

Writing Personal Narratives and The Harlem Renaissance

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How do Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, and Louis Armstrong effectively write personal narratives about living during the Harlem Renaissance?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students develop and write personal narratives by reading and analyzing personal narratives by Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, and Louis Armstrong. In the process, they also learn about the culture and ideals of the Harlem Renaissance, and discuss how personal narratives can reflect a moment of history.



Image: Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Courtesy of Nell Winston, The Louis Draper Archive

Personal narratives are powerful. They can provide a glimpse into the life of another person, they can create emotional connection through shared experience, or they can offer insight on life's joys and struggles. Personal narratives also serve as historical documents, revealing how the writer experienced a particular moment in time. Whether in the form of a song, diary entry, short story, poem, or letter, personal narratives are rarely just simple stories.

To help guide and inspire their own personal narratives, this lesson introduces students to the personal narratives of four artists who greatly influenced the Harlem Renaissance—a period of artistic, political, and cultural flourishing that occurred among Black communities in Harlem, New York, and beyond during the early 20th century. Students analyze the personal narratives of Blues and Jazz musicians Gladys Bentley and Louis Armstrong, as well as writer Langston Hughes, to gain insight into how to write compelling personal narratives. Reading accounts from these figures also allows students to consider what life might have been like during the Harlem Renaissance, one of the most important periods of Black History.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The definition of a personal narrative and an approach to writing one
- The defining characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance
- The life and work of Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, and Louis Armstrong

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to write compelling personal narratives by analyzing personal narratives by some of the most influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard the term “personal narrative?” Based on the words themselves, what might a personal narrative be?
- Have you ever read something that could be considered a personal narrative? If so, what was it?
- Why might a person want to read someone else’s personal narrative?
- How might personal narratives be important for understanding history, society, or culture?

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that they will be writing personal narratives in class, but will first be looking at other personal narratives for inspiration.
 - How would you summarize the Harlem Renaissance? When and why did it occur?
2. Inform students that all the personal narratives they will be reading come from the same moment in time: The Harlem Renaissance. Play the video “The Harlem Renaissance” from the site Black History in Two Minutes (<https://blackhistoryintwominutes.com/harlem-renaissance>). Then ask students:
 - What kind of historical conditions allowed the Harlem Renaissance to emerge?
 - What were some of the modes of expression associated with the Harlem Renaissance?
 - Was the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance limited to Harlem, New York? How do you know? (*Hint: consider*

the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” movement.)

3. Tell students they will now be reading personal narratives by important figures who played a large part in developing the Harlem Renaissance. Pass out to students **Handout - Personal Narratives from the Harlem Renaissance**. Then provide students with the following handouts to read. Teachers may assign a particular reading to each student, or allow students to select their own readings.
 - **Handout - Louis Armstrong Personal Narrative**
 - **Handout - Gladys Bentley Personal Narrative**
 - **Handout - Langston Hughes Personal Narrative**
4. After reading one of the above personal narratives and completing **Handout: Personal Narratives from the Harlem Renaissance**, have students share their responses in the Handout. Create a list on the board of some of the student responses. Then, as a class, discuss if there were shared ideas among students on what made a personal narrative interesting and engaging. Ask students:
 - Based on the responses to the handout, what are some of the things that make a personal narrative engaging?
 - How did the writers find a way to possibly connect with the readers? How did the writers express feelings that might be shared by other people?
5. Brainstorm with students what the principal theme or message of each personal narrative might be. (*For instance, the Louis Armstrong and Gladys Bentley narratives might have a theme related to taking a chance, while a theme of the Langston Hughes essay might be facing difficult encounters.*)
6. After a collection of themes are identified, ask students to choose one of the themes and write their own personal narrative based on the theme. For instance, if students identified a theme as “taking a chance,” ask students to write about a time in their life where they took a chance, and the consequences of taking a chance—or if a theme identified is “becoming famous,” ask students to write about a time in their life where they gained some attention or notoriety. (*Note: pending class time, writing a personal narrative may be given as homework, and the subsequent steps would occur at a future class.*)
7. After students have written their personal narratives, split students into reading circles. Have students read to one another their personal narratives, and provide constructive feedback using the same template in **Handout: Personal Narratives from the Harlem Renaissance**.
8. Ask each reading group to share with the class some of what they discussed as a group.



SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- What is the value of a personal narrative?
- What are some tips you discovered in writing an engaging personal narrative?
- How might a personal narrative represent the “spirit” of a particular time in history?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Re-write your personal narrative as a poem, letter, or Blues Song.
2. Pursue independent research on Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, and Louis Armstrong, or another figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Summarize their life, career, and creative, political, and social contributions.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 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.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Text Types and Purposes 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing 5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 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.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

STANDARDS

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Personal Narratives from the Harlem Renaissance
- Handout - Louis Armstrong Personal Narrative
- Handout - Gladys Bentley Personal Narrative
- Handout - Langston Hughes Personal Narrative