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## ABSTRACT

The realities of slavery and reconstruction hit home in oral histories from the Library of Congress. In this unit of study, students research slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project and describe the lives of former African slaves in the United States--both before and after emancipation. From varied sources, students can sample the breadth of individual experiences, make generalizations about the effects of slavery and reconstruction on African Americans, and evaluate primary source documents. This lesson plan, intended for students in grades 3-5: cites subject areas, time required, and skills developed; provides an introduction; presents learning objectives; poses guiding questions; gives teachers tips on preparing to teach the lesson; suggests (and delineates) six classroom activities; lists selected Web resources; and addresses standards alignment. A "story pyramid" sheet is attached. (NKA)

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# Slave Narratives: Constructing U.S. History Through Analyzing Primary Sources

## Introduction

The realities of slavery and Reconstruction hit home in poignant oral histories from the Library of Congress. In these activities, students research narratives from the Federal Writers' Project and describe the lives of former African slaves in the U.S. -- both before and after emancipation. From varied stories, students sample the breadth of individual experiences, make generalizations about the effects of slavery and Reconstruction on African Americans, and evaluate primary source documents.

## Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Interpret primary source oral history documents.
2. Summarize narratives of former slaves.
3. Compare and contrast life during slavery with life afterward.
4. Evaluate oral history sources-their strengths and limitations.

## Guiding Questions:

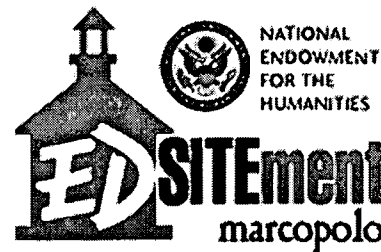
What did individual slaves do before the Civil War and afterward? Did emancipation change their lives? If so, how? What do oral histories teach us about historical events? What questions do they raise? Are memories and personal stories always factually correct?

## Preparing to Teach This Lesson

In preparation for this lesson, teachers will need to preview and select content from the website [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938](#), located on the EDSITEMent-reviewed resource [American Memory Project](#). They might also need to review information about African Americans in the 19th century, primary source documents, oral histories, and these narratives in particular. For the activities, educators should prepare handout materials and instruct students in reading comprehension strategies-such as how to write summaries with "story pyramids" or "two-column notes," described below. Finally, students will need guidance in class discussions and in a journal reflection activity.

If students are studying slavery for the first time, teachers might want to research background information on the experiences of African Americans in the nineteenth century. The following EDSITEMent-reviewed websites provide relevant information:

- [Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery](#) (by PBS)
- [Documenting the American South](#) (by University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) (This site includes a section on "North American Slave Narratives" that includes longer stories than the Library of Congress



GRADES 3-5



## Subject Areas

### Art and Culture

Folklore

### History and Social Studies

U.S. History - African-American

U.S. History - Civil Rights

U.S. History - Civil War and Reconstruction

World History - Human Rights

### Literature and Language Arts

American

## Time Required

Three class periods

## Skills

Describing and summarizing  
Comparing and contrasting  
Historical comprehension and analysis  
Working with primary sources  
Collaboration  
Public speaking and presentation  
Reflection and writing

site.)

The content goals are (1) to see slavery and freedom from a real person's perspective, and (2) to understand that individual experiences varied greatly. To find examples of stories of former slaves, research texts at [Born in Slavery](#). This site archives 2,300 oral histories, which you can browse by narrator, keyword, or state. It is important to discuss with students the different words used to describe African Americans in these stories. Many use terms that we now consider derogatory and insulting, and students will need to understand and be sensitive to these differences. Use your judgment in choosing readings appropriate for your students.

Sample stories for this grade range include the following:

- [Silas Abbott, Arkansas](#)
- [Betty Abernathy, Missouri](#)
- [Bill Austin, Florida](#)
- [Sarah Ashley, Texas](#)
- [William Baltimore, Arkansas](#)
- [Charley Barber, South Carolina](#)
- [Millie Barber, South Carolina](#)
- [Adah Isabelle Suggs, Indiana](#)
- [Abe Whittess, Alabama](#)
- [Mary Jane Wilson, Virginia](#) (pioneer teacher)

Choose several stories that suit the reading level and age of your students and that represent people of different ages, genders, occupations, and geographic locations. These accounts gain immediacy if you pair them with photographs of the narrators. (Browse photographs by subject and name.) Unfortunately, there are fewer portraits than interviews, so it might not be possible to use a photograph in every case. You will probably want to print out the stories and pictures you select, unless you can share them with the class directly from the computer via projection.

After students read the selections, they will summarize and review the material. Third and fourth grade students could use formats called "story pyramids" or "two-column notes," while some fourth and fifth grade students could summarize a story with a paragraph instead. A story pyramid begins with a main character's name at the top, two words describing the character on the next line, three words that describe the setting on the next line, four words that describe the important events below, and five words describing the main idea at the pyramid's base. These words should be descriptive, but they are not necessarily complete sentences. (You can print out the attached [story pyramid](#), provided in pdf format.)

Story pyramids focus on a character and his/her story -- like the source narratives themselves. This strategy helps students identify key aspects of a reading, which is useful because oral history tends to be loosely organized and rambling, like extemporaneous dialogue. The brief, poetic quality of story pyramids also suits the unique characters represented in the narratives. Alternatively, two-column notes ask students to summarize details in a format that directly mirrors the before/after slavery objective. In that case, the heading of the paper would be the narrator's name and the two columns represent "What (name) did during slavery" and "What (name) did after slavery." Both of these activities encourage active reading and emphasize comprehension. Model these activities with a sample narrative before students tackle the assignments.

To prepare for the discussion on oral histories and primary sources, consult the Library of Congress's learning page called "[The Historian's Sources](#)." It will provide general information about the different kinds of primary sources and give guidelines for analyzing their reliability. For details about these narratives in particular, see the section "[A Note on the Language of the Narratives](#)," which provides background on this project, describes direction and training given to interviewers, and alerts you to cultural stereotypes or biases that might be evident in dialects or other aspects of the stories. Full-class discussion should reveal the power of oral histories (their specificity and immediacy) and their limitations. Testimony could be true or false, mistakenly remembered, tempered by time, changed by the interviewer, and influenced by what (black) subject thinks (white) interviewer wants to hear.

## Activities

**1** Describe the Federal Writers' Project and define oral history for the class. What was the goal of the Federal Writers' Project? How are oral histories gathered and documented? How are they similar to and different from textbooks? How are they similar to and different from fictional stories?

Information about the origin, history, evolution, purposes, and activities of the Federal Writers' Project is available through the EDSITEMent-reviewed resource [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938](#), at the [Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives](#), in the sections on [The WPA and Americans' Life Histories](#).

Contextual information about slavery may have already been established with earlier lessons. If not, then ask students to describe what they already know about nineteenth-century African-American life. What did blacks in the South do before and after they gained freedom? Responses could be organized in the form of a Venn diagram. One circle represents examples of slave activities before emancipation, and the other circle represents things former slaves did after the Civil War. The intersection would include activities or lifestyles that were similar in both periods. (See attached [Venn diagram](#) file for sample.) Keep the student answers (whether in list or Venn diagram form) posted throughout the activity for future reference.

**2** Explain that students will learn about African Americans' experiences before and after the Civil War using oral histories. Point out that they will need to read carefully because they will later summarize the material. If you have not used story pyramids or two-column notes before, explain and model them for students using a sample slave narrative.

Third graders might need to read stories aloud as a class, or the teacher might need to read them aloud to them. In that case, you might want to cover at least two or three stories, or excerpts from a few stories, so students understand the variety of individual experiences.

Fourth or fifth graders can probably work independently in pairs or small groups with a narrative of their choice. Within small groups, assign roles such as recorder, reader, and discussion leader to coordinate the activity.

**3** Students then read a slave narrative from the Federal Writers' Project. Whether working as a class or in small groups, they should help each other read the selection and interpret dialect if there is any. Afterward, students discuss what is most important in the story they read. Each group (or the full class) then writes a story pyramid to summarize the historical person and his or her story.

Alternately, students can complete a worksheet based on two-column notes. During or after the reading, each group lists important details that occurred during slavery (left-hand column) and after slavery (right-hand column).

Some fourth or fifth grade classes might need a different summary activity, such as writing their own paragraph to summarize the story. Teachers should provide a couple of guiding questions to help students organize their ideas and compose their paragraphs. (See questions in step 4.)

**4** If students work in groups, each one then takes turns sharing information with the class. What is the name of their narrator? In what year and place was he or she interviewed? Where did the person live? Ask students to point to the area on a classroom map or on the online map of the U.S. available at the EDSITement-reviewed resource [National Geographic Society Xpeditions](#). The groups should present their story pyramid or two-column notes. What did their subject do before and after emancipation? If they have a portrait of their narrator, they should display or circulate it. While students share their findings, the teacher or a group member can write out the summary on the board.

If the class works together as a whole, the teacher should lead the students in making a story pyramid or two-column notes for each reading. Remember to ask students where the subject lives and have students find that area on a map. Emphasize that these are experiences of people who lived and worked in the South. There were other African Americans in the North who were free and had different experiences during that time period.

**5** After all groups have shared their research (or after the whole class has studied at least two stories), hold a full class discussion. How has the reading changed students' understanding of slavery? Discuss different perspectives of ex-slaves. What details intrigued or surprised them? What did these individuals do during slavery and afterward? Did life change significantly for African Americans during Reconstruction? (Some lives changed a lot, while others stayed the same. Some former slaves learned to read, some became teachers or railroad workers. Others continued to work on farms as poor sharecroppers. Some voted for the first time and earned their first real wages during Reconstruction.) Refer to student summaries and the stories studied in class.

How much time had passed between slavery and interviews? (more than 60 years) How might this time lag affect their stories? How old are the subjects when interviewed? Does age affect memories? Who interviewed the people and documented their stories? Is it significant that interviewers were white, while the subjects were black? If so, why? What are the strengths and weaknesses of oral histories?

Go back to the answers posted in your warm-up discussion (in step 1). What new information have students learned about oral histories and primary sources? Were any of their previous ideas inaccurate? Did they enjoy learning about real people through individual stories? If so, why?

**6** Ask each student to reflect on the material they covered in the lesson. Which story stands out in their minds most? Why? Have each person document his or her answers in a learning log entry. If they need a jumpstart, they can begin entries with a statement such as "When I think back on the story of (name of ex-slave), I will remember \_\_\_\_\_." Suggest a word count or page length appropriate for your class.

## **Selected EDSITement Websites**

- [African-American Women On-Line Archival Collections, Duke University Library](#)
- [Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery](#)
- [American Memory Project](#)
  - [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938](#)
    - [A Note on the Language of the Narratives](#)
    - [Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives](#)
    - [The WPA and Americans' Life Histories](#)
- [Documenting the American South](#)
- [Freedmen and Southern Society Project](#)
- [Library of Congress](#)

- o [The Historian's Sources](#)
  - [National Geographic Society Xpeditions](#)
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## Other Information

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## Standards Alignment

1. [CIVICED \(5-8\) V](#)  
What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?
2. [NCSS-1](#)  
Culture and cultural diversity. [more](#)
3. [NCSS-10](#)  
Civic ideals and practices. Citizenship in a democratic republic. [more](#)
4. [NCSS-2](#)  
Time, continuity, and change. The ways human beings view themselves in and over time. [more](#)
5. [NCSS-4](#)  
Individual development and identity. [more](#)
6. [NCSS-5](#)  
Individuals, groups, and institutions. [more](#)
7. [NCSS-6](#)  
Power, authority, and governance. [more](#)
8. [NCTE/IRA-1](#)  
Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. [more](#)
9. [NCTE/IRA-12](#)  
Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). [more](#)
10. [NCTE/IRA-2](#)  
Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. [more](#)
11. [NCTE/IRA-3](#)



Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. [more](#)

12. [NCTE/IRA-5](#)

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. [more](#)

13. [NCTE/IRA-6](#)

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. [more](#)

14. [NCTE/IRA-8](#)

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. [more](#)

15. [NCTE/IRA-9](#)

Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.





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## Story Pyramid

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Main Character

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Two Words describing character

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Three words that describe setting

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Four words that describe the important events

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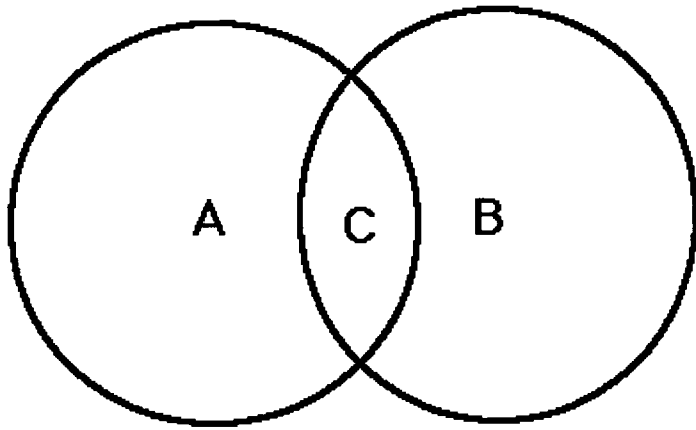
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Five words that describe the main idea





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