

# Eyewitness Narrative / First-Person Journal Activity

This is a **fully built, classroom-ready, comprehensive activity** for **Eyewitness Narrative / First-Person Journal Writing**, where students step into the shoes of a historical figure and write as if they lived through the event. This works for ALL cultures, eras, and content areas.

**Students write a multi-part journal or eyewitness account from the viewpoint of someone experiencing a major event.**

Perfect for:

Wars • revolutions • migrations • colonization • epidemics • cultural movements • environmental disasters • explorations • scientific breakthroughs • literary settings • ANY historical moment.

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## I. Purpose of the Activity

This project teaches students to:

- Develop historical empathy
  - Understand lived experiences from multiple perspectives
  - Use evidence to craft accurate sensory detail
  - Write in a consistent narrative voice
  - Connect big events to personal stories
  - Analyze cause-and-effect through individual experience
  - Explore marginalized voices often excluded from textbooks
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## II. Group or Solo Format

You may run the activity as:

- ✓ a group preparation + individual writing assignment
- ✓ a collaborative group-journal (each student writes a different entry)
- ✓ rotating journal entries passed between roles

Below is the **group-supported** version (recommended).

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## III. Group Setup (4–6 students)

### Roles:

1. **Lead Historian** – gathers facts, creates timeline
2. **Cultural Context Researcher** – gathers daily-life details (food, housing, clothing, customs)
3. **Character Specialist** – builds personality, background, motives
4. **Perspective Adviser** – ensures the voice matches the role (soldier, citizen, enslaved person, ruler, merchant, refugee, etc.)
5. **Sensory Detail Writer** – brainstorms sounds, smells, sights
6. **Editor** – helps check consistency + accuracy

Students collaborate on planning, but each writes their OWN narrative—unless you choose a collaborative version.

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## IV. Choose Event + Character (5 minutes)

Teacher assigns or students choose an event, such as:

### Events

- Construction of the Pyramids
- Athenian democracy meeting day
- Fall of Rome
- Mongol invasion
- Black Death
- Aztec–Spanish encounter
- American Revolution
- Middle Passage
- Trail of Tears
- Industrial Revolution factory work
- Great Depression
- World War I trenches
- Holocaust (careful framing required)
- Hiroshima bombing
- Civil Rights March
- Fall of the Berlin Wall
- Syrian refugee crisis

### Perspective Options

- Soldier
- Citizen
- Ruler
- Merchant
- Indigenous person encountering foreigners
- Enslaved person
- Refugee
- Healer/doctor
- Child witness
- Inventor/explorer
- Activist/organizer

Students select BOTH an event and a viewpoint.

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## V. Step-by-Step Process (60–90 minutes)

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### Step 1 — Research the Context (10–15 minutes)

Groups gather:

- What is happening politically or socially?
- Who is fighting/leading/affected?
- What dangers or pressures exist?
- What is daily life like?
- What do people believe or fear?
- What technologies, foods, clothes, tools exist?
- What emotions would be common?
- What primary sources show firsthand experience?

Lead Historian builds a timeline.

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### Step 2 — Build the Character Profile (10 minutes)

Students create a **Character Blueprint**:

- Name (period appropriate)
- Age
- Background: family, status, occupation

- Goals + fears
- What they know and don't know
- Biases or beliefs
- Literacy level (affects writing style!)

**Perspective Adviser checks for cultural accuracy.**

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### **Step 3 — Brainstorm Sensory Details (5–10 minutes)**

Groups use a chart:

<b>Sights</b>	<b>Sounds</b>	<b>Smells</b>	<b>Textures</b>	<b>Tastes</b>
e.g., smoke,	banners	boots	marching	sewage
	scratchy	wool	bitter	herbs

This is key for immersion.

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### **Step 4 — Plan the Journal Entry Sequence (10 minutes)**

Common structure:

1. **Before the event** (hope, fear, daily life)
2. **During the event** (action, chaos, decisions)
3. **After the event** (reflection, consequences, uncertainty)

OR write a single powerful eyewitness entry.

Groups outline:

- What does the character see?
- What choices must they make?
- How does the event affect them personally?

Recorder collects ideas for all writers.

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### **Step 5 — Individual Writing (15–25 minutes)**

Students write in **first person** (“I”) using:

- Historical accuracy
- Sensory detail
- Emotional authenticity
- Voice appropriate to their role
- References to real events and dates (if known)
- “Gaps” in knowledge (people didn’t know the future!)
- Tools, technology, clothing, landscape details
- Cultural beliefs or fears
- Bias or limitations of perspective

Prompts to guide writing:

- “Today I saw...”
- “I never expected...”
- “People around me whispered that...”
- “I fear what will happen if...”
- “My heart raced as...”
- “I remember the smell of...”
- “I heard rumors that...”
- “I do not know what tomorrow will bring.”

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## **Step 6 — Peer Exchange / “Role Swap Feedback” (5–10 minutes)**

Students exchange journals and provide feedback:

Checklist:

- Is the voice consistent with the character?
- Does it include sensory detail?
- Is it historically accurate?
- Does it show emotion and human impact?
- Does it feel like a real person?
- Does it reflect the limits of knowledge at the time?

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## **Step 7 — Optional: Performances or Readings (5–10 minutes)**

Students read aloud dramatic excerpts **in character**.

OR groups stage:

- a “survivor testimony” circle
  - a “press interview”
  - a museum audio guide narration
  - a staged diary reading
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## **VI. Optional Activity Extensions**

### **1. Multi-Voice Journal**

Each group writes from different perspectives living through the SAME event.

Examples:

- Enslaved person, plantation owner, abolitionist
- Factory child laborer, industrialist, union organizer
- Samurai, peasant, merchant in Japan
- British soldier, colonial citizen, Indigenous leader

### **2. Time Capsule**

Students place “entries, objects, drawings” in an envelope as a time capsule from the era.

### **3. Illustrations**

Add sketches of tools, clothing, landscapes, battles, or symbols.

### **4. Map + Journal Integration**

Add a small map showing where the narrator traveled.

### **5. Audio Diary / Podcast Version**

Students record as if speaking into an audio journal.

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## **VII. Assessment Options**

### **A. Narrative Rubric**

- Historical accuracy
- Voice authenticity
- Sensory detail
- Organization (beginning, middle, end)
- Use of evidence
- Creativity + vividness

## **B. Character + Research Rubric**

- Accuracy of cultural/historical details
- Understanding of role
- Strong supporting research

## **C. Reflection Questions**

Students reflect on:

- How did writing in first person change your understanding of the event?
- What emotions surprised you to write about?
- What would your character still NOT know at the time?
- What biases shaped your character's worldview?