

Diary of a Runaway Slave



Lesson 8

Grades: Fourth & Up

Overview: One of the first things students ask when they learn that Thomas Day was a “free” black man is “How did he become free?” This lesson addresses one of the most overt ways African Americans who were enslaved claimed their freedom. It also teaches about other common forms of resistance. Each student creates a series of diary entries in which he or she pretends to be a runaway slave youth. As students imagine themselves living in the antebellum South, and risking their lives for a chance to be free, slavery becomes less abstract and more “real.” In addition to bringing slavery to life for the student in a personal way, this lesson also teaches and provides practice in reading as well as creative writing and writing preparation skills.

Estimated No. of Class Periods: 2

Resources/Materials in Kit:

- 1) Hand Out – Breakdown of the Slave Narrative by Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- 2) Examples of advertisements for runaway slaves (these provide information about how the runaways were dressed, what he or she looked like, and circumstances surrounding their escape). These advertisements are from *Stealing a Little Freedom: Advertisements for Slave Runaways in North Carolina 1791-1840* by Dr. Freddie Parker, who has generously allowed the TDEP to photocopy several ads from his excellent book for this lesson plan.
- 3) An example of a fictional Runaway Slave Narrative written by a fourth-grader in Durham, North Carolina.

Resources to Get:

- 1) *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. A collection of the most famous slave narratives: “The Life of Olaudah Equiano,” “The History of Mary Prince,” “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” and “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.”
- 2) Copies of runaway slave ads from your state or region of the country. Here are some print and digital collections of runaway slave advertisements organized by state/s:

Freddie Parker, *Stealing a Little Freedom: Advertisements for Slave Runaways in North Carolina 1791–1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994)

Graham R. Hodges and Alan E. Brown, ed., *Pretends to Be Free: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland, 1994)

Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989)

Latham A. Windley, comp. *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730’s to 1790’s*, 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983)

Thomas Costa, *Virginia Runaways: Runaway Slave Advertisements from 18th Century Virginia Newspapers*, searchable at the website: <http://www.wise.virginia.edu/history/runaways/>

Related Resources (optional)

- 1) A recording of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives, available from the Southern Oral History Project at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- 2) *Letters from a Slave Girl* by Mary Lyons, a fictional account of a runaway slave girl, based on the life of Harriet Jacobs. This models the kind of fictionalized writing this lesson requires.
- 3) *Stolen Childhood*, by Wilma King, is an exhaustive study of slave youth in 19th century America. This provides rich academic background material for the teacher on slave youth.
- 4) *Runaway Slaves, Rebels on the Plantation* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger.
- 5) *Recollections of My Slave Days*, by William Henry Singleton; introduction and annotation by Katherine Mellon Charron and David S. Cecelski; Division of Archives and History, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, N.C. 1999.
- 6) *Daily Life on a Southern Plantation, 1853* by Paul Erickson provides detailed information on all facets of plantation life with many student-friendly photographs, drawings, and maps. It was published by Lodestar Books (Dutton) in New York, 1998.

Prerequisites:

Eighth-grade students should read at least one long slave narrative before studying this lesson, such as Frederick Douglass' narrative in *The Classic Slave Narratives*; fourth-graders may read a fictional story such as *Letters from a Slave Girl*; or they should read or be read excerpts from the narratives in *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Exposing students to several slave narratives is key.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Write a series of diary entries that:
 - describe several days in the life of an enslaved youth in the antebellum South, closely following the “slave narrative” format.
 - take into account the culture, values, landscape, and language of the time.
 - express empathy for the plight of the enslaved individual and an understanding of the laws and mores regarding slavery.
 - shows a grasp of changes that have occurred between the Antebellum Period and the present.
2. Create an “artifact” that represents pages or writings from a real diary of the period (it should be kept in mind that slaves often wrote and practiced writing on whatever paper they could find - scrap paper, newspaper, matchboxes, etc.)

Vocabulary

abolitionist - a person who opposed slavery

bondage - slavery, the state in which one is held against one's will.

covert - hidden, secret

dissident - disagreeing or having differences with a group

fugitive - someone who flees or runs away from authority

insurrection - a revolt against a civil authority or established government

North Star - the star in the northern hemisphere aligned directly above the North Pole. Runaway slaves often used the North Star to guide their escape to the North.

overt - open to view, not hidden

Quakers - a peaceful Christian religious group strongly opposed to slavery

quarters - assigned living accommodations, lodgings

resistance - actions of slaves to oppose or “resist” their enslavement; it could be overt (escaping), but mostly it was covert (work sabotage; taking things like food or clothing from the master)

Suggested Instructional Steps:

1. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to “experience” what it would be like to be an enslaved American in the antebellum period by putting yourself in the place of a runaway slave.
2. Ask students to:
 - List ways that your lives would be different had you lived during the antebellum period. List ways that your lives would be the same as today (i.e. physical aspects of being a teenager would be the same). Note: *This may be done in small groups who then return to large groups to share their lists.*
 - Discuss the differences and similarities between the time periods. Ask students: What would you have missed the most if you could go back in time and live in the 19th century?
3. Discuss the term “resistance”. Explain that slave “resistance” refers to the ways that slaves opposed and “resisted” their enslavement. The most overt (open) form of resistance was running away or rebellion. The majority of enslaved Americans engaged in covert (secret, hidden) forms of resistance that were a part of everyday life like:
 - work slow-downs
 - pretending to be “dumb” or “lazy” or “sick” to avoid being controlled
 - taking things like food or clothing

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- stealing from the master
 - tricking or “sabotaging” the Master in psychological ways, i.e. playing up to the Master to win his confidence, but then using information obtained as a “spy” to help the slave community

Perhaps the most powerful statement of resistance the slaves made was to create a whole separate culture with its own dialect, customs, traditions, and forms of worship that were beyond the control and comprehension of their masters. Many aspects of the unique culture slaves created still survive today.

4. Show the hand-out that displays the structure of a typical slave narrative and synthesizes its key features:
 - the **precipitating event** or “straw that broke the camel’s back” that finally drove the person to run away; cite an example from a slave narrative that students are familiar with.
 - the **path of escape** taken.
 - **what happened** along the way?
 - **the result** - Did he or she achieve freedom? Or did he or she get caught?

Students may provide examples of events taken from their readings in each category; they should be encouraged to use their imaginations to create a plausible story.

5. The Diary Writing Exercise

Explain:

- students construct their own slave narratives and then write diary entries based on these narratives.
- show advertisements of runaway slave children and teens found in North Carolina newspapers or other examples from your state or region. Explain that running away was an overt form of resistance and that every Southern newspaper in the period had advertisements for runaway slaves.
- Ask students to use the advertisements as a springboard or “trigger” to create a realistic story about a runaway slave
- If a name isn’t provided in the advertisement, have the students create a name for the enslaved person.
- Introduce the *Handout of the Breakdown of a Slave Narrative* which shows the building blocks of a slave narrative story: the precipitating event; path to freedom, etc. The grid is a pre-writing prompt to help students to organize their thoughts before creating an original runaway slave narrative.

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- For example, point to the Path of Escape column and ask students to list the many things that could happen on the road to freedom like: traveling by night, meeting friendly or hostile people (or wolves in sheep's clothing); hiding from slave hunters in forests, homes, and unlikely places (e.g., coffins, shipping crates, etc.), risking your life and the lives of others, and being captured or attaining freedom. Remind students to use their imaginations about the events that transpire, but make sure that their fictional account is historically “accurate” and “plausible”.
 - Encourage students to make their characters and story lines more true to life by using experiences common to young people then as well as now. Examples of feelings and experiences that haven't changed can be found from the list of “similarities” done in Step 1. These might include: interest in the opposite sex, feelings of immortality, self-doubt and insecurity, mixed feelings about independence from parents; having a lot of energy, etc.
 - Encourage students to complete the diary writing process by referring to their pre-writing prompt (the Breakdown)

6. Diary Construction Exercise: Once the diary is written and completed, instruct the students to make an artifact out of the diary. For example, they can color the entries with tea to make them seem old; tear the edges or soak entries in water to smear the ink; or students can also fold the entries in many ways or crumple the paper to make it seem as if the entries were written in secret or on the run.