

Lesson 5: Slavery and the United States Constitution

Estimated lesson time: 90 minutes

Guiding Question:

- Was the United States Constitution a pro-slavery document or an anti-slavery document?

Objectives:

- Students will interpret primary sources related to slavery and the U.S. Constitution.
- Students will create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- Students will evaluate differing perspectives on an issue before drawing conclusions.

Facilitation Notes:

- Glossary terms for this lesson are provided on a separate handout. The terms are also defined when they appear in the sources provided.
- Some components of this lesson contain terminology that is no longer used because the terms are recognized to be offensive or derogatory. These terms are retained in their original usage in order to present them accurately in their historical context for student learning, including understanding why those are not acceptable today.

Student Resources:

- Glossary
- Background Essay
- Background slides
- Engage: Preamble to the U.S. Constitution
- Explore: Graphic Organizer (No background information and scaffolded versions)
- Structured Academic Controversy directions
- Primary Sources
 - William Lloyd Garrison, "The American Union." *The Liberator*, January 10, 1845
 - Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Speech to Rochester, New York Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, July 5, 1852

Teacher Resources:

- Answer Key

Anticipate

- Optional: Have students read the background essay and highlight main ideas. Have students summarize or “shrink the text” of the essay in 1-2 sentences.
- Optional: Have students read through the background slide presentation. The background slides present the main ideas of the background essay in abbreviated form. Have students summarize or “shrink the text” of the slide presentation in 1-2 sentences.

Engage

- **Transition:** *Today we will look at a question that was debated in history and into the present day: Was the United States Constitution to a pro-slavery document or an anti-slavery document? Let’s start by looking at the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.*
- Distribute the Engage handout.
- **Scaffolding note:** Read the Building Context and Preamble as a class or have students complete individually. Essential Vocabulary is provided on the handout.

Explore

- **Transition:** *Now that we have looked at the Preamble of the Constitution, let’s look at how this document was interpreted before the Civil War. We will look at two famous speeches regarding the Constitution from two abolitionists: William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass.*
- Distribute the Directions for Structured Academic Controversy handout. Review the guidelines for the activity as a class.
- **Scaffolding note:** To demonstrate how the Structured Academic Controversy process works, you can demonstrate a practice topic such as “Is homework necessary?” or “Should all students wear uniforms?”.
- Distribute the Explore handout and graphic organizer.
- **Scaffolding note:** There are two versions of the Explore handout. The scaffolded version provides the background information on the U.S. Constitution, and the second version does not. Students can fill in this information from the background essay and/or background slides.
- Ensure students understand the essential question they will be addressing. Clarify that students may decide it is not a clear yes or no question, but may have qualifiers, i.e., “No, the Constitution is not a pro-slavery document BUT...,” or “Yes, ...BUT.”
- Review the background information on the U.S. Constitution.
- Distribute the two primary sources:
 - A. William Lloyd Garrison, “The American Union.” *The Liberator*, January 10, 1845

B. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Speech to Rochester, New York Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, July 5, 1852

- Divide students into groups for the activity. A traditional Structured Academic Controversy is done in small groups of 2-6 students. Each group is divided into Team A and Team B. Each group will read, annotate, and argue the major points of each source. Adjust group size to fit your classroom needs. This activity can also be done as a class, taking turns with each document. Have students refer to the Directions for Structured Academic Controversy throughout the activity. It is helpful to post times on the board or use an online timer so students can see how much time they have remaining for each step.
- **Scaffolding note:** Use [this Close Read video](#) to help students pull out main ideas from the primary sources. Each primary source also includes Comprehension and Analysis Questions. Assign these to students to help them pull out main ideas in addition to completing their graphic organizer if needed.

Assess and Reflect

- Invite students to share the consensus statements they created. What patterns do students see? Did anything surprise them?
- **Scaffolding note:** If students are reluctant to share, have groups post their statements on Post-it notes around the classroom or on a class site where they can be read and reviewed by all.
- Have students respond to the guiding question from their own perspective at the bottom of the handout.
- Ask students to reflect on the procedures of the Structured Academic Controversy approach. Was it helpful to see both sides of the issue? Did it lead them to a greater understanding of the issue? Was it challenging to argue a side with which you did not agree? Why? Ensure students fully explain their responses. If students are reluctant to share their views, have them write them down or share with a partner or in a small group.