



LESSON

Inheritance: A Family Interview Project

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Grades 7–12

TYPE

NARRATIVE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

COMMITMENT

4 sessions: 1 hour each

Behind every thing or trait we inherit is a story, a story that can connect us back to ancestors we may never even have had the chance to meet. Everything from the way we speak, how we carry ourselves, how we look, gestures, recipes, garments, jewelry, religious practices, names—we can trace these things back to the people who raised us.

Over the course of a minimum of three sessions, students will identify something they have inherited from their families, learn how to and then conduct interviews about that inheritance with their families, and write a narrative essay about what they learned.

This lesson is especially well-suited for English Language Learners, as it encompasses skills building in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students begin this project by reading and analyzing mentor texts to model their own narratives after. They then watch and listen to examples of successful interviews, develop and write their own interview questions to speak with their family members, and finally combine all their learnings into a creative narrative project. An optional final step is to encourage the students to recite and record their final narratives for additional speaking practice.

The most rewarding part of this whole project is the opportunity for students to learn more about where they came from, to preserve a piece of their history or culture, and in doing so have the ability to assert unequivocally that their history and culture matters. Too often the white supremacy culture so dominant in the United States labels the contributions of immigrants as too strange, too weird, too foreign, too exotic, too other to be worthy of a place in the history books. With this project, students push back and prove that their families' narratives deserve not just acceptance but celebration.

While delivering this lesson, it is important to be mindful that not all students are in contact with their biological families. For this reason, open up the project to include “inherited” items from mentors, coaches, role models, or chosen family members who have influenced the students' lives. Every student should feel welcome to

participate.

Session 1: What Does “Inheritance” Mean?

Students will develop a shared definition of “inheritance” and review relevant mentor texts to support their final narrative writing projects.

YOU WILL NEED

- 3 large sheets of butcher paper or poster board
- Markers
- Inheritance— Session 1 Handout
 - Page 1—1 copy per student
 - Page 2—1 copy per student
 - Students will be split into two groups to read the mentor texts, so the extra copies will be available for students who would like to read both essays.

BEFORE YOU START

Write one of the following questions on the top of each piece of paper. Each paper should only contain one question. Place each paper around the room, along with a few markers.

1. What gets passed down?
2. Who passes things down?
3. Why is it important to pass things down?

Write the warm-up question on the board: “What’s the best gift you ever received and why was it the best?”

HOW TO BEGIN (10 Minutes)

For English Language Learners, the idea of “inheritance” (and especially a more expanded definition to include all cultural artifacts and stories from one’s ancestors) might be a new one. The warm-up activity helps to frame the concept of inheritance as something positive and better prepare students for the writing project.

Begin with the warm-up question: “What’s the best gift you ever received and why was it the best?” Encourage students to write in full sentences for the full 5 minutes.

Next, ask students what they know about the word “inheritance.” Write their answers on the board. Also, take a moment to point out words with similar meanings. Do these synonyms help make the definition of “inheritance” more clear?

- Inherit
- Heir
- Heirloom
- Heritage

Step 1 (30 Minutes)

Next, students will read and analyze mentor texts written by other student authors. Whether you utilize the mentor texts provided or texts of your own, mentor texts should both showcase the writing techniques you hope your students can utilize and represent the students' identities. Too often, an outdated or culturally insensitive mentor text can leave a student more confused after analyzing the text than before they started, because not only do they have to understand the techniques showcased, but they may also struggle to decode the cultural references as well.

Split the class up into two groups—one group will read “My Family Interview” by Johnny Vasquez and the other group will read “My Name” by Ikra Abdi. These mentor texts can be found on [Inheritance— Session 1 Handout](#). Both groups will use the discussion questions below to analyze the essay together, and then report out what they discussed for the benefit of the other group. To do this successfully, encourage students to underline their favorite moments and annotate the margins with their observations and questions. Each group should also designate a reporter to share their thoughts from the group discussion.

Note for English Language Learners: To support English Language Learners with the reading comprehension component of this activity, it might be useful to teach the [Cornell Note Taking System](#). The Cornell Note Taking System was developed by an education professor at Cornell University, and it is designed to be a flexible, approachable tool for students.

“My Family Interview” discussion questions:

- What did you learn about the writer from reading this essay?
- What do you think the writer inherited from their stepmom?
- Why do you think the writer chose to interview their stepmom?
- Is there a member of your family that you'd like to know more about? Why do you want to know more about them?

“My Name” discussion questions:

- What did you learn about the writer from reading this essay?
- Why do you think the narrator's spells their name differently now?
- Why are names such an important part of who we are?
- Do you know what your name means or its origin?

After each group has read and discussed their assigned essay, ask the reporter from each group to share a summary of their group's essay, as well as their answers to the first question: “What did you learn about the writer from reading this essay?”

Step 2 (15 Minutes)

Next, students will develop thought banks about the idea of inheritance using the large pieces of paper or poster board already set-up around the room, each labeled with one of the three questions:

1. What gets passed down?
2. Who passes things down?
3. Why is it important to pass things down?

Divide the class into 3 small groups, with each group starting at a different question. Students will work independently, writing down words that they associate with each question. These topics should evoke a strong

response for students. Allow them to self-identify as much as possible, rather than supplying ideas. There are no wrong answers, but they should be honest answers. After five minutes at each station, the groups will rotate to a different question until each group has answered.

Once each group has rotated to all 3 pieces of paper, review the answers they supplied as a whole group. The lists they created will likely reveal their values, beliefs, and loves. Conversations might be sparked by the results of this activity. Encourage these discussions by stepping back and making space for the students to discover their similarities together.

These questions and words associated with them will serve as word banks for the students as they continue to develop interview questions for their families and write their narratives. If ever they are stuck or lacking inspiration, direct them to the word banks. The posters can continue to be hung around the classroom or transcribed into handouts for student reference.

Step 3 (5 Minutes)

At the end of this session, ask the students to reflect on something they have inherited in their lives. The inheritance might be an object, saying, story, or custom. They can write their reflections down, find a partner and share verbally, or sit and silently reflect on their own.

Session 2: What Makes a Good Interview?

Students will hone their interviewing skills through watching examples and have time to write the interview questions for their own family interviews.

YOU WILL NEED

- [“Trevor Noah Chats with His Grandma About Apartheid”](#)
- Computer and projector
- Inheritance— Session 2 Handout
 - 1 copy per student

BEFORE YOU START

At the beginning of this session, you will host a mock interview to demonstrate strong and weak interviewing techniques. Before the class, prepare a simple topic to conduct a mock interview with a volunteer. Examples:

- What is your favorite holiday and why?
- Tell me about your best day ever.
- If you could travel anywhere, where would you go and why?

Write the warm-up question on the board: “Think about a meaningful conversation you’ve had with a family member. Describe the conversation, as well as what made it meaningful.”

HOW TO BEGIN (10 Minutes)

Begin with the warm-up question: “Think about a meaningful conversation you’ve had with a family member. Describe the conversation, as well as what made it meaningful.” Encourage students to write in full sentences for the full 5 minutes.

After the students finish the warm-up question, ask students to share their answers as a class. Write their answers down on the board and share with students that they will be talking about constructing strong interview questions later this session.

Step 1 (10 Minutes)

Next, you will lead a mock interview with the help of a willing student-volunteer. The educator should take on the role of interviewer, and the student should take on the role of interviewee. Instruct the class to take notes on everything the interviewer (the educator) does wrong during the interview.

There are a variety of bad interview techniques you can demonstrate. Don’t be afraid to get emphatic and silly as you act these out:

- Pretend to show up late
- Intentionally mess up the interviewee’s name
- Avoid eye contact
- Interrupt the interviewee
- Ask only yes or no questions (e.g. Do you like mashed potatoes?)
- Be on your phone throughout the interview
- Look obviously bored (big sighs, slumped in chair)
- Do not take notes
- Ask questions that are off topic

Once you’ve acted through a few of these non-exemplar behaviors, pause the scenario and ask the class what they’ve noticed so far. Students do not need to name every behavior exhibited, rather they should come to the conclusion that these tactics exhibit rudeness or carelessness—behaviors no one wants to experience when they’re talking about a personal and meaningful topic. Ask students for suggestions on how the interviewer could improve.

Step 2 (15 Minutes)

To demonstrate stronger interview techniques, next students will watch [“Trevor Noah Chats with His Grandma About Apartheid.”](#) The interview begins at 3:00. After the students watch the video, ask them if they noticed any of their suggestions, as well as what other positive techniques Trevor Noah used to conduct his interview.

Optional: Instead of watching the video, incorporate the students’ suggestions into a second mock interview.

Below are additional interview techniques that create a positive experience for both the interviewer and interviewee. Share any tips from this list that the students do not come up with on their own, after watching the video or the second mock interview.

- Explain the project you’re working on to the interviewee and the types of questions you’ll be asking
- Ask permission to take notes and/or record the interview on your phone for future reference
- Ask open-ended questions using who, what, when, where, why, and how
- If the interviewee says something interesting, ask them a follow-up question on the same topic

- Sit up straight, nod, emote, and make positive eye contact to show active listening
- Don't be afraid of silence—give your interviewee time to think about and form an answer to your question
- The last question you ask should be, “Is there anything you'd like to add?” to give the interviewee an opportunity to share or expand on something you may have missed
- Thank the interviewee for their time and ask if it's OK to follow-up if you have any additional questions

Share with students that the most important thing about conducting an interview is that they are present during the conversation and not too worried about whether they are completing all of these actions at once.

Step 3 (20 Minutes)

Next, students will take time to develop their interview questions. Lumen Learning's web article, [“Writing Effective Interview Questions”](#) gives excellent advice about writing interview questions. In summary, strong interview questions are:

1. **Relevant.** On-topic questions help the interviewer expand their knowledge of their topic.
2. **Open-Ended.** Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to share as much as they can about the topic; whereas, closed-ended questions stop at yes or no.
3. **Clear.** Clear questions are easy to understand and make it simple for the interviewee to provide helpful information. If the interviewee is having trouble understanding the question during the interview, it's OK to rephrase it differently.
4. **Applicable.** Applicable questions are written with the interviewee's specific knowledge in mind.
5. **Unbiased.** Unbiased questions do not contain any of the author's assumptions about the topic, which helps to get answers that are as truthful and accurate as possible.

At this point, students should have a firmer grasp of ideas regarding something they've inherited from their families, as well as effective interview strategies. Students will use the [Inheritance— Session 2 Handout](#) to brainstorm and write their interview questions. Once students have written their interview questions, they should find a partner to trade handouts with. Students will give feedback to their partners about the 5 tenets of strong interview questions discussed earlier (Relevant, Open-Ended, Clear, Applicable, and Unbiased).

Step 4 (5 Minutes)

Bring the students' attention back to the ideas on the board that they shared at the beginning of the session. Ask them to reflect on the similarities between them and the points from the Lumen Learning article. Do they think there's any application for the Lumen Learning article outside of conducting interviews? They can write their reflections down, find a partner and share verbally, or sit and silently reflect on their own.

Session 3: Transcribing Interview Notes

Students will spend time transcribing their interview notes and reflect on the interview process.

YOU WILL NEED

- Computers, netbooks, or tablets—1 per student
 - If this technology is not accessible, students can transcribe their notes by hand using paper and a

pencil.

- Headphones or earbuds—1 per student
- Scrap paper—at least 2 sheets per student

BEFORE YOU START

Write the warm-up question on the board: “How would you describe a good interview to someone else who has never participated in one before?”

HOW TO BEGIN (10 Minutes)

Begin with the warm-up question: “How would you describe a good interview to someone else who has never participated in one before?” Encourage students to write in full sentences for the full 5 minutes.

Next, lead students in a reflection-based conversation about the interviews they conducted. The following questions can serve as strong openers, but allow for the conversation to go where the students take it.

- How did it feel to have a more structured conversation with a member of your family?
- What was something that you learned during your interview that you didn’t expect to learn?
- After the interview ended, did you discuss it with your family member? How did you both feel afterward?
- Did you feel more connected to that family member or your family in general after the interview ended?

Step 1 (45 Minutes)

For the remainder of this session, students will take their recording and transcribe it into concrete notes they can use to write their essays. Depending on the student, transcription could be a challenge, which is why so much time has been allotted to this step.

Students can either use a device with a word processing program, or a notes app installed, to transcribe their recordings. If this technology isn’t available, students can also transcribe by hand. Once students have their devices, pass out the scrap paper to them as well. Encourage them to use the scrap paper to jot down any questions they have during the transcription process—they might think of a follow-up question, need clarification about an unclear note they made, or want to ask more about a specific sensory or visual detail. Writing down these questions as they come up will be much easier than going back and trying to remember them later.

Step 2 (5 Minutes)

Most likely, every student will have identified a few follow-up questions that need more information. During the last 5 minutes of class, ask students to choose one or two of their follow-up questions to ask their interviewee before the next session, when students will have time to write their narrative essay.

Session 4: Writing the Essay

Students will review the 5-paragraph essay format and begin writing their own narrative essays.

YOU WILL NEED

- Each student's transcribed interview notes
- Paper and pencils
- Inheritance— Session 1 Handout
 - Page 1—1 copy per student
 - Page 2—1 copy per student
 - Students will be split into two groups to read the mentor texts, so the extra copies will be available for students who would like to read both essays.

BEFORE YOU START

Write the warm-up question on the board: "I am proud of myself because_____."

Draw a Venn diagram on the board, large enough to write in. In one circle, write "academic" and write "creative" in the other circle.

HOW TO BEGIN (10 Minutes)

Begin with the warm-up question: "I am proud of myself because_____." Encourage students to write in full sentences for the full 5 minutes.

Step 1 (10 Minutes)

Today, students will begin writing their essays; however, first they will participate in a discussion about the differences and similarities between a narrative essay and an academic essay. Begin by passing out the mentor texts found on Page 1 and Page 2 of the "Inheritance— Session 1 Handout." Students should receive the same mentor text that they read during Session 1. Students can set this aside.

First, ask students to share what they know about academic essays—the standard format, the kind of language that's used, the purpose, etc. Write their answers on the board in the "academic circle." Examples of answers students could shout-out:

- Academic essays typically utilize a standard format
 - An introduction paragraph (including a hook and main idea or thesis)
 - Three body paragraphs
 - A conclusion
- Academic essays generally avoid first-person (I/me/my) and descriptive language
- The purpose of academic essays is to inform or persuade

Next, ask students to skim the mentor text they received—this time reading it, they do not need to read for content, rather to try and identify the elements that make creative essays different. Students can underline evidence and write notes in the margins. Once students have finished skimming, ask them what they noticed makes a creative essay different from an academic essay. Write their answers in the “creative” circle.

Examples of answers students could shout-out:

- Descriptive, sensory language
- Use of first-person (I/me/my) point-of-view
- Examples of the writer’s home language
- Direct quotes from the interviewee that are special or impactful
- Personal reflections on how a topic has helped the writer grow

Next, ask students to share what elements they think the two types of essay have in common. Write these answers in the overlapping space on the diagram.

Step 2 (45 Minutes)

Students will use the remaining time to begin writing their drafts.

Step 3 (5 Minutes)

Ask students to reflect on what they learned throughout this project and whether that learning has changed the way they view themselves or their families. They can write their reflections down, find a partner and share verbally, or sit and silently reflect on their own.

Conclusion: Follow-up sessions can include peer review and revision. Once students feel their essays are polished, there are many options to celebrate their work. They can take their essay and transform it into a multimedia project with recordings or slideshows with images, or a class reading could be organized, extending invitations to the students’ families.