed on the graphic organizer. After each video, give students time to reflect silently and to complete the graphic organizer; then allow them to pair up and debrief about their reactions, thoughts, and responses to the worksheet questions.

6. After allowing students to view a few of the testimonies and discuss them with their partners, discuss the following as a class: What made these stories compelling? What historical context did you need to know in order to fully understand each testimony? How did the stories shift your perspective? How important is oral history?
7. For homework, students should solidify their interview plans. They should try to set aside 1-2 hours for the interview.

### Part 2: Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

1. Begin by asking students whom they have chosen to interview for the assignment.
2. Explain to students that the person conducting the interview is just as important as the person being interviewed and that preparation makes for the most successful collection of stories. Show the short video of Katie Couric explaining how to conduct a good interview at <https://youtu.be/4eOynr12eTM> and review the following webpages from the Legacy Project on conducting life history interviews:
  - A. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.html>
  - B. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>
  - C. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>
3. Using this information as a framework for the students, distribute **HANDOUT 1: PREPARING TO COLLECT A PERSONAL**



**NARRATIVE** and instruct students to complete the handout in order to prepare for the interview. Be sure to check in with all students while they are working independently to make sure they are on the right track.

4. Use the time at the end of the class period to have students pair up and exchange feedback on their interview questions.
5. For homework, students must conduct their interviews. Urge students to record the interviews (with the permission of their subjects) so that they can be fully present as an interviewer instead of worrying about writing everything down.

### Part 3: Capturing Someone Else's Voice in Narrative Writing

1. Begin class by checking in with students about how their interviews went. How are they feeling? How did the process go? Did they remember to bring a recording to class? Did they learn something new about someone they've known for a long time?
2. Ask students to think about the responsibility of collecting someone else's story for the purpose of sharing it with integrity and authenticity. What makes the IWitness archive so successful? What characteristics make up a great biography or written narrative? Distribute **HANDOUT 2: MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE** to help students organize their long audio interviews into a manageable writing piece.
3. Give students the class period to write up the results of their interview using a narrative structure. They should

provide a thoughtful title as well. (This may take two class periods if you sense your students need more time to produce thoughtful work.) Reports will probably range from 3-5 pages.

4. As students complete the assignment, they should submit their written pieces with their audio recordings.
5. Conclude by suggesting that students may wish to do additional legacy audio or filming of their elderly relatives to preserve the family narrative and values as the director of *Big Sonia* did.

### Extension Activity: What Is Your Story?

#### Creating a Vlog

A vlog is like a blog, but the story is captured on video. There are numerous websites online that provide tips on creating a vlog.

1. Allow students to reflect on their own life experiences and create a vlog responding to the following questions:
  - A. What oral history can you share based on your experiences?
  - B. What has happened in your lifetime that you can speak about as a primary source?
  - C. How did you overcome a challenging time in your life?
2. Watch each vlog as a class and discuss the similarities and differences of multiple stories from the same time period by people who are the same age.

Handout 1 ► P. 1

# Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Who is your interview subject?

What is your relationship to your subject? How do you know this person?

What time period and location will be the focus of the interview?

During this time period, what major events defined the era?

What were characteristics of the time period with respect to the following:

Politics	Economy	Culture	Environment
Equality	Industrialization	Geography/Climate	Technology

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 2**

## Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

Given your understanding of the time period and what it takes to be a good interviewer, write a minimum of 15 open-ended and tactful interview questions. Remember that the purpose of the interview is to better understand a challenging time in your subject's life and if and how he or she overcame the challenge.

Be prepared to ask follow-up questions during the interview as well. Obviously, you can't plan these ahead of time, but must think of them quickly during the interview. Again, try to make them open-ended and tactful.

You may or may not have the opportunity to ask all of your questions during the interview. However, it is far better to have too many questions than not enough.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.



# Mastering the Narrative Structure

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**“Brain Dump” of Initial Thoughts:**

# Lesson 3

(SOCIAL STUDIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS)



Journeys in Film™  
USC Rossier Center EDGE

Handout 2 ▶ P. 2

## Mastering the Narrative Structure

Set the scene. Who is the center of this story? When did it occur? Where? (Be very descriptive.)

What things led up to the resolution or overcoming the challenge?

How and when did your subject know the challenge had been overcome?

What impact did these experiences have on your subject? On you?





# Viewing a Documentary Film

## Enduring Understandings

- Documentary films present the filmmaker’s own vision of reality; it is essential for the viewer to watch actively rather than passively to judge the credibility of the film.
- Documentary filmmakers use many distinctive techniques including photographs, interviews, animation, and re-enactment, as well as film of actual events, to convey their ideas.

## Essential Questions

- How does one judge the validity of a documentary?
- What biases on the part of the filmmaker and the viewer can affect the way the film is perceived?

## Notes to the Teacher

The goal of this lesson is to teach not only about the filmmaker’s techniques used in *Big Sonia*, but also to help students become active, critical viewers of documentary film in a world where images are often substituted for extended written information. This film is about Sonia Warshawski, but it is also about the positive nurturing power of telling stories of our own experience.

*Big Sonia* tells the story of a nonagenarian named Sonia. She lives in Kansas City and the film reveals to us that she is a Holocaust survivor. The film relates Sonia’s experience of surviving the Holocaust and weaves this story through material about her work maintaining a tailoring business, about her relationship with her adult children, and finally about her efforts to communicate, through talks and public engagements, a message of harmony and compassion. The film’s narrative style combines observational footage of Sonia at work and at home with animated footage that visualizes and expresses her thoughts and feelings generated by her memories of surviving the Holocaust.

The filmmakers chose to divide the timeline of the film between action and interviews in the present and representations of the past. The filmmakers use observational footage (whereby the filmmaker follows action as it appears to “naturally” unfold), on-camera interviews, voice-over, music, animated sequences, and a small number of still images (photographs) to construct the story.

In Part 1 of the lesson, you will show the first 10 minutes of the film to acclimate the students to its unusual structure. Stopping the film to study **HANDOUT 2** on the structure of the first 10 minutes and a film glossary will enable them to

re-view the opening, applying critical thinking and analysis. They should then be better equipped to approach not only the opening, but also the entire film, in a similar manner. Download the glossary from <https://journeysinfilm.org/twtfresources> and print out a copy for each student to keep.

At the end of Part 1, you will distribute one more handout, a sheet of viewing assignments. Students should have adequate time to read through this and make their selections. You may wish to select a few of the assignments as most appropriate to your particular group of students or your classroom goals. Students wishing to select more than one assignment should be encouraged to do so and allowed to handle the combination in any suitable manner (or to select the one deemed more useful for a report) after viewing the film. You may wish to consult **TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS** well in advance of any class discussions.

Part 2 of the lesson involves showing the film in its entirety. Since this film is nearly 90 minutes in length, it may take an additional day to complete the viewing. It might be good to look for a stopping place any time in the last few minutes of the period and ask for feedback. Students may wish to point out special things they have observed and/or ask questions about the observations of others. As noted, you may wish to consult **TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS** well in advance of any class discussions.

Part 3 asks students to respond to particular aspects of the film, either in oral reports or in writing. If you want written reports only, it would be useful to ask some students to read their reports aloud as topics for additional discussion.

If you wish, you may use the Glossary as the basis of a film literacy vocabulary quiz, selecting as much of it as necessary for your course goals.

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2**

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience



## Duration of Lesson

3 or 4 50-minute class periods

## Assessments

Written/oral assignment taken from **HANDOUT 3**

Participation in class discussion

## Materials

DVD of *Big Sonia* or streaming capability

DVD player and monitor or screen

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1-3** for each student

Copies of *Journeys in Film* glossary from <https://24ct31xhoq010m27dskvu619-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Glossary-PDF.pdf>

**TEACHER RESOURCE 1: COMMENTARY ON ASSIGNMENTS**

## Procedure

### Part 1: A Close Look at Opening Scenes

1. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: ACTIVE VIEWING**. Tell students they will be watching the film, *Big Sonia*. Read through the handout together, discussing as appropriate and encouraging students to ask questions.
2. Show the first twelve minutes and fifty-five seconds of the film (to the shot of a garment cleaning device). Let this shot finish and then stop the film.
3. Distribute **HANDOUT 2: ANALYSIS OF OPENING SCENES** and **HANDOUT 3: A GLOSSARY OF FILM TERMS**. Rewind the film and watch the first 10 minutes again, pausing frequently to read through each section of **HANDOUT 2** with your students, and referring them to terms on the **GLOSSARY** as necessary.
4. Have students read through the glossary and go over the vocabulary to be certain your students are familiar with each term.
5. Finally, distribute **HANDOUT 3: ASSIGNMENTS**, asking your students to select one (or more) of the assignments to keep in mind (and take notes on) as they view the film in its entirety. Give them the due date for any writing you will be collecting or the due date and the format for oral presentations. Allow them to read through and make decisions for homework.

## **Part 2: Viewing “Big Sonia”**

1. Show the film, either from the beginning or from wherever it was stopped, as you prefer and time permits.
2. If the class period will end before the film is finished, stop the video a few minutes before the class ends. Ask students to point out special things they have observed and to ask questions about the film or about the observations of others. Do the same after the film is finished. As noted, you may wish to consult **Teacher Resource 1: Commentary on Assignments** well in advance of any class discussions.

## **Part 3: Culminating Project**

1. Give students adequate time to prepare either written or oral responses to the questions on the assignments sheet. Be sure to set clear deadlines. Hold conferences with students as they work to be sure they are on task and successful.
2. Give students an opportunity to present their oral reports with whatever structure you have established. If you have assigned written reports only, choose a few of the best and ask the students who wrote them to read theirs aloud. Allow for class discussion following the reading of each.
3. Conclude the discussion by reminding students that analyzing the techniques of filmmaking and the choices that the filmmaker makes can enhance both our understanding of a film and our enjoyment of it. Explain that it is also important to look at the film holistically once the analysis is complete.
4. If desired, review the Glossary (Handout 3) in preparation for a vocabulary quiz to be given at a later date.



**Handout 1 ▶ P. 1**

# Active Viewing of a Documentary Film

In recent years, the documentary film mode has become notably popular with filmmakers and with audiences. What had been a rather “obscure” part of film culture has arguably become more mainstream and recognized. While many of us might more typically view narrative fiction films, documentaries have increasingly offered us a rich alternative. Documentaries can often provide an insight and perspective on subjects and lives that narrative fiction films might not. The narrative choices that documentary films make available are exciting for both filmmakers and audiences.

The documentary film tradition reaches back to the early years of cinema history and, as it has developed, the documentary form has worked its way through hard news and films about nature and travel to bring us to this current moment in which documentaries are visually arresting and often startling in the subject matter with which they engage. They comprise a major part of the film culture, with documentary film festivals taking place globally.

## **The subjective filmmaker: Thinking about points of view**

A filmmaker’s creative starting point is to pose the question: What is my perspective on the subject that I want to explore in my film? It’s a subjective standpoint. In this respect, a subsequent question that a viewer might ask is: Does this film emphasize certain aspects of its subjects at the expense of other aspects? The viewer also needs to consider questions like these: In what ways is the film “true” to its subject? How have the filmmaking style and film language influenced my response to the subject?

We shouldn’t approach a film with a sense of distrust; however, it is appropriate to view and think about documentary films in terms of where the filmmaker is coming from in approaching the subject matter. In doing this, we can make a more measured judgement about how we accept or reject what the film offers.

Key to thinking about documentary film is developing our sense of intentional or unintentional distortion; this leads us to consider the ways in which audience members respond to a given film. All audiences bring to a film viewing two things: their own real-life experience and their experience of life as depicted in film. As critical, active audiences, we are committed to bringing precise attention and thinking to a given film, asking how the language of cinema is used to construct a version of the subject matter.

The “filmmaker” is the name that we give to the individual and the key creative team, who produce a film. This team can include director, producer, writer, film distributor. These roles and functions are all in the position to control, shape and influence most powerfully what the film is attempting to say.

We might argue that, unlike a narrative fiction film, a documentary film presents even more of an opportunity for personal filmmaking as the director will have chosen the subject to explore. In the context of narrative fiction filmmaking, there is a key difference and it’s this: the director will often be engaged to lead the production of a film that is based on someone else’s screenplay or concept.



## Active Viewing of a Documentary Film

### **Challenging our thinking and long-held convictions**

Let's assume that a documentary filmmaker has made a sincere effort to present a version of a subject that, while subjective, is also genuine and thoughtful. What do we do, though, when the view of the film is in opposition to that of the viewer? There is something positive in this potential conflict between what the film is saying and what we understand of the subject. In this respect, a documentary film can provoke us to rethink ideas and ways of understanding a given subject that may be long held and rooted in our own personal backgrounds. The thoughtful audience member has the responsibility to be attuned to conflicting perspectives in order to think fully about the filmmaker's intentions and our own reception of the final piece.



## Handout 2 ▶ P. 1

# Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes

*The following is a description of the first twelve minutes and fifty-five seconds of the film. You will be viewing the first 10 minutes again; pay close attention to the structure of these first 10 minutes. Note the use of voice-overs, panning shots, intercutting, montage sequences, and split edits, etc. (These terms and others that are in bold letters below are defined in the **Glossary**). It may be useful to think “This shot shows...” as each appears on screen. This will help you understand the nature of a documentary film as an assemblage of images on a chosen subject. [Note: If it is not clear what you’re seeing, try to figure out why the film’s director wanted you to be momentarily confused.]*

Momentarily, there is a black screen and on the soundtrack we hear the sound of a creaking door. There is then the first shot (a wide **SHOT**) of the film and it could not be more ordinary and unassuming: we see the elderly woman closing her front door as she heads out. Then comes the film’s first **TITLE CARD** that reads: Inflatable Films Presents. The card is accompanied by a whimsical piece of musical underscore and we hear the voice of Leah Warshawski who is the co-director of the film saying, “Hey, grandma.” The scene cuts to a mid-shot framed from the back seat of the car. We watch as Sonia gets into the car. Her granddaughter, Leah, is at the steering wheel.

The visual style deployed in this opening scene can be described as observational, using available light and thereby reinforcing a feeling of realism; it uses a handheld camera that can readily follow the action and events in front of the camera lens.

The older woman is Sonia, the subject of the film, although at this point we do not know her name. Sonia comments, “It’s chilly. I’ve got some sweets for us.”

Whimsical music plays on the soundtrack as Sonia settles into the car. Sonia tells her granddaughter that she should be wearing a sweater on a chilly day.

The film cuts to a title card: “A Film by Leah Warshawski and Todd Soliday.” The phrase “A Film by” tells us that it is has been authored, that it has a specific point of view on its

subject. The film then cuts from the first title card and back to the footage that introduces us to Sonia. Sonia hands chocolate bars to her granddaughter and to the camera operator. (We assume it is Todd Soliday; importantly, we never see him in the film). We watch and hear Sonia talking about the clouds as she is driven in the car. She says, “When you’re flying, it’s unbelievable: it’s bogminding. All this nature.” This observation may seem like a minor, irrelevant comment but it will be anything but within the context of the story of Sonia’s life that is eventually revealed. The next title is a production **CREDIT** and it is followed by a medium shot from inside the car of Sonia chatting to Leah.

There is then a **CLOSE-UP** of Sonia in profile from the camera’s position on the back seat of the car. Sonia comments, “I’m handling it better since I got older.” On the soundtrack, the music has become more pensive. Critically, the film does not at this point describe what “it” is. The film withholds key information so that the viewer remains intrigued, waiting to find out the answer. “For a normal person, it’s very difficult to understand, and you always kind of think ‘Oh, it might come back on me.’” We see Sonia in close-up looking at her granddaughter in the driving seat.

The **SEQUENCE** of shots within the car concludes by **CUTTING** to Sonia exiting the car and commenting, “It’s a beautiful day.” The shot holds and Sonia exits the frame.



## Handout 2 ▶ P. 2

*Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes*

The sequence next cuts to two medium-wide shots of “old” radio engineering equipment in a corridor. On-screen text informs the audience that the venue is KCUR Studio, National Park Radio, Kansas City. As Sonia walks along the corridor there is a **SPLIT EDIT** as we hear a radio engineer settling Sonia into a radio station studio. There is a wide shot of Sonia being settled into the studio.

There is then a cut to a shot of a recording sign illuminated in the radio studio. We are offered the beginning of the drama of the film’s story. There is a close-up on Sonia as we hear the voice of the radio interviewer [who is only identified by on-screen text providing her name] asking her about her experiences as a child. The interviewer sets up Sonia’s recollections by explaining that Sonia’s granddaughter is making a documentary about her grandmother’s past. As we hear the interviewer explain this, there is a brief shot of Leah and Sonia sitting listening to the interviewer. It is important that we only hear the interviewer as a **VOICE-OVER**. The visual focus is entirely on Sonia, who is shown in close-up when she states, “How I made it out was a miracle.” The scene is scored in a pensive manner at this point. Critically, the film at this point still does not define what it was that Sonia escaped. Immediately after this dramatic statement, the film cuts to its title card: *Big Sonia*. The musical underscore becomes more assertive and upbeat to accompany this.

The sequence then cuts to a wide shot (of drone camera footage) as it descends over a somewhat dilapidated looking building. Several other shots show the view of the building that we will soon realize is a shopping mall that is almost deserted. We still do not know specifically what the event is that Sonia spoke about in the radio interview, and so the filmmaker is skillfully sustaining our interest by withholding

the information that we most want to know. This approach begins to create suspense.

Next there is a cut to a wide shot that shows Sonia, in silhouette, walking into a very empty mall towards the camera. The scene cuts to a handheld shot of Sonia hurrying to open the door to her shop as the phone inside rings. The camera follows Sonia as she rushes towards the phone and answers a customer’s call. The mundane nature of this event still disguises the great “secret” that the story will reveal about her experiences a child. The sequence then shows Sonia setting up her shop. There is a **MONTAGE** of close-ups that shows shoes, cushions, tape, and a music box. This brief montage is underscored by a waltz-like piece of music that is tinged with a culturally-specific sound that relates to Sonia’s Jewish heritage.

The sequence cuts to a close-up shot that shows Sonia arranging flowers in her shop. This image of the flowers, of nature, will recur in the film and carry metaphorical value. There is a cut to a medium close-up of Sonia arranging a garment on a rack. The key detail of this shot, although it is not emphasized, is that Sonia’s left arm, which is nearest the camera, is marked by a tattoo that we partially see. The film does not offer more detail about it at this point. Indeed, so brief and understated is this detail that not every viewer may initially see it.

The scene then cuts to a medium-wide shot that shows us a sewing machine and, alongside it in the background, a framed photograph of a young man. (We will learn later that this is an image of Sonia’s late husband, John). This photograph is revealed as the camera tracks from right to left but we are not, at this moment, given more information about the man shown in the photograph. Throughout the opening sequences of the film, the filmmakers establish various details that are



## Handout 2 ▶ P. 3

*Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes*

duly explained in relation to Sonia's life as a young person and as an adult.

The sequence cuts to a close-up of Sonia applying makeup and there is a montage of handheld shots that show Sonia attending to her customers. We have a shot of Sonia looking through garments on a rack. We hear the director of the film ask Sonia, "Is it all for sale, grandma?" We see Leah sitting alongside her grandmother and this provides us with an interesting question about the voice of the director. This sequence in the shop further constructs Sonia as a warm and much-liked person and part of a community. This evident sense of belonging and friendship will clearly contrast very soon with the revelations about Sonia's youth. The montage of customers coming into the shop is fast-paced and eventually the camera holds on Sonia in a medium-wide shot; on the soundtrack we hear Fred, one of the customers, speaking warmly of Sonia.

There follows a medium close-up of Sonia measuring a pair of trousers. We do not see the person wearing the trousers above the knee. As with the absence of a close-up shot of the radio interviewer earlier in the opening of the film, the "identity" of Sonia's customer is not important. What is important is that the camera shows Sonia's hands and arms as she attends to the trousers. As she does so, we see the tattoo on her left arm; again, it is not commented on in any way. The identity of the customer is unimportant. What is much more important is that as Sonia measures the lower leg, she again reveals the tattoo on her left arm.

There is then a cut to a wide shot of the shop exterior and we see that it is called John's Tailoring. Playful music plays on the soundtrack as customers offer comments on-camera about Sonia and one customer explains how tough it is for

a business to survive in the nearly empty mall. Again, this seemingly mundane observation foreshadows a plot point about the fate of the shop and thematically how people start over after disruptive events in their lives. The comments are all very positive and affirmative.

There is a close-up of flowers on Sonia's shop counter. The camera tracks slowly across the counter as Sonia pulls out a pile of illustrations from a drawer and scatters them on the counter. As she does so, she explains that what she is showing us are her doodles. This is a critical moment in the film: the music shifts from being playful to communicating more a sense of mystery. What are these doodles of? Why have they been drawn? Sonia explains answers to these implied questions: "When you think about it, it's like a medicine." We see her start to make a drawing and the live-action scene then cuts to the medium of animation as we hear her voice as a voice-over. On the right of the screen an animated flower is shown flourishing and we hear her say: "I love flowers and birds. It's in the nature, flying. Especially, I love butterflies." The visual style of the animation is abstract. Then we see an animation of Sonia looking at butterflies that float around her. Sonia's voiceover refers, for the first time, to her mother and how she thought that Sonia would design hats for her work. The animation then cuts back to live-action footage of Sonia making her doodle. The sequence then cuts back to an animated scene showing Sonia as a girl and we hear her say "Sometimes you don't know what will come out in doodling. It's like a therapy."

As the animated images hold for a moment, we hear the radio interviewer and the sequence then cuts back to Sonia's radio interview. (The film will return to the interview later.) We hear but do not see the interviewer comment to Sonia, "You are



## Handout 2 ▶ P. 4

*Big Sonia: Analysis of Opening Scenes*

one of the last living survivors.” We hear this comment on the soundtrack and it connects powerfully to the image that we see simultaneously: the shot shows Sonia’s arms at rest on the desk where she sits, and we see the tattoo on her arm again. We hear and see Sonia, in a medium close-up, comment, “You live with it all your life and you can never forget because if that is Hell I was in that Hell.” As she speaks, her granddaughter reaches out her hand to comfort her. The sequence then cuts to a close-up of Leah holding Sonia’s hand.

The sequence cuts to a title card that reads: *Miedzyrzec, Poland, September 1939*. Another piece of text appears telling us Sonia’s age. The music accompanying the title card is somewhat pensive. Significantly, an animated flower moves across the lower right-hand corner of the title card. The title card cuts to the second animated scene that shows Sonia and her mother outside their house. On the soundtrack we hear a siren and see the shadow of a warplane across their home. The wide shot zooms out further and there is the sound of bombing as Sonia and her mother are shown running inside, as the sounds of gunshots grow. Fighter planes are shown over the house and on the soundtrack we hear Sonia recalling that “When the war broke out, I was 13.”

The animated scene cuts to Sonia being interviewed in a more formal way as she sits on a chair against a black backdrop. The scene cuts back to the animation that now depicts Nazi soldiers outside Sonia’s home and there is the sound of gunfire. The dominant colors of the animation now are black and grey. We hear Sonia’s voice-over on the animation as she recalls the first deportation of Jews to concentration camps. The sequence cuts back to Sonia in the live-action interview recalling how she watched events from an attic window; the sequence then cuts back to the animation, this time to a medium-wide shot that shows a worried-looking Sonia at the

attic window. The film cuts back to Sonia being interviewed and she recalls “Horrible, horrible things.” The music is very pensive and melancholy now. The animation continues and there is a medium-wide shot of Sonia at the attic window; we hear her continuing to talk about looking down as gunshots are heard again. The sequence then cuts back to Sonia in the in-camera live action interview, followed by the animation showing a wide shot with armed Nazi soldiers in the lower part of the frame and Sonia depicted in the top part of the frame. There is tension in this little girl and the soldiers clearly sharing the same space.

The sequence cuts back to Sonia’s radio interview very briefly, then back to the animation with a wide shot showing her hiding on the top floor of her house. We hear Sonia’s voice on the soundtrack as she recalls this event. The animation style evokes a sense of a children’s picture book. We hear her say “My brother, my father: I never saw them again.” A new animation scene is presented now that shows Sonia and her mother in the woods as a deportation train pulls into view, one of its doors opening to reveal a blood red interior and the abstract forms of other prisoners. Sonia explains that her sister escaped and that she and her mother were put onto a train. “It’s impossible to erase it.”

The sequence then cuts back to Sonia at the shop in the present day and it is such a contrast with what she has been recalling.

The **GLOSSARY** lists many familiar words, which have special uses or meanings in the film industry. Becoming familiar with them will help you express yourself when you discuss and/or write about this film as well as other films in the future, fiction films and/or documentaries. You can find this glossary at <https://24ct31xhoq010m27dskvu619-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Glossary-PDF.pdf>.



## Handout 3 ▶ P. 1

# Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

## 1. Reminders to the audience that there are real persons making this film.

In the opening sequences of the film, we learn that the film has been made by Sonia's granddaughter whom we see driving Sonia to the radio station (and then subsequently at other points during the film). The filmmaker does not disguise this relationship. Later in the film's opening section, we see the director sitting with her grandmother in a radio interview. Critically, it is important to recognize that a documentary film is a creation and construction that is made by people who bring their knowledge, attitudes, understandings and point of view to a subject.

**Assignment:** Watch for and record *at least* three other moments when the viewer is reminded that the film is not some "magic capturing of reality" but a conscious assemblage of moments *based* on reality. What does each moment contribute to the viewer's understanding?

## 2. Using animation to illustrate a story

During the telling of Sonia's past as a concentration camp detainee during the Holocaust, animation is used. The animation expresses the emotional distress and trauma of this experience. What do you think the filmmaker was hoping to achieve by using animation rather than archival photographs or other resources?

**Assignment:** Watch for other scenes where the filmmaker uses animation instead of live action and make notes on several of the animated sequences: What is depicted? How effective are these sequences? What else could be done in their place if the filmmaker was opposed to using animation?

## 3. Using BACKSTORY

During the film's opening 12 minutes and 55 seconds, the film establishes Sonia's backstory and does so in several distinct ways. Sonia is shown discussing her past in a radio interview that threads throughout the film and provides it with a narrative link between past and present. The radio interview becomes part of the voice-over material in the film.

**Assignment:** What is the effect of the different ways of presenting Sonia's backstory? Watch for and take notes on other times when Sonia discusses her experience as a Holocaust survivor and also as a wife and as a mother. How do these scenes affect the viewer?

## 4. Using VOICE-OVER as storytelling

*Big Sonia* emphasizes observational footage as the basis for the film's visual style. In the material, we see Sonia and the other people in the film (they are the film's "characters") speaking to each other and to the camera as they undertake various activities. The film also includes more formally arranged interviews with Sonia, her daughters, her son, and several other people who have a connection to Sonia. The film, though, also uses voice-over as a major form of expressing Sonia's thoughts and feelings and those of her family, thus developing the theme and advancing the plotline. The voice-over that is most powerful and significant in the film is arguably used in relation to the animated scenes, providing the historical context and background information about Sonia's life.



## Handout 3 ▶ P. 2

# Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

**Assignment:** Watch for **voice-over sequences** and describe several. Which are most effective in telling this story?

## 5. Highlighting relationships

One of *Big Sonia*'s key storylines explores the relationship between Sonia and her children, two daughters and a son, and their particular responses to Sonia's past as a Holocaust survivor.

**Assignment:** Pay attention to the particular sequences that focus on Sonia's daughters and her son. How would you describe the differences in their relationships to their mother and her past? Pay special attention to the sequence showing Sonia at a family gathering. We hear voice-overs from her children explaining the importance of such an event for their mother.

## 6. Storytelling as a healing power

At two different points in the film's timeline, Sonia's adult son Morrie reads the poem about his mother that he wrote as an adult from a child's perspective; he titled the poem "Sonia at 32." These are key scenes in the film. The one that first shows Morrie reading the poem stops abruptly when Morrie breaks down in tears as he reads the text. Late in the film, observational footage shows us Morrie pressing flowers and then placing them in the poetry book to mark the page of his poem "Sonia at 32"; we hear him reading the poem in its entirety as a voice-over. This second reading of the poem

paired with observational footage of Morrie pressing flowers relates as a motif to the images of nature that Sonia speaks about in the film's opening sequence when she talks about her doodles.

**Assignment:** Why does the filmmaker choose to repeat the poetry-reading as a voice-over? Include any other differences you may have noticed. Pay particular attention to the first of these shots, described above. In what way is this depiction most appropriate? What is the reason for this scene being included in the film? What is different and what does it tell us about the relationship between Sonia and her son? What does the film say to us about creativity?

## 7. Creating "reality" for the camera

Refer to the film's late scene when Sonia opens her new shop and her daughters and son are in attendance to help her.

**Assignment:** To what extent does the presence of the camera and film crew control the family's behavior? Are they "putting on a show" or being themselves in this situation? Do you think the filming changes family dynamics or merely reveals them?

## 8. Point of view: The prison sequence

Throughout *Big Sonia*, various points of view are presented. Often we hear Sonia's point of view on a subject, and then we are given the points of view of her children, of high school students, and of prisoners at a correctional facility. The prison sequence late in the film begins with Sonia during her radio interview. (The film returns to this interview several times



**Handout 3** ▶ P. 3

# Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

throughout the film as a way of setting up a sequence.) She is explaining her mission to spread a message of compassion that relates back to her Holocaust experience. Pensive music underscores this moment and the sequence then cuts to show Sonia in a wide shot walking past the barbed wire and exterior fence of a massive looming prison in the background. On the soundtrack, we hear Sonia's voice-over (taken from the radio interview) and there is a moment of split-audio when we begin to hear the voice of a man who will be shown in the next shot to be a prisoner. He is shown explaining his circumstances. The sequence cuts back to following behind Sonia as she enters the prison and we see several shots as she is checked upon entry. Pensive music underscores the sequence which then includes another prisoner being interviewed on-camera explaining his own backstory. These two prisoner interviews are juxtaposed with the observational footage of Sonia being checked as she enters the prison.

The sequence cuts to Sonia talking with a group of inmates, then to interviews with several inmates. The sequence then cuts to a new "character" in the film, SuEllen Fried, who explains that she runs an initiative called Reaching Out From Within. Fried explains that she saw a news story about Sonia and realized that the Optimist Creed that Sonia has on the wall in her shop is also used by the Reaching Out From Within rehabilitation program. The sequence then cuts back to Sonia speaking with the prisoners as they sit with her. Closeups show us prisoners looking, listening, and responding to Sonia's story about her childhood and the Holocaust.

**Assignment:** What is the attitude of the prisoners to Sonia and to her personal history? How does Sonia's point of view about her experiences connect with the prisoners? Why is this sequence placed in the late part of the film?

## 9. The use of music

Throughout the film, the action is accompanied by music. Some of this music is playful, and at other times it is more somber.

**Assignment:** Select a sequence and discuss how the music enhances the images and action and how the music changes according to what we are seeing and hearing.

## 10. The power of objects

Throughout the film there are scenes that emphasize the power of objects: there is a scene in which Sonia shows her granddaughter the scarf that once belonged to Sonia's mother, a book of poetry, a photograph of Sonia's family, a letter written from the concentration camp, the Optimist Creed.

**Assignment:** What are the purposes of the objects that we see used and referred to in the film? How do they communicate the theme of the film?



Handout 3 ▶ P. 4

# Techniques and Film Devices in *Big Sonia*

## 11. Juxtaposition

*Juxtaposition* means placing things next to one another to call attention to their similarities or differences. Go back to the opening twelve minutes of the film.

**Assignment:** Look for several sequences that gain strength by being out of order. What is gained by the juxtaposition of two sequences? Be prepared to describe the sequences and the effect of the ordering on the story.

## 12. Dramatic tension and resolution

*Big Sonia's* intercutting narratives construct Sonia's storyline by mixing the present with her memories of the Holocaust.

**Assignment:** Why does the filmmaker choose to conclude the film with the sequence of Sonia setting up her shop at a new location? What does this reinforce for the viewer?

## 13. Summary evaluation of the film

Ideally, you managed to follow the story of Sonia's life as a young person and as an adult and how the events of the life stages are related. What are the themes of the film? Consider the ideas of compassion, memory, hope, overcoming difficulties. (Remember that a theme should be stated as a full sentence, not merely listed as a topic.)

**Assignment:** Do you think that the film's structure (showing Sonia in the present remembering the traumatic events of the past) indicates and clarifies the powerful relationship between Sonia and her family's daily life and memories? Explain.

## 14. Repetition of a type of sequence

At two points in the film, early and late, two sequences explore the same topic, the experience of speaking to a small group as a Holocaust survivor. The first sequence shows Sonia meeting with a group of high school students, the second with a group of prison inmates.

**Assignment:** What are the differences between the two sequences? What do the high students respond to? What do the inmates respond to in Sonia's recollection?

## 15. Reviewing a film

A movie reviewer tells the audience his/her opinion about whether a film is worth seeing and why. Usually the content includes storyline, as well as topics such as actors' skills, cinematography, sound track, and themes.

**Assignment:** Write a review of the film as if for your school paper. Would you recommend this to your fellow students? Why, or why not?



## Teacher Resource 1 ▶ P . 1 **Commentary on Assignments**

### **1. Reminders to the audience that there are real persons making this film.**

*Any of the many montage sequences might serve this purpose since it is obvious that the various shots do not necessarily follow one another but were assembled by someone for a particular purpose.*

### **2. Using ANIMATION to illustrate a story**

*The film makes extensive use of animated scenes in order to visualize Sonia's experience of the Holocaust. Clearly there is no archival footage of Sonia specifically from this time and therefore animation is an interesting way to render the events that Sonia recalls. Notice how the visual style of the animation is abstract rather than realistic. The animation allows the filmmaker to precisely emphasize elements of Sonia's recollections using colors, shapes, and proportions that would not be likely in real life.*

### **3. Using BACKSTORY**

*Throughout the film, the details of Sonia's backstory are revealed. Critically, this technique has something in common with all narratives. This is an opportunity to make the point that documentaries are constructions as much as fiction narratives are; they deploy many of the same conventions, such as characters who are in opposition to each other, an overarching conflict, the creation of tension, and eventual resolution.*

### **4. Using VOICE-OVER as storytelling**

*Voice-over works well when it adds emotional value and information that an image does not necessarily provide. Voice-*

*over can both reinforce and clarify what is shown; it can also act as a counterpoint to it.*

### **5. Highlighting relationships**

*The film presents Sonia's warm relationship with her customers, but clearly the relationships that she has with her children are more complex. Also, there is an opportunity to explain Sonia's relationship with her own mother.*

### **6. Storytelling as a healing power.**

*Storytelling as an act of memory and of personal and cultural history has many and varied examples. We have the example of stories told about the Holocaust and we might look to American history and be able to identify the many and varied stories told about the American Civil War. Considering the relationship between our past (history) and the way that our present engages with it might provide your students with a broad and deep subject to explore. Perhaps invite your students to apply the example of storytelling in Big Sonia (in terms of how memory is articulated at both the personal and the community levels) to American history. Invite your students to identify a film, a song, a poem, a novel, or short story that is an example of how the past is brought to life as a healing process between different cultures and communities.*

### **7. Creating "reality" for the camera**

*The concept of reality is a huge question to grapple with and might allow you to engage your students with the concepts of truth and "fake" information.*



## Teacher Resource 1 ▶ P . 2 **Commentary on Assignments**

### **8. Point of view: The prison sequence**

*This sequence of the film is an emotional ‘high point’ in which Sonia’s mission to communicate her message of kindness reaches its fullest expression. The sequence functions as a dramatic resolution of the narrative’s storyline about Sonia sharing her experiences of the Holocaust in terms of her “public-facing work.” Certainly, this sequence should be compared and contrasted with Sonia’s visit to the high school that is shown earlier in the film and there is an interesting discussion to have around comparison and contrast between the sequences.*

### **9. The use of music**

*As an exercise, ask the students to close their eyes and just listen to a given scene for its music. As another exercise to demonstrate the power of music, perhaps select a brief scene, without any dialogue in it (for example the series of shots showing Sonia entering the prison) and play it mute with a piece of music from a separate sound source that is in keeping with the event being depicted. Then play the scene again with a piece of music not in keeping with what is being depicted. Finally, ask your students to consider how music works when it is integrated with voice-over.*

### **10. The power of objects**

*Objects as motifs in this film symbolize the larger themes of memory, legacy, family heritage and also, too, the act of bearing witness.*

### **11. Juxtaposition**

*The entire film engages in a process of juxtaposition, moving from the storyline in the present (for example when the film first shows us Sonia at the tailoring shop) to the storyline in the past (the animated scenes depicting the events of the Holocaust).*

### **12. Dramatic tension and resolution**

*Invite students to pay attention to the role of music in creating tension and resolution (and a sense of harmony and happiness) throughout the film. What other elements build tension and lead to resolution?*

### **13. Summary evaluation of the film**

*Ask students to consider whether their reaction to the film was more emotional or intellectual. In what ways does the film offer a counterpoint to the sense of hope with a clear sense of the toll that Sonia’s past has taken on her and her relationship with her children.*

### **14. Repetition of a type of sequence**

*Discuss: Do the students relate more to the sequence with the high school students?*

### **15. Reviewing a film**

*Suggest that students bring in copies of some film reviews and establish what the expected format for such an essay might be.*



# Maladaptive Stress Response and Intergenerational Trauma

## Enduring Understandings

- The stress response is an adaptive reaction that evolved to facilitate the continuation of the species.
- A maladaptive stress response can impact the physical and psychological health of trauma survivors as well as the offspring of trauma survivors.
- Intergenerational trauma occurs when the effects of trauma are not resolved in one generation and are passed onto the next.

## Essential Questions

- What is the stress response and how does it ensure the survival of a species?
- What is trauma and how is it related to a maladaptive stress response or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?
- Can the effects of trauma be passed on from one generation to the next?

## Notes to the Teacher

In her Ted-X video “How Do You Cope with the Trauma You Didn’t Experience?” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkAMHQhabkU>, director Leah Warshawski considers how the traumatic events that shaped her grandmother’s early life have left their mark, not only on Sonia Warshawski, but on her two daughters Regina and Debbie, her son Morrie, and her grandchildren. Such intergenerational trauma is a major theme of the film *Big Sonia*. This lesson explores how trauma and the stress it produces can affect us all.

The lesson should be begun before showing the film *Big Sonia*. Parts 1 and 2 give students the opportunity to see several videos and read an online article to understand the relevant concepts of stress response, adverse childhood experiences, and intergenerational trauma. In Part 3, students apply what they have learned to an analysis of intergenerational trauma in personalities that appear in the film *Big Sonia*, which offers insights into Holocaust survivor Sonia Warshawski and her relationships with her children and grandchildren.

A note of warning: Before you begin, prepare for the possibility that a discussion on trauma may trigger some of your students. If there is a possibility of toxic stress or trauma in the background of any of your students, you should warn them that this lesson may be difficult and have options for students to work on an alternative assignment outside of the classroom or give them permission to leave if the material proves distressing. It is also important that you have a counselor and resources available in the event that they are needed.

## What is the stress response and how does it ensure the survival of a species?

In creating *Big Sonia*, Leah Warshawski, the filmmaker and granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, came to realize that she mirrors the post-traumatic characteristics of her grandmother Sonia. As the director delved deeper into the life and experiences of her grandmother, intense conversations with family members revealed the effects of toxic stress and emotional pain carried forward with each generation. Within this journey, she discovered the reality of intergenerational trauma and the fact that even though one may not physically experience trauma, maladaptive stress responses of the past very much affect the future.

When human beings have all of the resources needed to maintain bodily systems, they are in a state called *homeostasis*. Homeostasis is often referred to as balance or equilibrium. During homeostasis, various chemicals including epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol are available at low levels throughout the brain and body. Levels of these chemicals increase when there is a real or perceived threat to homeostasis, known to most people as stress. The detection and elimination or mitigation of threats are essential for human survival and the continued propagation of the species. (Consider what happens if human beings are unresponsive when they see large animals or city buses moving rapidly toward them.) For this reason, human beings evolved with a stress response, that is, a physiological, behavioral and cognitive mechanism to reestablish homeostasis.

The perception and intensity of threat or the interpretation that something is indeed a stress is entirely subjective and based upon previous experiences, coping mechanisms, and social support available to the individual. The perception of

a threat occurs in an area of the brain called the *amygdala*. Immediately, the amygdala sends a signal to another part of the brain called the *hypothalamus* and the stress response is activated. The hypothalamus partners with the *pituitary gland* and the *adrenal gland* to facilitate and monitor the body's response to stress. Together these areas are referred to as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis).

The stress response occurs in two stages: the first, “fight or flight,” is a fast response and the second, the “general adaptation syndrome,” is slow. The “fight or flight” response is the result of communication between the hypothalamus, the anterior pituitary gland and adrenal medulla where norepinephrine and epinephrine are released. Norepinephrine and epinephrine help with the initial reaction to a stressor by providing energy and increasing attention. The “general adaptation syndrome” consists of communication between the hypothalamus, anterior pituitary gland and adrenal cortex resulting in the release of cortisol or stress hormone. Cortisol functions to reduce inflammation, provide energy and shut down the stress response once the threat has diminished.

Not all environmental changes are interpreted as threatening. However, any environmental change that is interpreted as threatening will result in the activation of the stress response. Additionally, because our brain's perception seems to be reality, simply the thought of the threatening event is enough to activate the stress response, even while a person is physically safe. To that end, a maladaptive stress response occurs when the stress response is triggered too often or is the result of trauma.



**What is trauma and how is it related to a maladaptive stress response or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?**

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. Trauma may lead to extreme stress in which one lacks the ability to cope and to process the emotional toll of the experience. Examples of experiences that may result in trauma include real or perceived life-threatening event, sexual assault, and the accidental or violent loss of a child, family member or friend. Although it is normal to experience certain temporary after-effects of stress such as fatigue, insomnia, headaches, muscle tension, digestive upset, moodiness, and mild anxiety, trauma leaves long-term, even life-long physical and emotional consequences and often results in a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Individuals with PTSD experience psychological and physical symptoms such as hypervigilance, extreme or exaggerated responses to minor stimuli, flashbacks or nightmares of the traumatic event, extreme emotion when being reminded of the trauma, or cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, and other inflammatory disorders.

**Can the effects of trauma be passed on from one generation to the next?**

These maladaptive responses to stress and trauma do not stop with the individual who experiences the stress or trauma. There is research that suggests that the psychological impact of trauma, specifically the development of PTSD in a trauma survivor, has the capacity to impact the expression of genes in offspring. To understand this further, it is important to understand something about genes. Genes hold information that, when activated, determines individual characteristics.

Some characteristics are the result of a single gene, for example, the ability to roll one’s tongue. Other characteristics such as height and eye color are polygenic, that is, they are the result of multiple genes working together. Genes are not the sole determiners of who we become and how we develop. There are chemical compounds located above the gene called the epigenome and when the epigenome interacts with the environment, genes can be activated or silenced. Think of the keys on a piano as genes and the hands that play the keys as the epigenome. One study of Holocaust survivors with PTSD illustrates potential epigenetic effects. Specifically, the gene that helps to regulate cortisol in offspring has epigenetic markers such that there are higher levels of circulating cortisol compared to the offspring of parents who were not subjected to the Holocaust or have PTSD.<sup>1</sup>

In comparison to the limited human research on the relationship between trauma and gene expression is the research on Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs. ACEs are traumatic experiences in a person’s life that occur before the age of 18 and that the person remembers as an adult. In 1998, a scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and a physician who worked for Kaiser Permanente investigated the relationship between ACEs and negative outcomes on social relationships as well as psychological and physiological health in adulthood. Not only did the researchers confirm a relationship between ACEs and negative outcomes on social relationships as well as psychological and physiological health in adulthood, but they found that, as the number of ACEs experienced increased,

<sup>1</sup> Yehuda, R., Daskalakis, N. P., Lehrner, A., Desarnaud, F., Bader, H. N., et al. (2014). Influences of maternal and paternal PTSD on epigenetic regulation of the glucocorticoid receptor gene in Holocaust survivor offspring. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 171(8), 872-880.

so did the negative outcomes on social relationships and psychological and physiological health in adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion, it appears as though there are multiple mechanisms of action in which trauma can be carried on through generations whether through epigenetic markers for depression and anxiety in offspring or the perpetuation of toxic stress and trauma experienced by the children of trauma survivors.

For more information, see <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>.

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7**

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.11-12.4**

Determine the meaning of symbols, key terms, and other domain-specific words and phrases as they are used in a specific scientific or technical context relevant to grades 11–12 texts and topics.

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<sup>2</sup> Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.



## Duration of Lesson

4 or 5 class periods

## Assessments

Whole-class discussion

Group discussion

Completion of **HANDOUT 1: THE STRESS RESPONSE** and **HANDOUT 3: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA**

## Materials

Internet access for watching the following videos:

- “How Stress Affects Your Body,”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-t1Z5-oPtU>
- “ACEs Primer” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccKFkcfXx-c&t=2s>
- “Study finds trauma effects may linger in body chemistry of next generation” <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/study-finds-ptsd-effects-may-linger-body-chemistry-next-generation>

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 1: THE STRESS RESPONSE**

Internet access for students to read “An Unhealthy Dose of Stress” at <https://swmnelca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Unhealthy-Dose-of-Stress.pdf>.

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 2: GLOSSARY**

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 3: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA**

## Procedure

### Part One: Preparation

1. On the board write, “Imagine that you have to give a speech to the entire student body and this really stresses you out. Describe in detail the physical reactions and feelings this experience would evoke.” Give students time to reflect in writing.
2. Ask students to volunteer to describe what they have written. List descriptions like “cheeks feel hot” and “racing pulse” on the board.
3. Next, share the Ted Ed video “How Stress Affects Your Body” about the physiological process that occurs during stress and how it impacts health at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-t1Z5-oPtU>. Ask students to match up the descriptions on the board to the steps in the stress response.
4. Following this video, lead a discussion about the purpose of the stress response. Emphasize specifically that the stress response exists to notify us when there is a change in our environment that is threatening and to get us to safety. Make it clear that without the stress response the human species would not survive.
5. Conclude the discussion by making a connection between the survival of the species and physiological processes and their relationship to the stress examples provided at the beginning of the lesson.
6. Explain to students that they are going to study the effect of childhood trauma on stress and adult life. Invite students to tell you if at any time they feel this is too difficult and explain that you will give an alternate assignment.

## Part Two: Adverse Childhood Experiences

1. Introduce the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences with the YouTube video “ACEs Primer” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccKFkcfXx-c&t=2s> and explain that the class will now dive deeper into what happens developmentally when a child experiences trauma or toxic stress. Discuss insights and surprises from the video.
2. Next, have students access, read, and take notes on the article “An Unhealthy Dose of Stress” from the Center for Youth Wellness at <https://swmnelca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Unhealthy-Dose-of-Stress.pdf>. Also pass out **HANDOUT 1: THE STRESS RESPONSE** and give students a few minutes to work individually or with a partner to order the events in the correct sequence after they have read the article.
3. Once work has been completed, review the correct answers for the handout. (The correct order should be 4-6-2-1-5-7-3.) Take the opportunity to review terminology. See **HANDOUT 2**, and, if you wish, distribute it to the class.
4. Conclude this section by asking students to discuss “Sasha” from the Center for Youth Wellness article in small groups. What does Sasha’s future look like and what do students believe may happen if/when she has her own children? What types of ACEs might her children experience if she doesn’t resolve her own traumatic experiences? Have students share their hypotheses as an introduction to the concept of Intergenerational Trauma.

## Part Three: Intergenerational Trauma

1. Introduce the secondary mechanism for Intergenerational Trauma by playing the PBS Newshour clip “Study finds trauma effects may linger in body chemistry of next generation” at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/study-finds-ptsd-effects-may-linger-body-chemistry-next-generation>.
2. Discuss the clip, making sure students understand that in addition to the toxic stress experienced by being a child of a trauma survivor, offspring may also “receive” changes to certain genes, increasing the odds of having anxiety and depression.
3. Pass out **HANDOUT 3: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA** and state that the class is going to apply all that they’ve learned about the stress response, ACEs, and Intergenerational Trauma to the film *Big Sonia*. Explain the directions and ask students to complete the worksheet as they watch the film but save the questions for homework.
4. Show the film, pausing a few minutes before the end of the class period for students to complete their notes.
5. Once they have finished the film, have them complete **HANDOUT 3: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA** (in class or for homework).
6. Collect their work and discuss their answers, using the suggested answers on **TEACHER RESOURCE 1** as a guide. Remember that answers may vary. Be sure to focus on the questions at the end pertaining to cultural groups and communities that share a history of oppression, victimization, or massive group trauma exposure. Some examples are:

# Lesson 5 (PSYCHOLOGY, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT)



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- A.** African Americans (slavery and subsequent institutional racism)
- B.** American and Canadian First Nations indigenous peoples (genocide, forced boarding school attendance and removal from family and community)
- C.** Armenians (genocide)
- D.** Black South Africans (apartheid)
- E.** Japanese Americans (survivors of internment camps)
- F.** More recent examples such as Syrian and South and Central American refugees.

Ask students what we can learn from survivors. How can we break the cycle of Intergenerational Trauma?

- 7.** End the lesson on a positive note touching on the subject of resilience. Have students brainstorm and list resilience-building resources and interventions. (You may wish to have a guidance counselor team with you for this discussion; at the least, have school and local resource information available.)
- 8.** In closing, ask students if Sonia from the film or Sasha from the reading had been given such resources, do they think the effects of their trauma would have been passed on to the next generation?



**Handout 1**

# Steps in the Stress Response

**Directions:**

What is the order in which events occur when someone is stressed? Read all the elements in the list below. Then place the correct number beside each step in the stress response.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The pituitary gland sends a message to the adrenal cortex and cortisol is released.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The hypothalamus releases hormones to trigger the pituitary gland.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The dog's owner appears, yells its name, and you realize the threat is over. Cortisol now turns off the stress response, helping your body calm down.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. You're walking home from school when a large and unrestrained dog races toward you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The pituitary gland sends a message to the adrenal medulla and epinephrine/adrenaline and norepinephrine/noradrenaline are released.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Your amygdala reacts to the threat by sending a message to the hypothalamus.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. You react to the threat by an increase in heart rate and your pupils dilating.

# Glossary

<b>adrenal cortex</b>	Located along the outside of the adrenal gland and mediates the stress response by producing cortisol or stress hormone.
<b>adrenal glands</b>	Small glands located on the top of each kidney that help the body respond to stress by producing cortisol, norepinephrine (noradrenaline) and epinephrine (adrenaline)
<b>adrenal medulla</b>	Located in the inner part of the adrenal gland and mediates the fast stress response (fight or flight) by producing norepinephrine (noradrenaline) and epinephrine (adrenaline).
<b>adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)</b>	Traumatic experiences that can have a profound effect on a child’s developing brain and body with lasting impacts on a person’s health throughout a lifespan. There are ten recognized ACEs, which fall into three types—abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. <sup>1</sup>
<b>amygdala</b>	Two structures located close to the hippocampus in the frontal portion of each temporal lobe sound the alarm to the hypothalamus when a stressor is detected.
<b>cellular plasticity</b>	The ability of cells to change their structure or function.
<b>cortisol</b>	A hormone often referred to as stress hormone whose effects include increased blood pressure and blood sugar and regulation of the body’s metabolism and immune response.
<b>epigenome</b>	A second set of instructions interacting with DNA that activate or suppress the expression of particular genes.
<b>epinephrine/adrenaline</b>	A hormone produced by the adrenal medulla to mediate the fast portion of the stress response or fight or flight.
<b>fight or flight</b>	The initial and fast reaction to a stressor wherein the adrenal medulla releases norepinephrine (noradrenaline) and epinephrine (adrenaline) to increase energy and attention during the initial processing of stress. Analogous to the alarm stage of the general adaptation syndrome.
<b>general adaptation syndrome</b>	The slower response to stress occurring in three stages wherein cortisol or stress hormone is produced from the adrenal cortex to provide energy and reduce inflammation. The first stage or alarm stage is analogous to the fight or flight response. The second stage is resistance and the third is exhaustion.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Adverse Childhood Experiences, (Apr. 1, 2016), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>



**Handout 2 ▶ P. 2**

# Glossary

<b>genes/genome</b>	Contains the unique list of genetic instructions stored in the sequence of base pairs of DNA.
<b>hippocampus</b>	An area of the brain responsible for memory processing, learning and aspects of regulating the stress response.
<b>homeostasis</b>	When a living organism has all resources necessary to maintain bodily systems, often referred to as balance or equilibrium.
<b>hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis</b>	The central stress response system connecting the brain with the entire body via hormones released into the blood.
<b>hypothalamus</b>	An area of the brain with many functions one of which is to control and mediate the stress response by connecting the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland. This connection to the endocrine system allows for a total body response to stress.
<b>intergenerational trauma</b>	Also referred to as transgenerational or historical trauma is the theory that trauma when experienced by one generation is transferred to future generations through behavior via the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder or complex post-traumatic stress disorder and/or genetics via epigenetic mechanisms.
<b>intervention</b>	Action taken by caregiver, teacher or community to stop or reduce the effects of adverse experiences and increase resilience.
<b>maladaptive or toxic stress:</b>	Extreme, frequent or extended activation of the body's stress response without the buffering presence of support. <sup>2</sup>
<b>neuroplasticity</b>	The process by which our brains are shaped by our experiences.
<b>norepinephrine/noradrenaline</b>	A hormone produced by the adrenal medulla to mediate the fast portion of the stress response or fight or flight.
<b>pituitary gland</b>	An area of the brain with many functions, one of which is to connect the nervous system (hypothalamus) with the endocrine system (adrenal glands) during the stress response.
<b>polygenic</b>	Traits or characteristics controlled by two or more genes.
<b>post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</b>	A combination of maladaptive physiological psychological, and behavioral characteristics experienced by individuals exposed to trauma.

<sup>2</sup> Sara B. Johnson, et al., The science of early life toxic stress for pediatric practice and advocacy, 131 PEDIATRICS 319 (2013), available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/2/319.full>.



## Glossary

<b>prefrontal cortex</b>	An area of the brain responsible for decision-making, judgement, impulse control and attention.
<b>resilience</b>	The ability to learn from, cope and process the emotional toll of a crisis or traumatic experience and return to physical homeostasis and psychologically healthy state.
<b>stress</b>	A real or perceived threat to homeostasis.
<b>stress response</b>	The physiological, behavioral and cognitive mechanism to reestablish homeostasis.
<b>synaptic plasticity</b>	The strength of the connections between braincells.
<b>transgenerational epigenetic inheritance</b>	Inheritance of epigenetic markers across generations that affect gene expression and trait(s) of offspring. Traits studied in epigenetics often refer to the way people behave or their vulnerability to disease. Normally markers are wiped clean at conception (when egg and sperm meet), but research is beginning to establish that some markers are not erased.
<b>trauma</b>	A deeply distressing or disturbing experience such as a threat to one's life, sexual assault, or the violent or accidental loss of a family member or friend.

**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**

# Intergenerational Trauma

**Directions:** While watching the film *Big Sonia*, use the “Adverse Childhood Experience Chart” below to identify and fill in the corresponding information for each generation represented in the film. If there is no information, just leave the section blank.

	<b>Adverse Childhood Experience(s) encountered.</b>	<b>Description of resulting social, emotional, and/or cognitive impairment.</b>	<b>Description of the health-risk behaviors subsequently adopted.</b>	<b>Description of resulting disease, disability, and/or social problems seen in adulthood.</b>
↓				
	<b>Adverse Childhood Experience(s) encountered.</b>	<b>Description of resulting social, emotional, and/or cognitive impairment.</b>	<b>Description of the health-risk behaviors subsequently adopted.</b>	<b>Description of resulting disease, disability, and/or social problems seen in adulthood.</b>
↓				
	<b>Adverse Childhood Experience(s) encountered.</b>	<b>Description of resulting social, emotional, and/or cognitive impairment.</b>	<b>Description of the health-risk behaviors subsequently adopted.</b>	<b>Description of resulting disease, disability, and/or social problems seen in adulthood.</b>



## Intergenerational Trauma

### Reflection Questions:

1. Select either Morrie or Leah. Describe the behaviors they may have witnessed or experienced as a child due to the trauma or toxic stress experienced by their parent or grandparent. How many known ACEs did they experience and how might this possibly affect their health in adulthood? (A list of ACEs appears on the next page; you may observe other responses to ACEs not listed.)

2. What is resilience? Pick one of the three survivors and describe two resilience-building interventions which may have disrupted the cycle of Intergenerational Trauma.

3. In addition to the Holocaust, name three examples of historical traumas. Pick one and describe the known or potential impact on subsequent generations.

# Intergenerational Trauma

<b>Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)</b>		
The following are stressful or traumatic events which can be experienced directly or witnessed.		
<b>Abuse</b>	<b>Neglect</b>	<b>Household Dysfunction</b>
Physical abuse	Physical neglect	Mother treated violently
Sexual abuse	Emotional neglect	Incarcerated household member
Emotional abuse		Household mental illness
		Substance misuse within household
		Parental separation or divorce
<b>Risk Factors Related to ACEs</b>		
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<b>Behavioral Problems</b>	<b>Physical Health Problems</b>
Early alcohol use	Suicide attempts	Diabetes
Substance abuse (illicit or prescription) and addiction	Lifetime depressive episodes	Heart disease
Tobacco use	Sleep disturbance	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
	High-risk sexual behaviors	Liver disease
	Adolescent pregnancy and unintended pregnancy	Cancer
	Poor work performance	Stroke
	Financial stress	Sexually transmitted diseases
	Risk for intimate partner abuse	Fetal death
	Poor academic achievement	
	Early initiation of sexual activity	

[Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html> and <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/practicing-effective-prevention/prevention-behavioral-health/adverse-childhood-experiences>]



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