

Preparation

Refresh Your Knowledge On

- The speech itself: “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”
- The basics of Douglass’s life:
 - **1838:** Frederick Bailey escapes from slavery and settles in New Bedford, MA, where he takes the name Douglass.
 - **1845:** A radicalized Frederick Douglass publishes his Narrative, announcing to the world he is an escaped slave. He then leaves New England to avoid capture by slave catchers while he travels and lectures in England, supporters buy his freedom.
 - **1850:** Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act—it is now a federal offense to harbor a person who is “legally” a slave.
 - **1852:** In his fiery July 5, 1852 speech, the great orator famously takes exception to being asked to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence. What brings him to this moment? What does he try to achieve? Is he un-patriotic or ultra-American? Does he actually dissociate himself from American citizenship or embrace it with this speech?
- The Fugitive Slave Law
- The Constitution (especially as used as a defense of slavery)
- The Declaration of Independence (especially as used as a defense of freedom)
- Arguments that were made for and against slavery
- Attacks (both verbal and physical) that were made against abolitionists
- The meaning of “jubilee”

Tips for Leading

- You are the leader, and it is your responsibility to moderate the group discussion.
- Before the discussion, choose two or three topics you want to “cover.” Be prepared for other topics to arise.
- Discourage opinions that offend or close off discussion.
- You may set an allotted time per speaker (about a minute), and you may ask people to react or respond to previous speakers.
- One option is to start the discussion by asking for one-word reactions to the reading of the speech. Then return to people whose words may be provocative, and ask them to explain.
- Use questions that lead people to return to the text to investigate.

Discussion Questions

Topic Questions

- What is the rhetorical question in his speech?
- Who was Douglass’ audience?
- Did the audience expect this speech?

- What did the audience expect of Douglass?
- Why was it essential for Douglass to argue that he was a man? What is a “man” in Douglass’ speech? How does Douglass argue that he is a man? Does he need to?
- What are the implications of his words in 1852? What are implications today?
- How did the 1850s advance the war?
- Have we moved forward as a country? How?
- What is citizenship?
- Why read this speech and why read it now?
- What parts of the speech do you find particularly powerful, and why?
- If Douglass were alive today, what might he be working on?
- Are speeches important in society? What do they do? How do they work?
- What, according to Douglass, is wrong with 1850s America?
- What does this speech tell us about today’s United States?
- What other speech or writing would you compare to this?

In-Depth Questions

- Look at the opening of the speech. How does Douglass characterize himself and his relationship with the audience? Why do you think he describes himself in those terms?
- Does Douglass stick to that (apologetic) tone, or does he change at some point? How would you explain how and why he changes?
- When does Douglass address the audience as “you,” and when does he talk about “us” and “we”? How would you explain this?
- If you were a member of the group of female abolitionists who had invited Douglass to give the speech, how might you feel about his criticism of the founders and other parts of American history and life? Would you feel personally attacked, or would you agree with his attacks?
- Why does Douglass attack the church, especially given the fact that many abolitionist groups were affiliated with churches? Was this dangerous, and if so, why did he do it?
- In the 19th century, oratory was considered both a form of entertainment and a crucial element of public life. To be effective, oratory was expected to address the mind (presumably with information and logical arguments), as well as the imagination and heart (presumably with images and ideas), in order to convince the will (to take a particular action). What parts of this speech might have appealed to the mind and what parts to the heart?
- If most of his listeners were already abolitionists, what do you think he was trying to accomplish with respect to persuading them to take action?
- What kinds of things does Douglass quote? What impression does this, and his speaking style, give you of what kind of person he was. Would you have found him impressive? Do you find him impressive? If so, does this contribute to the effectiveness of his argument in any way?
- If you were a member of the audience listening to this speech, at what points in the speech might your mood change? How and why? How would you feel at the conclusion of the speech, and why? Does it matter that he ends with the hymn?

Additional Resources

Works By Frederick Douglass

- [Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Foreword by Wendell Phillips. 1845: Boston, The Antislavery Office. 1846 edition, scanned and reformatted by Forgotten Books](#)
- [Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* \(New York: Miller, Orton, & Company, 1857\)](#)
- [Frederick Douglass Papers Edition](#)
- [Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress](#)
- An online [collection of Frederick Douglass' writings and speeches from 1845 to 1894](#) can be found on TeachingAmericanHistory.Org, including Douglass' words [in response to the Emancipation Proclamation](#) and the [enlistment of African-American men in the Union Army](#).

Information About Frederick Douglass

- [Charles W. Chesnutt. Frederick Douglass. Boston: Small, Maynard, 1899](#)
- [Frederick Douglass \(1818-1895\) Timeline](#)

Information About Frederick Douglass in Massachusetts

- [New Bedford Historical Society](#)
- [Douglass' speaking itinerary for 1839 to 1846 includes many Massachusetts towns](#)
- [Mass Moment: Frederick Douglass First Addresses White Audience](#)

Sources For Historical Context

- [Slavery and the Fourth of July](#)
- [Reading Frederick Douglass during the Presidency of Barack Obama](#), Mass Humanities Newsletter, Spring 2009
- [Public Speaking in an Outspoken Age: This section of the E Pluribus Unum Project: America in the 1770s, 1850s, and 1920s, offers a discussion of the role oratory played in the debate over slavery.](#)
- [Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," January 1, 1863](#)
- [Nast, Thomas, "The Ignorant Vote—Honors are Easy" \(Cartoon\), Harper's Weekly, v. 20. N. 1041. New York: December 9, 1876](#)
- ["The Mob in New York," New York Times, v. 12, 15 July, 1863](#)
- [Claudia Anderson, "Parallel Lives: Frederick Douglass, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the Flight to Freedom," The Weekly Standard 06/23/2008 \(Volume 013, Issue 39\)](#)

Relevant Web Resources

- [The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship](#) This project of the [American Memory](#) initiative showcases more than 240 items, including books, government documents, manuscripts, maps, musical scores, plays, films, and recordings from the African American collections of the Library of Congress.

- [Library of Congress: Today in History, September 3](#). “On Monday, the third day of September, 1838, in accordance with my resolution, I bade farewell to the city of Baltimore, and to that slavery which had been my abhorrence from childhood.” An informative essay that is heavily linked to Douglass resources.
- [American Abolitionism](#) Developed by faculty members and graduate students at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, this project offers a number of resources for those interested in studying the American Abolitionist Movement.
- [“Been Here So Long”: Selections from the WPA American Slave Narratives](#)
- [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project](#) Born in Slavery contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves.
- The Dred Scott Decision and its Bitter Legacy an online exhibition from the [Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History](#)
- [The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition](#) at Yale University, is dedicated to the investigation and dissemination of knowledge concerning all aspects of chattel slavery and its destruction.

Lesson Plans and Curricula

- [Forward March: Continuing Frederick Douglass’ Footsteps](#): This National Park Service “Teaching with Museum Collections” Lesson Plan includes a curriculum guide to accompany a visit to the [Frederick Douglass National Historic Site](#) at Cedar Hill, Douglass’ home in Washington, D.C., from 1877-1895. Suitable for Multiple grades.
- [The Ongoing Struggle for Freedom: Frederick Douglass Video Lesson Plan](#): This is provided by C-SPAN to educate teachers how to introduce topics such as Freedom, Race, and Language in American History. Intended for 8th Grade and up.
- [The Great Debate Lesson Plan: Slavery in the U.S. Constitution](#) : Discusses Constitutional Racism and the Afro-American experience during the Reconstruction. Intended for Middle School students grades 6-8.
- [“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”](#):The National Humanities Center provides a close reading and lesson plan for Frederick Douglass Fourth of July Speech.
- [Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History: Historians on Record Podcasts](#): Provides lectures from numerous credible historians and scholars on historical documents, people, and events (Not an actual lesson plan, just teaching material). Intended for High School Students and up.

Books for Children

- *A Picture Book of Frederick Douglass* (Picture Book Biography) by David Adler (Author) and Samuel Byrd (Illustrator)
- *Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: The Story Behind an American Friendship* by Russell Freedman (Author)
- *Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist Hero (Childhood of Famous Americans)* by George E. Stanley (Author) and Meryl Henderson (Illustrator)
- *Frederick Douglass for Kids: His Life and Times, with 21 Activities* (For Kids series) by Nancy I. Sanders (Author)