

*"We teach difficult history because these lessons can guide how we act in the future"*

– Canadian Museum of History

## What is difficult history?

**Difficult history** can be defined as historical narratives that include oppression, violence, or trauma. Difficult histories often elicit strong emotional reactions. They challenge widely accepted versions of a community or nation's past or stated values. Difficult histories connect with questions or problems facing us in the present and cause us to question our understanding of the past and present.

*Difficult history is also known as:*

- *hard history*
- *historical injustice*
- *controversial history*
- *difficult knowledge*
- *sensitive pasts.*

## Why teach difficult history?

Teaching difficult history provides important opportunities to:

- ensure that important stories and perspectives are remembered
- validate and affirm the experiences of various communities
- connect past events to current contexts
- consider how civic engagement can promote social and cultural diversity and inclusion

*"...education, or what passed for it, got us into this situation, and education is what will lead us out."*

– Justice Murray Sinclair

## How do I teach difficult history?

Ensuring that every student sees themselves reflected throughout their schools, learning resources, and within their learning experiences requires us to invite complexity and hidden narratives into learning about the history of our communities, province, and nation. Difficult history can be challenging; teaching difficult history and current events can bring up many feelings for both students and teachers. Teachers need to use evidence-based strategies to address topics in ways that are culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and affirm the well-being and achievement of all students.

There are evidence-based strategies teachers can use when approaching difficult history to ensure that learning is developmentally appropriate and responsive to students and communities. Strategies can be found on pp. 5-6.

“Difficult histories can make us uncomfortable. They can challenge how we think about ourselves, our relationship to others, and our relationship to the nation.”

– James Miles, Visiting Assistant Professor, Columbia University

## Supporting Teaching and Learning:

### Know Yourself, Your Students, Your Community

Engaging with difficult history will look different from class to class. This is because everyone has their own unique experiences and backgrounds that need to be considered when addressing topics of difficult history in the classroom. Relationships between students and teachers are essential for building a climate of respect and understanding. Knowing your students helps you to determine how to engage students in difficult history, and to what degree. Below are questions you can consider when planning a responsive approach to difficult history:

- What are the demographics of your classroom?
- What is your relationship with your students and their families?
- How might your **positionality** affect how you understand and approach topics with your students?
- How can I teach this in ways that are responsive to my students' needs?

*Positionality* refers to where one is located in relation to their social identities (e.g., race, class, gender expression, ability, etc.) The combination of these identities shapes how we experience and understand the world.

### Safe Learning Environments

Creating a classroom culture that recognizes and values all students' identities and provides opportunities for students to explore identities that are different from their own is essential to fostering a safe learning environment. When planning learning experiences, you can:

- take time to reflect on your own identity and positionality in relationship to these histories,
- co-create a classroom collective agreement that outlines expectations for you and your students,
- support students in understanding what difficult history is, and that experiencing difficult emotions in response to the learning is a normal reaction,
- introduce various ways that students can process their emotions with support.

### Resource Selection

Choosing resources to support learning about difficult history requires careful consideration. It is essential that teachers review resources before using them with students. Below are questions to guide your resource selection:

- Does the resource align with curriculum outcomes for my course?
- Is this resource developmentally appropriate?
- Does the resource pass the [Bias Evaluation Instrument](#)?
- Is the resistance and resilience of the people affected reflected in the resource? If not, how can I introduce resources that do?

## Language Use

Before introducing difficult history topics to students, teachers need to consider language commonly used at the time. In the past, terms and phrases were commonly used that are no longer acceptable today. In other instances, terms are still used today but in very specific contexts such as use of “Indian” in relation to the Indian Act. This kind of distinction requires explicit instruction so that students understand appropriate and inappropriate contexts for the word.

Teachers need to be aware that resources that contain language such as slurs or hate speech can be harmful to students. It is important that students have an accurate understanding of the past; however, before selecting a resource that includes harmful language, you can consider:

- Is the resource necessary for students to meet course outcomes?
- Is the resource developmentally appropriate?
- Is there a different resource that can be used?
- Does the resource support critical conversations about prejudice or discrimination and its effects?

## Text Sets

Whenever possible, it is preferred that teachers choose resources authored by people from the affected community. However, this is not always possible, especially when including primary sources from times when the voices of people from marginalized communities were not included in historical records. To counter this, you can develop a text set. A text set is a collection of relevant resources purposefully selected or organized by the teachers for a specific purpose. A text set can include:

- general background information,
- information on people involved in or affected by the issue,
- information on why and event happened or why it's important,
- different perspectives on the topic.

*Words like “Indian” and “Eskimo” appear in historical and legal sources, as well as primary sources and first voice accounts. These words should never be used to refer to Indigenous people outside of these contexts.*

*Text sets can include:*

- *articles*
- *speeches*
- *interviews*
- *letters*
- *diary entries*
- *photos*
- *artwork*
- *government documents*

## Primary Sources

Primary sources are essential for developing historical thinking. Primary source documents can bring events described in the curriculum to life by revealing the perspectives of those who experienced them. When selecting primary sources to support learning you can:

- ensure sources are developmentally and age appropriate by modifying them (through the use of ellipses or redaction) so students are not exposed to harmful words or images,
- make connections between primary sources and the present, so students recognize that historic events continue to impact contemporary communities,
- include documents that show a variety of perspectives so students can analyze different narratives to construct an accurate understanding of historic events and their impacts,
- provide various kinds of sources such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, interviews, etc.

*Primary sources are essential for studying the past. However, some sources may need to be modified in order to ensure students are not exposed to harmful language such as racial slurs. Modifications should only be used to support students' well-being and never to change the author's message.*

When using primary sources, encourage students to think critically about why a source was created, who created it, and who the intended audience was. Provide explicit instruction to support students in identifying biases in the information, and how the information can be used to interpret past events.

## Facilitation

When discussing difficult history, set expectations that lead to balanced, respectful conversations. It is important to model what balanced, respectful conversation looks like in your classroom. People today are not responsible for decisions made in the past, but we also need to acknowledge that some individuals and communities have been disproportionately affected by those decisions. When facilitating classroom discussions:

- remind students about respectful communication
- ask students to support their position with evidence
- rephrase questions when needed
- correct inaccurate information
- lead students in reflecting
- immediately address the use of inappropriate language
- provide time for processing, reflecting, and debriefing

## Responding to Questions or Concerns

If you are questioned about resources or approaches to support teaching and learning around difficult history, your response is critical. Before responding, consider the inquiry you received; you may wish to reach out to your administrator or another professional before responding. Listen to the question or concern. Take a collective approach - thank the person for sharing their thoughts and assure them that you want to address their question or concern. Be willing to explain your reasoning and approaches and acknowledge that you are willing to learn and grow your practice.

## Teaching Strategies

There are evidence-based teaching strategies you can use to support your students in learning about difficult history. Strategies that are not evidence-based should be avoided. Below you will find information you can use to guide planning and instruction.

✗	Avoid starting when you are pressed for time. Teaching difficult history involves careful preparation and scaffolding for students. Avoid starting discussions when you have limited time, such as the last lesson on a Friday.
✗	Avoid re-enactments or simulations. Re-enactments, simulations, or other ways of “acting out” difficult history are not appropriate and can be considered disrespectful to survivors and harmful to students.
✗	Avoid using humour. Using humour is not an appropriate way to ease discomfort or to attempt to lighten difficult history.
✗	Avoid singling students out. Do not ask students to share personal experiences of prejudice or discrimination based on race, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other aspects of their identities. Do not ask students to speak on behalf of a group with which they identify.
✗	Avoid romanticizing history. Portray all people as human beings who can make their own judgements and decisions. Reliable information, and a balance of perspectives is necessary for students to have an accurate understanding of the past.
✗	Avoid teaching difficult history only during specific months or days. Don't wait for February to address Black history in your curriculum or June to introduce the fight for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. Incorporate these histories year-round and use days or months to acknowledge various peoples to deepen students' understanding and make connections between past and present.
✗	Avoid comparisons of oppression. Comparing the scope, depth, or impacts of suffering between groups affected by difficult events is not appropriate (e.g., enslavement in Canada compared to the US).
✓	Involve students, administration and parents. Explain what will be discussed or shown in class and why it's important to the course. You can include information in your communication plan, as part of curriculum night, or other ways you communicate with students and their families.
✓	Read ahead. Read and watch everything you plan to use in class. Use graphic material judiciously and only to the extent that it is necessary to support students in meeting the learning goal.
✓	Prepare students for reactions. Explain that people respond to difficult history in different ways. Some people feel anger, guilt, shame, sadness, or defensiveness. Explain that behaviors such as joking, are not appropriate and provide other ways for students to respond when they are uncomfortable.
✓	Introduce tools to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their learning and process their emotions. Encourage students to keep a reflection journal as a regular part of their learning experience or use an anonymous survey to check in on how students are feeling.
✓	Scaffold the learning experience. Provide context for learning about difficult history. Introduce historical perspectives, world views and the events around the difficult time.
✓	Anticipate connections to today. Be aware of your students' backgrounds – the effects of difficult history may impact their lives today. Be open if students volunteer their experience, but never single out anyone to share.
✓	Include individual stories. First-person accounts such as diaries, interviews, letters and survivor testimonies humanize historical events and statistics so students can connect to the material.
✓	Include messages of hope and resilience. After a lesson on difficult history, information on ways the community has resisted, or ways students themselves can become engaged in an issue helps them to

	see there is a way forward. Consider how to approach history in a way that is age-appropriate and empowers students rather than overwhelming them.
✓	Choose historical fiction carefully. Historical fiction can be an effective way to humanize difficult history for students. However, teachers need to be aware that some historical fiction texts (e.g., novels, films, etc.) dramatize events with the intent of exploiting the audience's emotional vulnerability. Choose texts that are respectful of survivors' experiences and are age-appropriate for students.
✓	Design creative writing assessments carefully. Creative writing can be a meaningful way for students to reflect and communicate what they have learned. However, teachers should ensure that the assignment clearly aligns with a course outcome and that students are provided with explicit instruction to avoid appropriating the experiences of survivors and communities in their work.

If you have questions or require additional support in approaching difficult history, reach out to your school administrator.

## Additional Resources

- [Approved Resources List](#)
- [Bias Evaluation Instrument](#)
- [Know the Signals: A Guide for Selecting Learning Resources that Value Black Students' Lives](#)
- [Know the Signals FAQs](#)
- [Guidance for Selecting Short Term Learning Resources](#)
- [Tips for Teaching Difficult History](#)