

# Slave Narratives

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## Standards:

- National English/Language Arts Standard 1: *Students read a wide range of print and non print 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.*
- National English/Language Arts Standard 3: *Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts; their word identification strategies and their understanding of textual features.*
- National English/Language Arts Standard 7: *Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.*

**Focus/Concept:** Exploring and analyzing the genre of narratives, and in particular, slave narratives.

## Measurable Outcomes:

- Students will be able to identify the components of the genre narrative writing, and of slave narratives as differentiated from other forms of autobiography and memoir through the study of several slave narratives.
- Students will construct a personal narrative based on their understanding of the genre, focusing on the angle of identity formation.
- Students will synthesize and apply their understanding of the genre of narrative writing with their personal writing experiences in an accurate, effective written preface to a compilation of student created narratives.

## Primary Sources:

- “Introduction” *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ix-xviii).
- “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.” *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (243-331).
- “A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa.” Printed by C. Holt, at the Bee Office, 1798. (iii-32).

**Overview:**

In this lesson, students will examine the genre of narrative writing, and identify the components of the slave narrative. Based on provocative questions and established criteria for narrative writing, students will interview a parent, grandparent or community member and conduct relevant research to construct a narrative of at least five pages.

After constructing their own narratives, students will analyze (Broteer) Venture Smith's "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture. . ." in its entirety, as well as excerpts from Frederick Douglass' "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass."

Finally, after revising their own narratives, students will synthesize and apply their knowledge of slave narratives with their writing experience into an accurate, effective preface for a class compilation of student written narratives to be housed in the community library. The preface will be selected from student submissions based student evaluations and a final vote.

**Duration of Lesson:**

Three 90 minute class periods, or seven 40 minute class periods.

**Context for Lesson:**

Students have read Wiesel's novel, *Night*, and have explored issues pertaining to freedom, basic human rights, power, and identity. In preparation for this lesson, students have learned about the history of slavery in the United States and in New England. Immediately prior to this lesson, students will have taken a field trip to the Webb/Deane/Stevens Museum in Wethersfield, and learned about the lives of slaves in their own community.

Following this lesson, students will be reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and studying the Jim Crow period, the Scottsboro Trials. Additionally, they will be conducting independent reading projects on issues pertaining to human rights, such as the novel, *Sold*, and the text, *Escape from Slavery*.

**Grade/Ability Level:**

This lesson is designed for a ninth grade honors English course, but could be modified for grades ten through twelve, at various ability levels. Additionally, the lesson could be used in an American Studies course.

**Essential Questions:**

- What are the components of narratives, and in particular, slave narratives?
- How does the (Broteer) Venture Smith narrative convey the experience of a New England Slave? What considerations are important when analyzing the narrative as an historical text? As a literary one?
- How are (slave) narratives differentiated from other forms of autobiography and memoir writing?
- How does power play into the human experience?
- How can a writer effectively relate trauma?
- What kinds of events define us as humans?
- What is the nature of memory?

- How can a writer accurately piece together someone else’s experience in story form?
- What issues arise in narrative writing with objectivity and subjectivity? What is the nature of truth in narrative writing?

**Lesson Implementation:**

**Day One (90 minutes):**

- Opening: (*Whole class*) Teacher asks the students, “if I were to tell you that you had to write your life story, what would you include?” Students will take three minutes to brainstorm ideas in their notebooks, then share their responses with the class. The teacher would record comments on the board. Next, the teacher poses the question to the students, “What kinds of events define us as humans?” and elicit discussion.
- After this discussion, the teacher asks students to engage in a conversation in *small groups* about the challenges of writing a life story—how do we make decisions about what to include/disclude? Is memory always accurate? How do we determine a specific purpose with such a broad subject? Does audience matter? What if you were writing someone else’s life story? (**Distribute Handout One**). Groups should complete the handout, then report to the whole class on their discussions.
- The teacher will conduct a lecture on the genre of narrative writing, focusing on the slave narrative. Students will complete **Handout Two** as they listen to the lecture. Leave time for questions throughout the lecture, and ensure that students have accurately completed their notes on Handout Two.
- The teacher will explain to the students that they will be required to write a 5 page narrative due in the next class (allow students two nights to complete the assignment; in a 90 minute block, class meets every other day, so this would be the next class. In a 40 minute class, this schedule would need to be modified). They will interview a parent, grandparent, or community member based on the questions provided and complete the assignment according to the guidelines presented (**Handout Three**).
- In preparation for the assignment, allow students time to work in **pairs** to develop thoughtful questions for their subjects, based on prior knowledge of their subjects.

**Day Two (90 minutes):**

- Opening: Students will share their narratives in **pairs**, and engage in an informal conversation with one another about the challenges they faced. They should compare in their discussions their expectations for the assignment with the reality of the outcome. After the pair discussions, students will report to the **class** on their experiences.
- Introduce the concept of the slave narrative (Handout Four), and give students time in class to read Venture Smith’s narrative after a brief overview of the work. Students should annotate and underline as they read, and record any questions in their notebooks.
- Whole class discussion of Venture Smith narrative, considering the following questions:

How does the preface differ from the text of the narrative?  
What is Broteer's narrative tone?  
How does Broteer convey the important events of his life?  
How does the narrator incorporate both struggle and triumph?  
What does Broteer include and disclude?  
What is Broteer's narrative purpose?  
How is the narrative organized?  
What can we infer about the details of his life, including family, education, religion, friends, personality, and the like?  
In what ways do freedom, power, and identity factor into this narrative?  
Is this an accurate depiction of his life? What, if anything are we missing?  
How does Broteer's narrative voice speak for all slaves?

- Closure: pose the questions: In what ways does Venture Smith's narrative compare to yours and to your partner's? What have you learned about narrative writing through the reading and discussion of Venture Smith's narrative? Students should take 10 minutes to respond to these questions in their journals, then share their responses with the class.
- For the next class, students should revise their narratives to ensure that they are speaking to the collective, human experience rather than the experience of just one person.

### **Day Three (90 minutes):**

- Opening: Students should share their revisions with their peers and discuss editorial changes they made.
- Group sharing activity: each student should choose one-two paragraphs from their narratives that they believe speak to universal human experience. Students will engage in a "read-around" in which they will share their writing aloud with the class. As they listen, students should take notes on key themes they heard in each others' writing.
- Assignment: students will be asked to write a preface to a book which will be housed in the community library compiling all of their narratives. The preface should be no longer than two typed, double-spaced pages. In order to write the preface, they must consider (Handout five).
  - the community (audience) that will be reading the book
  - the essential questions, issues, and challenges the class has grappled with in regard to narrative writing
  - the preface to Venture Smith's narrative, and how to avoid the inconsistency of voice presented.
  - What are the key themes the class explored pertaining to human experience?
  - What can we learn from Venture Smith's narrative, and slave narratives in general, about the power and purpose of the genre?
  - What is our collective purpose?
  - How do we convey the context of the classroom and the assignment for those who are outside of this classroom?

Closure: Students will share their prefaces in small groups, considering the questions above. Each group will select the most effective preface from the group, and then the class will select the best of the group selections to determine a class “winner.”

Following this lesson, students will be reading excerpts from Frederick Douglass’ narrative, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and studying the Jim Crow period, the Scottsboro Trials. Additionally, they will be conducting independent reading projects on issues pertaining to human rights, such as the novel, *Sold*, and the text, *Escape from Slavery*.

**Assessment:**

- Students will identify the challenges of personal story telling.
- Students will research, write, and revise a narrative according to the components of narrative writing.
- Students will read and analyze Venture Smith’s narrative according to the characteristics of slave narratives.
- Students will synthesize and apply their understanding of narratives and slave narratives in a preface considering the lesson’s essential questions.

**Curriculum created by Tami Devine Fagan**

## HANDOUTS

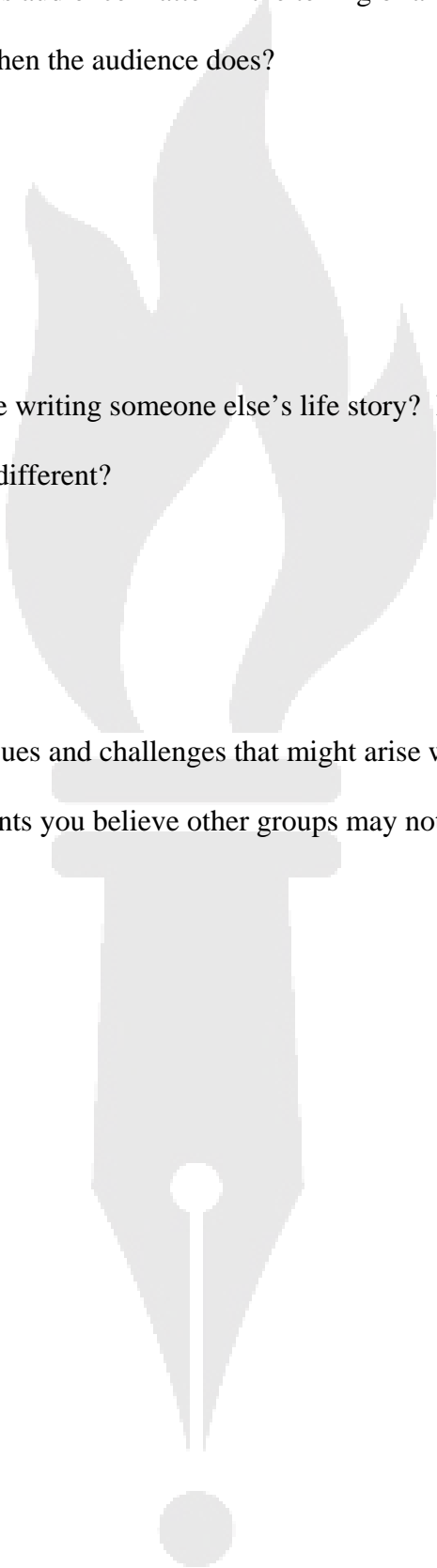
### Handout One

#### Small Group Activity

#### The challenges of writing a life story

Instructions: in small groups, discuss the following questions and take notes on your conversation. After about 15 minutes, each group will share its best points with the class.

1. How do we make decisions about what to include/exclude in the telling of a life story?
2. Is memory always accurate?
3. How does a writer of a life story determine a specific purpose with such a broad subject?

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4. In what ways does audience matter in the telling of a life story? How does a final product change when the audience does?
  
  5. What if you were writing someone else's life story? How would the challenges be similar and/or different?
  
  6. What are other issues and challenges that might arise when telling a life story?  
Try to discuss points you believe other groups may not consider.

Handout Two

## **Narrative Writing Process**

### **Lecture Notes/Fact Sheet**

As you hear each topic/question mentioned in the lecture, record important details.

What is the Goal of narrative writing?

How is a narrative generally organized?

How can dialogue be used in a narrative?

How and when is the main point/purpose revealed in a narrative?

What are some effective ways to develop characters and setting?

What does it mean to show, rather than tell?

Narratives are generally written chronologically, but what are some exceptions to this rule?

Flashback:

Fast Forward:

Identifying the point of your narrative conflict:

The importance of including only those details that advance the narrative point:

Ways to make your narrative “readable”

description

active verbs

keep verb tense and point of view consistent

present, past, future tenses

first, second, third person

Resources: [www.thewritingsite.org](http://www.thewritingsite.org), [www.engl.niu.edu/sourcebook](http://www.engl.niu.edu/sourcebook)

## Handout Three

### **Guidelines and Instructions for Personal Narratives**

- 5 pages, typed, double spaced, titled, and paginated.
- Submit in paper and electronic form.
- Allow **AT LEAST AN HOUR** to interview your subject, and consider recording the interview. Take detailed notes.
- Consider the following as you write and research:
  1. The points from the lecture on Narrative Writing and Slave Narratives.
  2. The discussions as a whole class and in small groups about the challenges and issues that arise when attempting to tell a life story.
  3. What is your purpose for telling this story?
  4. Who is your audience?
  5. When you interview your subject, consider the following questions:

What are the major events that shape this person's identity?

How does this person infuse interpretation onto life events?

How does this person describe struggles differently from triumph?

What events does this person seem to remember more details about?

Why?

How can you accurately portray this person's experience?

What can others learn from this person's life that would resonate with their own individual experiences?

If at all, how do the issues of power and freedom play into this person's telling of his/her life?

\*Remember, you can't write everything the person tells you. After the interview, decide what your purpose will be, consider your audience, and frame your narrative accordingly. Try to consider the format and sequence of your narrative as a means to more effectively tell your story.



## Handout Four

### Slave Narratives

- Slave narratives deal with black ex slaves in America and their feelings about their captors, as well as their own experiences as slaves.
- Generally highlight slaves' desire for both freedom and literacy.
- Ishmael Reed said, "the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away" (1976).
- Over 100 ex-slaves wrote book length narratives before the end of the Civil War.
- It is estimated that over 6000 ex-slaves wrote shorter narratives.
- Slave narratives follow a similar structure and format, most likely because the writers of said narratives had often read widely the narratives of other slaves (the process of imitation and repetition).
- Writers of slave narratives were writing not only their own life stories, but they were speaking on behalf of all blacks who had ever been enslaved in America, and contributing their story—their voice—to the collective.
- Bontemps said, "From the narrative came the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective prose writing by black American writers from William Wells Brown to Charles W. Chestnutt, from W.E.B. DuBois to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin." In other words, the writers of slave narratives greatly influenced the Afro-American literary tradition in monumental ways.
- Slave narrative were very popular and widely read at their publication.

- Often, the printed narratives were revisions of speeches the authors had given for anti-slavery organizations.
- Slave narratives are so appealing because they speak to the human condition: the struggle against adversity. In fact, slave narratives deal with, in general, a universal question: what it means to be human.

Resource: *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Introduction.

Handout five

### **Writing the Preface to our Compilation Book**

In class, you will write a preface to the book which will house all of our narratives, to be kept in the community library and made available to the public. The preface can be no longer than two typed, double-spaced pages, and it should consider the following:

- the community (audience) that will be reading the book
- the essential questions, issues, and challenges the class has grappled with in regard to narrative writing
- the preface to Venture Smith's narrative, and how to avoid the inconsistency of voice presented.
- What are the key themes the class explored pertaining to human experience?
- What can we learn from Venture Smith's narrative, and slave narratives in general, about the power and purpose of the genre?
- What is our collective purpose?

After you have written your preface, you will share your writing in small groups, and each group will determine the most effective preface based on how well the writer was able to address the above questions, and how accurately the writer was about to set the stage for our texts.

We will then have a "competition," between the groups to determine the most effective preface in the class. The winner will receive, beyond recognition, extra credit.

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