

# Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

---

by Tim Bailey

## UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and analyze original texts of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze and assess primary source material.

Over the course of five lessons, students will read, analyze, and gain a clear understanding of "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July," a speech delivered by Frederick Douglass on July 5, 1852. The first four lessons require students to read excerpts from the speech "like a detective." Through summary organizers, practice, and discussion, they will master the technique of identifying key words, creating summaries of document sections and, as an assessment in the final lesson, writing an argumentative essay.

## UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and analyze a speech, identifying the major claims using textual evidence
- Draw logical inferences from what is explicitly stated
- Identify key words in a historical text
- Summarize a historical text in their own words
- Review, synthesize, discuss, and explain their summaries of a historical text
- Write an argumentative essay that makes inferences from a primary source and support their conclusions with explicit information derived solely from the text

## NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS

The unit is structured for 5 class sessions, but Lessons 1 and 2 can be combined and Lessons 3 and 4 can be combined. In addition, the essay could be assigned as a take-home exercise.

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 10–12

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5: Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.a: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content; Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), reasons, and evidence.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- To what extent were the ideals of the Declaration of Independence real for African Americans before the Civil War?
- To what extent were Fourth of July celebrations a reflection of American freedom or American hypocrisy before the Civil War?

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland in 1818. While he was in Baltimore as a young boy, the slaveholder's wife began to teach him to read, but her husband stopped her. Douglass then found many secret ways to learn to read and write. Later in life, Douglass wrote that "knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom." After two unsuccessful attempts to escape bondage, Douglass finally succeeded in September 1838. He published his first autobiography in 1845 and became one of the most outspoken critics of slavery and the most renowned African American of his time.

During the 1850s, Frederick Douglass typically spent about six months of the year giving abolitionist lectures in the United States and overseas. Douglass's life experiences enabled him to provide personal and horrifying examples of the treatment of enslaved African Americans. He never minced words when he described the lives of those men, women, and children who remained enslaved. He presented evidence and examples of the suffering of slaves. He reminded people of good will of the importance of ending the practice, and he served as a moral compass as Americans wrestled with the laws and practices that subjugated a whole race.

The celebration of the Fourth of July in mid-nineteenth-century America differed substantially from today's event. Gatherings were more reflective than celebratory. Many communities commemorated the day with speeches that extolled the virtues of the American Republic, recalled the sacrifices of the Founding Fathers, and pointed to the accomplishments of the rapidly expanding nation.

However, when Douglass spoke in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, he asked his audience to question how the nation honored its founding principles and noted in biting oratory: "This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, I must mourn."

## LESSON 1

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and analyze a speech, identifying the major claims using textual evidence
- Draw logical inferences from what is explicitly stated
- Identify key words in a historical text
- Summarize a historical text in their own words

### MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” by Frederick Douglass (excerpts).  
Source: *Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852* (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co., 1852) from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History ([GLC06829](#))
- Summary Organizer #1
- An overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

### PROCEDURE

Note: The first lesson is a whole-class exercise.

1. Tell the students that they will explore what Frederick Douglass said in a speech he delivered on July 5, 1852, to the Ladies of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society in Rochester, New York. This address has come to be known as the “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” speech. Resist the temptation to provide more information as you want the students to develop ideas based solely on Douglass’s words.
2. Hand out Summary Organizer #1. This contains the first selection from the speech. Ask the students to read it silently to themselves.
3. Display a copy of Summary Organizer #1 in a format large enough for all the students to see (an overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device). Make certain that students understand that the original text has been abridged for this lesson. Explain the purpose and use of ellipses.
4. “Share read” the text with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. Tell the students that they will be analyzing the first selection from the document today and learning how to do in-depth analysis for themselves. The whole class will be going through this process together for the first section of the document.
6. Explain that the objective is to select “Key Words” from the text and then use those words to create one or two summary sentences that demonstrate understanding of what Douglass was saying.

7. Guidelines for Selecting Key Words: Key Words contribute to the meaning of the text. Without them the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs (not “connector” words like *are, is, the, and, so*, etc.). The number of Key Words depends on the length of the original paragraph. This selection is 275 words long, so you can pick up to twelve Key Words. The students must know what the Key Words mean, so there will be opportunities to teach students how to use context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills to discover word meanings.
8. Students will now select up to twelve words from the text that they believe are Key Words and underline them in text.
9. Survey the class to find out what the most popular choices were. After some discussion and your guidance, the class should decide on twelve Key Words. For example, the class might select the following words: *slave, plantation, escaped, celebration, National Independence* (you can allow two words as a Key Word on occasion if they make sense as a unit), *political freedom, America, young, stream, refreshing, angry, and dry up*. Now, no matter which words the students had previously selected, have them write the agreed-upon Key Words in their organizers.
10. Explain that the class will use these Key Words to write one or two sentences that demonstrate an understanding of what Douglass was saying. This should be a class negotiation process. For example, “I escaped from a slave plantation. Today is a celebration of National independence and political freedom. America, a young country, is like a stream that can be refreshing, angry, or just dry up.” The class might find that they don’t need some of the words to make a sentence more streamlined. This is part of the negotiation process. All the students write the final negotiated sentence into their organizers.
11. Now guide the students in putting their summary sentences into their own words. Again, this is a class negotiation process. For example, “I am an escaped slave here to talk about this young country’s freedom and future.”
12. Wrap up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. You could have students use the back of their organizers or a more formal vocabulary form to make a note of these words and their meaning.

## LESSON 2

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and analyze a speech, identifying the major claims using textual evidence
- Draw logical inferences from what is explicitly stated
- Identify key words in a historical text
- Summarize a historical text in their own words

### MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer #2
- An overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

### PROCEDURE

Note: For this lesson, the students will be working with partners and in small groups.

1. Review what the class did in the previous lesson and the gist of the first selection.
2. Distribute Summary Organizer #2 and display a copy in a format large enough for the whole class to see. Tell the students that they will work on the second section of the document with partners and in small groups.
3. Share read the second selection with the students as described in Lesson 1.
4. Review the process of selecting Key Words, writing a summary of the text using those words, and then restating the summary in their own words to show their understanding of the meaning of Douglass's words.
5. Pair the students up and have them work together to select the best Key Words. This passage is 234 words, so they can choose 10 to 12 words.
6. Now put two pairs of students together. These four students will negotiate with each other to come up with their Key Words. Be strategic in how you make your groups in order to ensure the most participation by all group members.
7. Once the groups have selected their final Key Words, each group will use those words to construct one or two sentences that summarize what Frederick Douglass was saying. During this process, try to make sure that everyone is contributing. All of the students should write the group's negotiated sentence into their organizers.
8. Ask groups to share out the summary sentences that they have created. This should start a teacher-led discussion that points out the qualities of the various responses. How successful were the groups at getting at Douglass's main idea and were they careful to use the Key Words in their summaries?
9. Now direct the groups to work together to restate their summary sentences in their own words. Again, this is a group negotiation process. After they have decided on a summary, it should be written into their organizers. Have the groups share out and discuss the clarity and quality of the responses.

10. Wrap up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. You could have students use the back of their organizers or other vocabulary form to make a note of these words and their meaning.

## LESSON 3

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and analyze a speech, identifying the major claims using textual evidence
- Draw logical inferences from what is explicitly stated
- Identify key words in a historical text
- Summarize a historical text in their own words

### MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer #3
- An overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

### PROCEDURE

Note: For this lesson students will work individually unless you decide that they still need the support of a group.

1. Review what the class did in the previous two lessons and the gist of the first two selections.
2. Distribute Summary Organizer #3 with the third selection from Douglass's speech. You may decide to share read the third selection with the students as in prior lessons or have them read it silently to themselves.
3. Review the process of selecting Key Words, writing a summary using the key words, and then restating the summary in the students' own words. This text is 211 words, so the students can pick up to 10 words.
4. After the students have worked through the three steps, have them share out their summaries in their own words and guide a class discussion of the meaning of Douglass's words.
5. Wrap up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. You can have students use the back of their organizers or other vocabulary form to make a note of these words and their meaning.

## LESSON 4

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and analyze a speech, identifying the major claims using textual evidence
- Draw logical inferences from what is explicitly stated
- Identify key words in a historical text
- Summarize a historical text in their own words

### MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer #4
- An overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

### PROCEDURE

Note: Students will continue to work independently in this lesson.

1. Review what the class did in the previous three lessons and the gist of the first three selections.
2. Distribute Summary Organizer #4 with the fourth selection from Douglass's speech. You may decide to share read the text with the students as in prior lessons or have them read it silently to themselves.
3. Review the process of selecting Key Words, writing a summary using the key words, and then restating the summary in the students' own words to demonstrate understanding of Douglass's main points. There are 285 words in this selection, so the students can select up to 12 key words.
4. After the students have worked through the three steps, have them share out their summaries in their own words and guide a class discussion of the meaning of Douglass's words.
5. Wrap up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. You can have students use the back of their organizer or other vocabulary form to make a note of these words and their meaning.



## LESSON 5

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Review, synthesize, discuss, and explain their summaries of a historical text.
- Write an argumentative essay that makes inferences from a primary source and support their conclusions with explicit information derived solely from the text.

### MATERIALS

- Summary Organizers #1–4 completed by students
- An overhead projector, Elmo projector, or similar device

### PROCEDURE

1. Review the work from the previous lessons by asking the students to provide a summary in their own words of each of the four text selections. This is done as a class discussion. Write these short sentences on the overhead or similar device. This should reinforce the students' understanding of Douglass's text.
2. If the students do not have experience writing an argumentative essay, proceed with a short lesson on essay writing. Otherwise, have them write a short essay in response to one of the prompts in class or as an out-of-class assignment. Remind the students that they must back up any arguments they make with evidence taken directly from the text of "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" The first prompt is designed to be the easiest.

### PROMPTS

1. Where does Frederick Douglass place the blame for slavery in America and how does he make that argument?
2. Why does Frederick Douglass compare the United States to a river; and how may America avoid becoming "the sad tale of departed glory"?
3. Why does Frederick Douglass use the terms "you" or "your"? What arguments does Douglass make that reinforce this point of view?

## Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” July 5, 1852 (Excerpts)

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable—and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here to-day is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude. You will not, therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say, I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. With little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you. This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom . . . There is consolation in the thought, that America is young. —Great streams are not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties. They may also rise in wrath and fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship. They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with nations.

. . . The simple story of it is, that, 76 years ago, the people of this country were British subjects . . . You were under the British Crown . . . But, your fathers . . . They went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measures of government unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to . . . To say now that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy . . . but there was a time when to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause of the colonies, tried men’s souls . . . On the 2d of July, 1776, the old Continental Congress, to the dismay of the lovers of ease, and the worshippers of property . . . in the form of a resolution . . . it may refresh your minds and help my story if I read it. “Resolved, That these united colonies are, and of right, ought to be free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved.” Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary. The 4th of July is the first great fact in your nation’s history—the very ring-bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny . . .

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through

all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the every day practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival . . .

Behold the practical operation of this internal slave-trade, the American slave-trade, sustained by American politics and American religion . . . Fellow-citizens, this murderous traffic is, to-day, in active operation in this boasted republic . . . I see the bleeding footsteps . . . on the way to the slave-markets, where the victims are to be sold like horses, sheep, and swine . . . My soul sickens at the sight . . . But a still more inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous state of things remains to be presented. By an act of the American Congress . . . slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form . . . The Fugitive Slave Law makes MERCY TO THEM, A CRIME; and bribes the judge who tries them. An American JUDGE GETS TEN DOLLARS FOR EVERY VICTIM HE CONSIGNS to slavery, and five, when he fails to do so . . . Let this damning fact be perpetually told . . . that, in tyrant-killing, king-hating, people-loving, democratic, Christian America, the seats of justice are filled with judges, who hold their offices under an open and palpable bribe . . . I take this law to be one of the grossest infringements of Christian Liberty, and, if the churches and ministers of our country were not stupidly blind, or most wickedly indifferent, they, too, would so regard it . . . they are utterly silent in respect to a law which robs religion of its chief significance, and makes it utterly worthless to a world lying in wickedness . . . Allow me to say, in conclusion . . . I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably, work the downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope.

Source: *Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852*  
 (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co., 1852) from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLC06829)

Name:

Period:

Date:

## Summary Organizer #1

### Original Text:

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable—and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here to-day is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude. You will not, therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say, I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. With little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you. This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom . . . There is consolation in the thought, that America is young. —Great streams are not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties. They may also rise in wrath and fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship. They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss—sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with nations.

### Key Words:

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

### Summary:

---



---



---



---

### In Your Own Words:

---



---



---



---

Name:

Period:

Date:

## Summary Organizer #2

### Original Text:

. . . The simple story of it is, that, 76 years ago, the people of this country were British subjects . . . You were under the British Crown . . . But, your fathers . . . They went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measures of government unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to . . . To say now that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy . . . but there was a time when to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause of the colonies, tried men’s souls . . . On the 2d of July, 1776, the old Continental Congress, to the dismay of the lovers of ease, and the worshippers of property . . . in the form of a resolution . . . it may refresh your minds and help my story if I read it. “Resolved, That these united colonies are, and of right, ought to be free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved.” Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to---day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary. The 4th of July is the first great fact in your nation’s history—the very ring---bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny . . .

### Key Words:

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

### Summary:

---



---



---



---

### In Your Own Words:

---



---



---



---

Name:

Period:

Date:

### Summary Organizer #3

**Original Text:**

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the every day practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival . . .

**Key Words:**

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

**Summary:**

---



---



---



---

**In Your Own Words:**

---



---



---



---

Name:

Period:

Date:

## Summary Organizer #4

### Original Text:

Behold the practical operation of this internal slave-trade, the American slave-trade, sustained by American politics and American religion . . . Fellow-citizens, this murderous traffic is, to-day, in active operation in this boasted republic . . . I see the bleeding footsteps . . . on the way to the slave-markets, where the victims are to be sold like horses, sheep, and swine . . . My soul sickens at the sight . . . But a still more inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous state of things remains to be presented. By an act of the American Congress . . . slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form . . . The Fugitive Slave Law makes MERCY TO THEM, A CRIME; and bribes the judge who tries them. An American JUDGE GETS TEN DOLLARS FOR EVERY VICTIM HE CONSIGNS to slavery, and five, when he fails to do so . . . Let this damning fact be perpetually told . . . that, in tyrant-killing, king-hating, people-loving, democratic, Christian America, the seats of justice are filled with judges, who hold their offices under an open and palpable bribe . . . I take this law to be one of the grossest infringements of Christian Liberty, and, if the churches and ministers of our country were not stupidly blind, or most wickedly indifferent, they, too, would so regard it . . . they are utterly silent in respect to a law which robs religion of its chief significance, and makes it utterly worthless to a world lying in wickedness . . . Allow me to say, in conclusion . . . I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably, work the downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope.

### Key Words:

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

### Summary:

---



---



---



---

### In Your Own Words:

---



---



---



---