



***This is How I See It: Finding Voice through Memoir Study and Writing***

by Shari Dinkins, 2016 CTI Fellow  
McClintock Middle School

This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
Grade 8 English-Language Arts; Grades 9 – 12; Creative Writing

**Keywords:** memoir, voice, personal narrative, *Night*, *Fragments of Isabella*, the Holocaust

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** This unit looks at memoir while studying the Holocaust. Using *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *Fragments of Isabella* by Isabella Leitner, students will explore the Holocaust from two perspectives. While *Night* explores the male experience of the Holocaust, *Fragments of Isabella* shares the female experience. After reading the memoirs, students will participate in a writing workshop. This workshop will allow them to find their own unique voice as they explore their personal narrative in order to write their own memoirs about an experience overcoming a challenging time or circumstance.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to approximately sixty students in English-Language Arts, grade 8.*

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## This is How I See It: Finding Voice through Memoir Study and Writing

*Shari Dinkins*

### **Introduction**

Author John Jakes, states that the most important thing for any writer to do is to, “Be yourself. Above all, let who you are, what you are, what you believe shine through every sentence you write, every piece you finish.”<sup>1</sup> Another author, Georgia Heard, said, “(Voice) . . . it’s the heart, eyes, ears, tongue, and hands of the writer.”<sup>1</sup> But the question becomes: what is voice? It has been described as the “personal flavor”<sup>2</sup> of a piece of writing. In the literary elements, it is referred to as tone, and there is no literary genre better for developing voice than the memoir.

A memoir is defined as “a written factual account of a person’s life,” and is a sub-genre of autobiography.<sup>3</sup> The word originates from the French word for *memory* or *reminiscence*.<sup>3</sup> This means that memoirs are stories of specific events or moments in a person’s life, rather than an overarching view of one’s life. Often, memoirs are grouped by theme and involve personal reflection on the experience being recalled. This makes the memoir a valuable genre; it preserves a person’s history as seen through his or her own eyes.<sup>3</sup> Memoirs are a unique take on personal history, sharing the stories that shape and define us.

For the past six years of my career, I have taught a Holocaust unit. It is my passionate belief that all students should be exposed to this gruesome part of history in order to know that one voice can make a difference, that one voice can spark a change, turn a tide, save a life. I believe this lesson is even more important given the current climate of our country. The world in which our students live is attacking them for their race, their culture, their religion, their sexual orientation, or their mental or physical ability, just as Hitler did the Jews, Gypsies, Blacks, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled. It is my hope that this unit will not only open my students’ eyes to the historical horrors of hate, but will also allow them to find their voice and encourage them to fight for what is right, even though it may not always be what is easy.

### **Rationale**

If there is one thing I have learned after nine years of teaching, it is that every student has a story. This was never more apparent to me than over the course of this past academic year. My first year at McClintock Middle School proved to be the most diverse of my career thus far. And with such diversity, I could not help but wonder . . .

Many students think that teachers have no lives outside of school. Some even think their teachers live at the school. Of course, this is not the case. But how many teachers take the time to think about their students' lives outside of school? As I went through the year, I found myself wondering about my students, especially those who were originally from another country. What was their home country like? What are some of the traditions of their home country? What brought their families to America? Do they like it here? Do they miss their home country? Would they go back? How much education do their parents have? How do their families view education? Where all have they been? What all have they seen? How has all of this shaped them?

I know my students have stories to tell. For some of them, this unit may well be the first time they share those stories. For others, this unit may be the catalyst to finding their own, unique voice. And for some, it may empower them to make their voice heard. Whatever they glean, it is my hope that this unit shows them that their story matters. Their voice matters. They matter.

## **Demographics**

I teach at McClintock Middle School. We serve a total of 1,049 students, and I am honored to teach approximately sixty of them. As previously mentioned, my school is incredibly diverse. Of the student population, 52% are African American; 24% are Hispanic; 12% are Caucasian; 6% are Asian; 4% are more than one race; 1% are American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1% are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Within this population, there is even more diversity. An overwhelming 83% of the student body qualify for free or reduced lunch; 10% are receiving some form of Exceptional Children services; 4% have 504 Plans; 4% have transportation issues; and 11% have limited English proficiency. Many of our students have been residence of the United States for less than three years.

My classroom is a microcosm of that diversity. I teach three classes of eighth grade English-Language Arts every day. My classes average seventeen students. The demographics of those "average seventeen" looks like this: ten African-Americans, four Hispanics, two Caucasians, and one Asian. Of my fifty-one students, seven are new to the school this year; one has a 504 Plan; and twenty did not speak English as their first language.

## **Unit Goals**

My objective for this unit of study is twofold. First, I wish to expose students to memoirs as a genre. I want students to read multiple examples, study them, and connect with them. Secondly, I want students to find their voice. Through multiple writing activities, students will develop their writing voice. Ultimately, students will use their newfound voices to tell their own stories, explaining "How [They] See It".

## Content Research

What is Memoir?

In her 2005 book, *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Sharpen Meaning – and Triumph Over Tests*, Katherine Bomer notes that the concept of writing about one's experiences or life dates back to 397 A.D., with St. Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>4</sup> Bomer goes on to note that "it wasn't until 1806 that the genre earned its name" from a collection of Greek roots – *auto* meaning "self," *bio* meaning "life," and *graphia*, meaning "a written description."<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, autobiographies are chronological recordings of the writer's life, usually including reflection and analysis of moments in one's life. According to Bomer, "autobiographical writing is the 'most natural extension of common conversation.'"<sup>5</sup> But memoir is much more specific.

While memoir is autobiographical writing, and does share many of the genre's key characteristics – "honesty, self-analysis, and self-revelation" – it is a much more narrow, specific genre, offering what Bomer refers to as "a mere slice of ordinary life – a certain time period, a special relationship, a particular theme or angle on life about one's life."<sup>6</sup> The general conclusion is that memoir takes the "keyword[s]" of autobiography – retrospection and truth – and amplifies them because of its intense focus.<sup>7</sup>

Bomer says she "often begin[s] memoir workshops by talking about what . . . memoir [is not]," which is a logical manner of introducing what memoir actually is.<sup>8</sup> Memoir is not: "a hideously boring reportage of a life lived"; going to begin with a date of birth or place; a genealogy, documenting facts; a "naming [of] milestones"; name dropping.<sup>8</sup> Memoir jumps into the middle of life, shining a spotlight on a story that is well underway and far from finished.

What is Gained from Reading About the Lives of Others?

Unlike works of fiction, memoir provides the reader with a glimpse into another person's life. Bomer asserts that memoir is possible "the most important genre there is" because "reading and writing memoir can help create a better world."<sup>9</sup> Memoir is a vehicle that allows the reader to, as Bomer says, "connect with . . . other[s]," learning "that other people feel the way we do."<sup>5</sup> Bomer goes on to say memoir is "how we learn about lives that are so vastly different from our own so that our minds and hearts can stretch to understand who life is for others."<sup>5</sup> She isn't the only one who shares this opinion.

In "What Lessons You Can Learn by Reading Memoir," author Jerry Waxler agrees, saying that the reading of memoir allows the reader to "share" time with "another human being," to "see the world through [the] eyes [of the writer], and allow them to lead [the reader] through the feelings and thoughts they experienced."<sup>9</sup> Waxler asserts that

memoir offer three primary benefits: insight into “the human condition,” insight into how to effectively write memoir, and guidance through lessons learned by others.<sup>9</sup>

First, the study of memoir offers the reader “insight into the human condition.”<sup>9</sup> According to Waxler, reading about the struggles and experiences of others allows us, as humans, to develop an understanding of things we have not personally experienced. He credits reading a soldier’s memoir about the journey through Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with not only providing knowledge of PTSD, but with lessons on “dignity” and “the powerful healing . . . of service dogs.”<sup>9</sup> Waxler also acknowledges lessons about caring for a parent with Alzheimer’s Disease, the “awesome responsibility of motherhood,” and the struggles of raising a wayward child.<sup>9</sup> Memoir allows the reader to gain empathy for people they do not know and situations they have never experienced.

Second, reading memoir helps teach the reader how to effectively write memoir. Waxler says that each memoir is “an encyclopedia . . . of hints about the style and structure of the memoir genre.”<sup>9</sup> And the variety within the memoir genre is immense. From picture books to graphic novel to traditional and early reader to young adult to adult, there is something within the genre for everyone.

Finally, memoir allows the reader to learn from the lives of others. Famous Science Guy, Bill Nye, said, “Everyone you will ever meet knows something you do not.”<sup>10</sup> Comedian, Graucho Marx, concurs: “Learn from the mistakes of others. You can never live long enough to make them all yourself.”<sup>11</sup> Even Voltaire, the famed French writer and philosopher agrees, asking, “Is there anyone so wise as to learn by the experience of others?”<sup>12</sup> Memoir allows the reader to learn from those more experienced, to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, and as Waxler says, that is “a huge pay off.”<sup>9</sup> Learning from the lives of others provides the reader with valuable insights into situations they may experience. Through memoir, a reader can see how others have handled situations and experiences similar to their own, coming full circle to realize we are not alone, not the only one going through a hardship or enjoying victory.

### The Benefits of Processing Through Writing for Adolescents

In an interview, author and former middle school teacher, Jeff Anderson, says:

“Let’s face it. Middle grades is a time of turmoil and of testing the edges of who we want to be, will be. Middle school is a perfect drama really. Listening, really listening is what the best teachers do. It’s the same for writers.”<sup>13</sup>

Anyone who has ever had a middle schooler or taught middle school knows just how accurate that statement is. Middle school *is* a drama. Students are battling pressures at home (chores and expectations and, at times, responsibilities they should not yet have), school (grades, friends, boys, girls, bullies, “mean” teachers) and in society (being cool, being enough). Add to that the constant rollercoaster of hormones and puberty. and few

days pass without some sort of conflict, tears, and confusion. It is easy to see why so many middle schoolers feel alone. But memoir writing allows, as Anderson says, “connectedness,” showing middle schoolers that “what holds us together is stronger than what pulls us apart.”<sup>13</sup> The writing and the sharing of writing creates much needed and many times vital common thread for adolescent students.

Middle school students are desperately searching for acceptance, a place to belong. They are searching for and trying to accept themselves in a society that shoves its expectations down their throats. Anderson asserts that it is through the writing process that offers transformation, change, and healing.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the act of writing is therapeutic and good for health.

In an article for PsychCentral entitled, “The Health Benefits of Journaling,” Maud Purcell pronounces “a pen coupled with paper . . . as a powerful life tool,” and lists several very specific benefits of writing.<sup>14</sup> Purcell cites a study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin that found journaling made immune cells stronger, and other studies show it decreases the severity of asthma; but the positive effects of writing of more than physical.<sup>14</sup> Purcell refers to psychologist James Pennebaker, who asserts that the act of writing

The Value of Reader Response

## Instructional Implementation

### Teaching Strategies

This unit is comprised of two parts: (1) in-depth memoir study with analysis and (2) memoir writing.

#### *In-Depth Memoir Study with Analysis*

This is the first part of the unit. Within it there are five components.

1. Journaling Allows students to write about their own lives, an act with will be important as they begin working on their own story.
2. Lesson Allows the teacher to provide important information and facilitate discussions of the text.
3. Activity Allows students to engage with information.
4. In-Class Reading Allows students the time necessary to complete the texts.
5. Reader Response Allows students to process and respond to the reading, giving them a better understanding of the texts.

Please note that these lessons are designed for an eighty-minute block. Chart A shows how this time is best used.

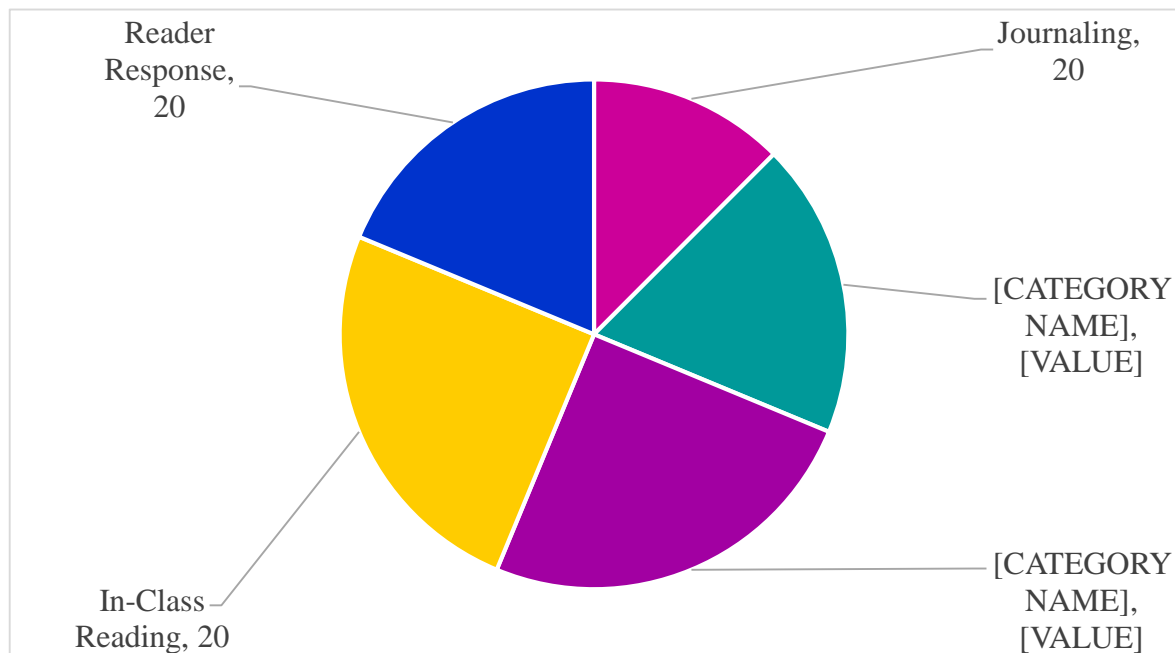


Chart A

With the exception of “Day 1: Introduction,” each day should be completed in the following order: Journaling, Lesson, Activity, In-Class Reading, and Reader Response. This allows the students to begin and end with writing, while providing them with important reading time. The reading passages have been divided so that one text can be read in-class, while the other is read for homework. Students should be allowed to choose which text they read at which sitting.

### *Memoir Writing*

This is the second part of the unit. Here, students will create their own memoir. This portion of the unit is a workshop, allowing students to work both independent and collaboratively.

The workshop will follow the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Students will complete the planning portion of the workshop on Day 1: Introduction.

Drafting will occur on days two through ten. Each drafting day will provide an opportunity for students to choose between two prompts, and will also allow students to share their writing and receive responses from classmates. Students may respond to the writings of their classmates in one of three ways: by asking the author a question; by making a connection to their own life; or by responding to a memorable line from the author’s text.

Day eleven is designated for an assessment on the selected memoirs. Days twelve and thirteen are revising days. Day fourteen will be a self-editing day, and day fifteen will be a peer editing day. On day sixteen, students will work on publishing their personal memoirs.

### Classroom Lessons/Activities

#### *Day 1: Introduction*

The Introduction day is designed to prepare the students with information essential to their comprehension of the memoirs. The day’s activity is designed to get students thinking about the power of one voice. This is the only day of the unit where the Activity will come after the Readings. This will allow students time to work on their responses to the poem and quotations after a brief discussion.

Journaling    Create a timeline of your life. Include memorable, important events.

Lesson        \* Historical set-up: Information about the causes of WWII and the rise of Hitler



\* Biographical information on the authors: Elie Wiesel and Isabella Leitner

Readings	“And I Did Not Speak” by Pastor Neimoller, with quotes additional quotes
Activity	Discussion of the poem, “And I Did Not Speak,” along with the accompanying quotations
Reader Response	See Handout, “And I Did Not Speak” for writing prompt

### Day 2

Journaling	Write about a time in your life when you did something forbidden. OR Write about where and what home is for you.
Lesson	Group Reading: Fragments of Isabella, pg. 13 - 14 Night, pg. 3 – 5 Discussion of Readings
Activity	Instruction on completion of the Venn Diagrams. Today, complete Venn Diagram A.
Readings	<i>Fragments of Isabella</i> , pg. 15 - 26 <i>Night</i> , pg. 6 – 20 (top)
Reader Response	How does Moishe the Beadle survive his ordeal? Why does he return to Sighet? Discuss why the Jews of Sighet refuse to believe Moishe.

### Day 3

Journaling	Write about a time in your life when everything changed for you. OR Write about a traumatic moment with your family.
Lesson	Discussion: First Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram B
Activity	Concept Card: HUMANITY
Readings	<i>Fragments of Isabella</i> , pg. 27 - 36 <i>Night</i> , pg. 20 – 34

Reader Response These are some of the more difficult sections of the books. Write your response to these sections. How did you feel while reading? How did you react to the events?

#### Day 4

Journaling Write about the day you were no longer a child.  
OR  
Write about something you have lost.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram C

Activity Concept Card: DIGNITY

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 37 - 49  
*Night*, pg. 34 (bottom) – 46

Reader Response Today's readings speak strongly on humanity. At one point, Wiesel writes, "In a few seconds, we had ceased to be men" (37). What does he mean? What things can cause people to lose their sense of dignity and humanity?

#### Day 5

Journaling Write about a time when someone unexpectedly came through for you.  
OR  
Write about a time when you were in conflict with someone.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram C

Activity The Holocaust: By the Numbers, Part I

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 50 - 60  
*Night*, pg. 47 – 58

Reader Response Continue thinking about the ideals of humanity and dignity discussed yesterday. How are you seeing these ideals play out, either positively or negatively, within the texts?

#### Day 6

Journaling Write about an encounter you have had with death.  
OR  
Write about a time you learned something you didn't want to know.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram D

Activity The Holocaust: By the Numbers, Part II (SUBMIT)

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 61 - 68  
*Night*, pg. 58 (bottom) – 72

Reader Response Today's *Night* passage contains what many people feel is one of the most difficult parts of the entire memoir. Write your response to this section. How did you feel as you read this chapter? How did you react to the events?

### Day 7

Journaling Write about a particular piece of clothing or possession.  
OR  
Write about a scary experience you have had.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram D

Activity

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 69 - 76  
*Night*, pg. 72 (bottom) – 84

Reader Response One of the main themes of both memoirs is the role faith plays in times of hardship. Discuss the changes Leitner and Wiesel undergo as a result of the things they are experiencing. How does their faith change? Wiesel is particularly vocal about this change. Do you feel he is justified in his feelings?

### Day 8

Journaling Write about a lie you told or one that was told on you.  
OR  
Write about a secret you had to keep.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram D

Activity

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 77 - 87

*Night*, pg. 85 – 97

Reader Response In discussing the Holocaust, one survivor, Luba Frederick, said, "To die was easy." Based on the reading you have done thus far, explain her statement.

*Day 9*

Journaling Write about an important family member.  
OR  
Write about a moment in which you had to make a choice.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram E

Activity

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 88 - 96  
*Night*, pg. 98 – 106 (top)

Reader Response How do you feel about the behavior of the German civilians towards the victims of the Holocaust based on what you have read thus far? Why do you think the German people behaved in this manner?

*Day 10*

Journaling Write about a time you escaped from something or someone.  
OR  
Write about scars, physical or emotional, in your life.

Lesson Discussion: Previous Day's Readings with Completion of Venn Diagram E

Activity

Readings *Fragments of Isabella*, pg. 97 - 106  
*Night*, pg. 106 – 115

Reader Response If you could have a conversation with a character from either memoir, which character would you choose? Why would you choose that character? What questions would you ask? Explain why you chose these questions.

### *Day 11*

Students will complete an essay test.

### *Day 12 & Day 13*

Students will choose one of their journaling activities from the previous ten days. They will then work on developing and revising the ideas within it to create a short personal memoir.

### *Day 14*

Students will work independently, following an editing checklist, to edit their own writing.

### *Day 15*

Students will work in small, rotating groups to edit one another's memoirs. Again, they will use the provided editing checklist.

### *Day 16*

Students will share the final copies of their personal memoirs, which will be added to a class volume.

### Assessments

There are two main assessments for this unit – an essay test and a personal memoir. The essay test asks students to respond to the following prompt:

Originally, Wiesel had titled his work, *And the World was Silent*, but the publisher changed the title to *Night*. Discuss the significance of the titles, *Fragments of Isabella* and *Night*, explaining why the title of each memoir is fitting.

The second assessment, the personal memoir, asks students to write about a specific event in their lives. This is where their journaling comes into play, as students will select one of their quick writes to expand into a short personal memoir. Upon completion, these memoirs will be combined into a class volume.

## **Appendix 1: Teaching Standards**

This unit is founded upon the Common Core Standards; thus, the unit will require close reading, textual support, vocabulary acquisition, and writing. While the unit addresses many of the Common Core Standards, the following is a list of the standards implemented in a significant way within this unit.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3**

Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

Students will analyze various memoirs in order to discuss how the events connect within each memoir and within the selections categorically.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.5**

Analyze in detail the structure of a specific paragraph in a text, including the role of particular sentences in developing and refining a key concept.

Students will analyze specific passages of various memoirs in order to evaluate them as pivotal moments within the texts.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Students will be writing to develop a real experience, adhering to the attributes of the memoir genre.

### ***CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.B***

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

Students will develop their memoir of a specific experience or event with reflection.

## **Appendix 2: Materials for Classroom Use/Worksheets**

### ***Night & Fragments of Isabella* Pre-Reading Activity**

**Read the following poem and quotations carefully.**

“And I Did Not Speak” by Pastor Niemoller

First they came for the Jews  
and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists  
and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionist  
and I did not speak out –  
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me –  
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

“Prejudice is a lazy man’s substitute for thinking.” ~ Unknown

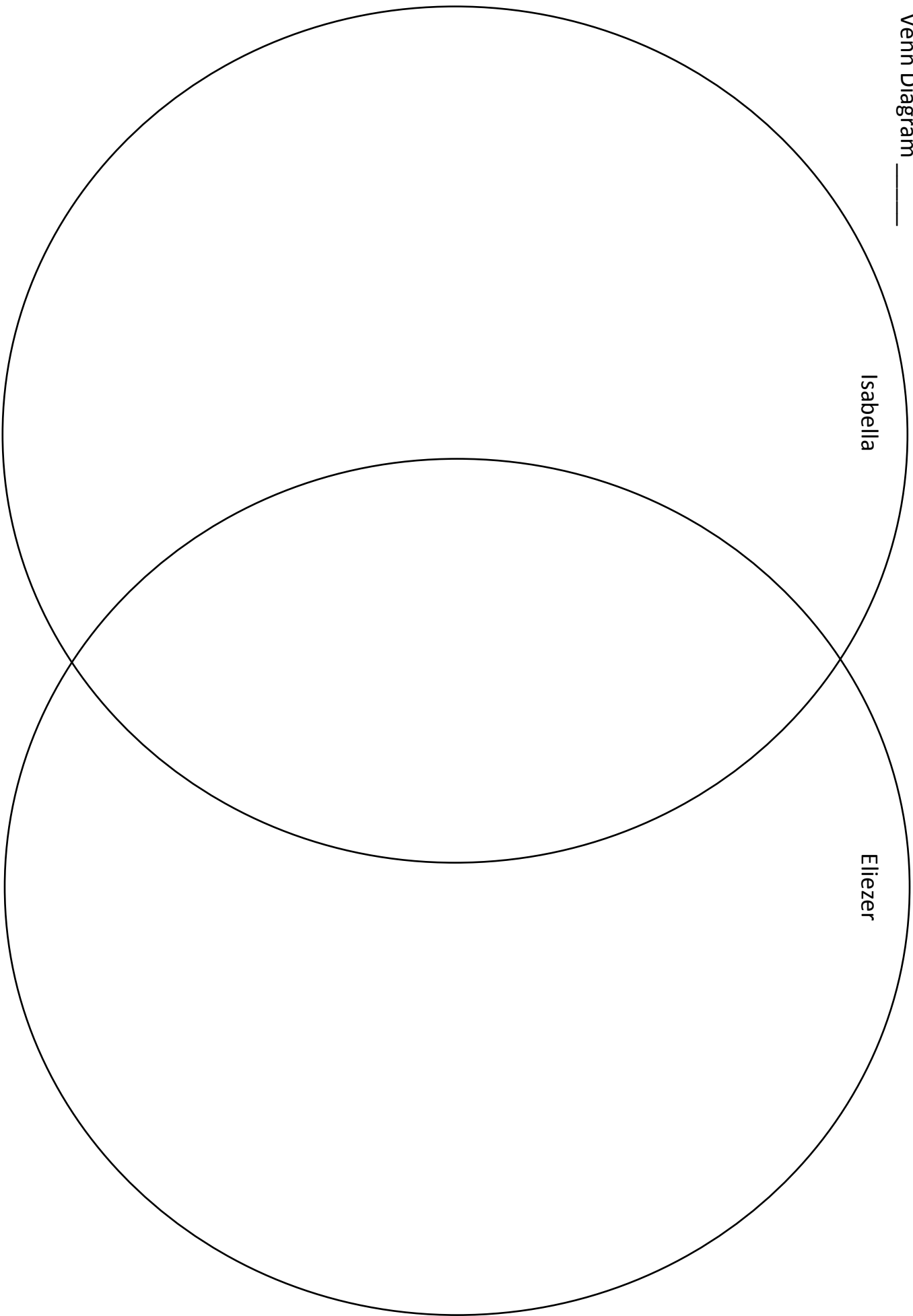
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world,  
indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” ~ Margaret Mead

Consider what you know about the Holocaust. After reading the above, think for a moment about what this poem and these quotes have in common. What are they saying about the events that happened during the Holocaust? What do they say about how such a horrific event could have been stopped, or even prevented? What do they say about our world today or for the future? In a well-developed essay, provide not only a thoughtful response the poem and quotations, but also address the questions above.

**HAPPY WRITING!**

*Fragments of Isabella & Night*

Venn Diagram \_\_\_\_\_



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Block 1 2 3 4 Date \_\_\_\_\_



### Appendix 3: Teacher and Student Resources

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/>

This is the single best website for Holocaust education. It contains a plethora of information for educators and students alike.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, *6+1 Trait Writing: 4-12 Introduction Teacher Training*, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, *6+1 Trait Writing: 4-12 Introduction Teacher Training*, 113.

<sup>3</sup> LiteraryDevices Editors. "Metaphor," *LiteraryDevices.net*.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Bomer, *Writing a Life*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Bomer, *Writing a Life*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Bomer, *Writing a Life*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Bomer, *Writing a Life*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Bomer, *Writing a Life*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Waxler, "What Lessons Can You Learn by Reading Memoirs," *Memoir Revolution*, [memorywritersnetwork.com](http://memorywritersnetwork.com).

<sup>10</sup> Bill Nye, "Quotes about Learning from Others," *QuotesGram*, [quotesgram.com](http://quotesgram.com).

<sup>11</sup> Graucho Marx, "Quotes about Learning from Others," *QuoteAddicts*, [quoteaddicts.com](http://quoteaddicts.com).

<sup>12</sup> Voltaire, "Learning from Mistakes," *PictureQuotes*, [picturequotes.com](http://picturequotes.com).

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This site offers quotations on a variety of topics.

Waxler, Jerry. "What Lessons Can You Learn by Reading Memoirs." Memoir Revolution. June 09, 2014. Accessed December 03, 2016. <http://memorywritersnetwork.com/blog/what-lessons-reading-memoirs>.

This site is devoted to the memoir. Waxler and others offers insight into the genre.

Rodriguez, R. Joseph. "We Are Our Stories: A Conversation with Jeff Anderson." *Voices from the Middle* 24, no. 1 (September 2016): 48-51.

This is an interview with Jeff Anderson, who offers insight into his experiences working with student writers.