Reflecting on George Floyd’s Death and Police Violence Towards Black Americans

For more information on our response to the ongoing events:

- Read A Message From Facing History: A Reckoning Amidst the Pandemic
- Read our blog post, On George Floyd

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was suffocated by a police officer in Minneapolis, while three other officers looked on. George Floyd has joined a long list of black men, women, and children who have been killed in recent years by police officers. (See many of their names here.) Protests have erupted across the United States—and even across the world—in response to these deaths.

This Teaching Idea is a guide for teachers to begin conversations with their students about George Floyd’s death and the events that surround it. Such conversations are always difficult for teachers to facilitate, and distance learning presents added challenges to teaching sensitive material. Despite these challenges, it’s critical to make space for students to process the difficult and deeply painful events of the past week.

1. Start with Yourself

Self-reflection is important preparation for facilitating sensitive conversations with our students. As educators, we have to process our own feelings and become aware of the way our own identities and experiences shape the perspectives we hold. Read the “Start with Yourself” section on page 2 of our Fostering Civil Discourse guide. Then reflect on the following questions:

- What emotions do the recent events surrounding the death of George Floyd raise for you?
- What perspectives will you bring to your reflection on these events with your students?
What can you do to ensure that students with a range of perspectives are supported in your reflection?

As this story develops, how will you continue to learn alongside your students?

### 2. Prepare for Teaching

A remote learning environment poses particular challenges for difficult conversations. These ideas will help you to plan a sensitive and effective conversation with your students:

- Plan where and how you will hold this conversation. Will it be a live discussion on Zoom or another platform? Will you use a moderated discussion board or other asynchronous platform?

- If you don’t regularly meet with your students online, consider setting up office hours when students have the option to call or message you to discuss their thoughts or feelings about the killing of George Floyd and the protests that have followed.

- Tell students ahead of time what to expect from your conversation about the events surrounding George Floyd’s death, so that they can emotionally prepare. For example, let your students know if they will be assigned to break out rooms or other discussion forums. Consider giving students the opportunity to opt-out of talking during the conversation, in order to provide students who need it space to process what they are experiencing and learning.

- Determine whether you might be able to refer students to school wellness staff for additional support if needed.

- Consider communicating with parents and caregivers about the conversation you are planning to hold. How might you help to bridge and support connections between school conversations and those happenings in students’ lives outside of school?

### 3. Create Space for Student Reflection

In the midst of traumatic and violent events, it can be beneficial to focus first on emotional processing, addressing the “heart” before the “head.” Give yourself and your students space to reflect on your emotional responses to the event.

- Let your students know that their learning environment is a safe space. Begin with a brief Contracting activity if you have
not already forged that safe space in your distance learning environment. Invite your students to add to or modify the contract to support this conversation. Then follow with an acknowledgment of the event and its emotional impact.

- Consider sharing a resource from a trusted news outlet to establish baseline knowledge of the events and dispel misinformation. You might choose to share an article from a local news source to focus on the impact of recent events in your area. (Many students may have watched the video of George Floyd’s murder. *We do not recommend showing this graphic video to your class*, in part because it risks retraumatizing students.)

- Give your students an opportunity to reflect individually in their journals. Students should have the option to keep their journal reflections private. Potential journal prompts include:
  - How is the news of the past week, including the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests, affecting you?
  - What would you like others to know about what you are thinking, feeling, and experiencing?
  - What do you need from others to understand, cope, process, and be safe as this story continues to unfold?
  - What can you offer to others to support them in how this story is impacting them?

- Invite students to share any reflections they wish to, but also give students the option to keep their reflections private. Possible ways to share include:
  - One-on-one or small group office hours with teacher
  - Small group discussions among students on a video or chat platform
  - Voice recordings (sent directly to the teacher or shared in a student forum)
  - Excerpts from journal entries, chosen by students (sent directly to the teacher or shared in a student forum)

4. Go Deeper: Learn about The History of Police Violence toward Black Americans
The following resources can help your students better understand the historical roots of police violence towards black Americans:

- In an interview with The New Yorker magazine, Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson explains how today’s police violence towards black Americans is rooted in our past and a false narrative of racial difference.

- The article The racist roots of American policing: From slave patrols to traffic stops from The Conversation traces the historical precedents of aggressive and violent policing of African Americans in slavery and the Jim Crow era.

You might have students synthesize what they have learned from one or both of these resources by having them create an iceberg diagram. At the top of the diagram, students can write “the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.” Next to the bottom part of the diagram (under the water), students should write their answers to these questions: What are the historical roots of police violence toward black Americans? How does this history impact policing today?

Finally, ask students to share their diagrams. (If students drew their own diagrams, they can take a photo to share.)

5. Go Deeper: Reflect on Protests Today

Play Trevor Noah’s video George Floyd, Minneapolis Protests, Ahmaud Arbery & Amy Cooper for your students. (Note: In the first few minutes of the video, Trevor Noah focuses on the video of Amy Cooper taken in Central Park last week. You may choose to play the video from the beginning or start the video at 5:40, when Trevor Noah begins discussing the death of George Floyd."

Then, reflect with students:

- How is Trevor Noah making sense of the news from the past two weeks? Why does he believe that the pandemic and the series of high profile incidents of racism and racist violence are connected?

- How does Trevor Noah define a social contract? How does he use the idea of a broken social contract to explain the protests and unrest we have seen across the United States?

In Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech The Other America, he talks about how “a riot is the language of the unheard.”¹ Play a video excerpt of his speech or share the transcript with your students.
Then, reflect with students:

- What do you think Martin Luther King Jr. means when he says that “a riot is the language of the unheard?”

- What examples does Martin Luther King Jr. give of problems he believes are going unaddressed during his life? What are examples of problems you believe are going unaddressed today?

6. **Raise Students’ Voices**

Conclude your discussion by inviting students to step back and consider what is at stake in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death and in the midst of widespread protests. Ask students to imagine that they have the chance to communicate directly to one or more of the key figures in this story, such as George Floyd’s family, the chief of police in Minneapolis, the mayor of any city where protests are taking place, Joe Biden (the presumptive Democratic nominee for president), President Donald Trump, or another national leader. What questions would they want to ask? What perspectives would they want to share? If students would like to share reflections publicly, our partners at the *New York Times’ The Learning Network* are inviting comments in their Student Opinion section: [What Is Your Reaction to the Days of Protest That Have Followed the Death of George Floyd?](https://www.nytimes.com/section/opinion)

**Citations**

1: You might discuss with your students that some people today call into question the use of the word *riot* to describe what is occurring in many cities. Other terms that are being used include *protest, civil unrest, and uprising.*

Get More Tips for Teaching Current Events
Sign up to receive our latest teaching ideas in a short biweekly email.

**Email***

Email

**Postal Code***

Postal Code

*You may unsubscribe from these communications at any time. For more information on how to unsubscribe and our privacy practices, please review our [Privacy Policy](https://www.facinghistory.org/privacy-policy). By clicking submit, you consent to allow Facing History to store and process the personal information you've submitted.*