The Who, “My Generation”

I.
Defining Terms

Discuss each of the questions below with your partner.

- What is a “generation”?
- Do you think of yourself as a member of a particular generation? If so, what title would you give that generation and how would you define it? If not, why do you think being part of a generation is not important to you?
- Who do you consider to be in your generation? Who is not in your generation? How do you feel about people who are not part of your generation?

II.
Background on the Who

Read the artist page for the Who on the Rock and Roll: An American Story website. Discuss:

- When and where were the Who formed?
- What type of music was the band best known for?
- According to the description, was what you just saw in the video typical for the Who?

III.
“My Generation,” the Who, 1965

Read the excerpt below from the song lyrics, written by Pete Townsend, and watch the video of the band performing the song on American television in 1967. Then discuss the questions below.

People try to put us d-down
Just because we get around
Things they do look awful c-c-cold
I hope I die before I get old

This is my generation
This is my generation, baby

Why don't you all f-fade away
Don't try and dig what we all s-s-s-say

I'm not trying to 'cause a big s-s-sensation
I'm just talkin' 'bout my g-g-g-generation
My generation
This is my generation, baby

- Whom is the singer speaking for? (Who is “we”?) What is his message on their behalf?
- When the singer says “I hope I die before I get old,” what do you think he means? Do you think he means this literally? Or might there be a figurative meaning? Does “old” represent a physical age, a state of mind, or perhaps something else?
- How does the music reflect the lyrics? What instruments do you hear? What is the overall mood and tone of the music? For example, does it have a pleasant melody? How does the band use music to emphasize the message of the lyrics?
- Why do you think the singer stutters on certain words? What message is he trying to convey?
- Who do you think was the intended audience for this song?
- Remember that the video you saw at the beginning of the lesson came at the end of a performance of this song. What is the connection? Do the actions in the video reflect the message of the song? If so, in what way?

IV.
Background Reading on “My Generation”

Read this background material on the song “My Generation,” and then discuss the questions with your partner.

The Who released their first album, *My Generation*, in 1965, when Pete Townsend, the lead guitarist and writer of many of the band’s hits, was 21 years old. The title track of the album was only a minor hit in the United States, but it nonetheless remains one of the Who’s most recognized songs.

“’My Generation’ was very much about trying to find a place in society,” Townshend said in a 1987 interview. “I was very, very lost. The band was young then. It was believed that its career would be incredibly brief.”

In a 1989 television interview, Townsend, in his mid forties, was asked if his definition of “old” had changed since he wrote the song. “No, it’s exactly the same,” he replied. “I suppose ‘old’ to me then was really ‘rich.’ It was like somebody who had achieved everything and looked to anybody that was on the ladder up with an eye to kick him off.”

- According to Townsend, did “old” mean physical age? According to these interviews, was the song from his perspective about age or about acceptance?
- Does Townsend’s explanation of the song mesh with your own interpretation of it? Do his words change your understanding of it?
- How might one’s interpretation of the song change as one gets older? Can the song still have meaning for someone who is not a teenager or in his early 20s?

V.
Writing a “My Generation” for Your Generation

Follow the directions for writing new lyrics for “My Generation.”

In the space below, write new, updated lyrics for “My Generation.” Your lyrics should be about your generation in today’s America. When you are done, be prepared to present and discuss the following:

- In what ways do your lyrics focus on the key events, ideas, complaints, concerns, or issues for your generation? In presenting your lyrics, be specific. Quote your work.
- What are the intended audiences for your version of the song? What message are you sending to each of your audiences? Again, be specific and quote your work.