

The Abolitionist Movement: Determining the Meaning of Words in Texts

Duration

One class session of approximately 45 minutes

Resources

1. Teacher Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To practice reading and understanding texts with difficult vocabulary

Common Core Standard

- **9-10.4:** “Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.”

Student Activities

- Practice reading historical texts with a focus on understanding vocabulary in context.
- Practice supporting answers with evidence and reasoning.

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to practice reading higher-level historical texts that contain difficult vocabulary. The passages students will analyze are both texts related to the American abolitionist movement of the 19th century (the focus of the lesson is on the vocabulary analysis, not the history). The lesson includes several different components that are designed to spark conversation and help students to think about the variety of ways in which historical-thinking skills rely on a robust understanding of vocabulary.

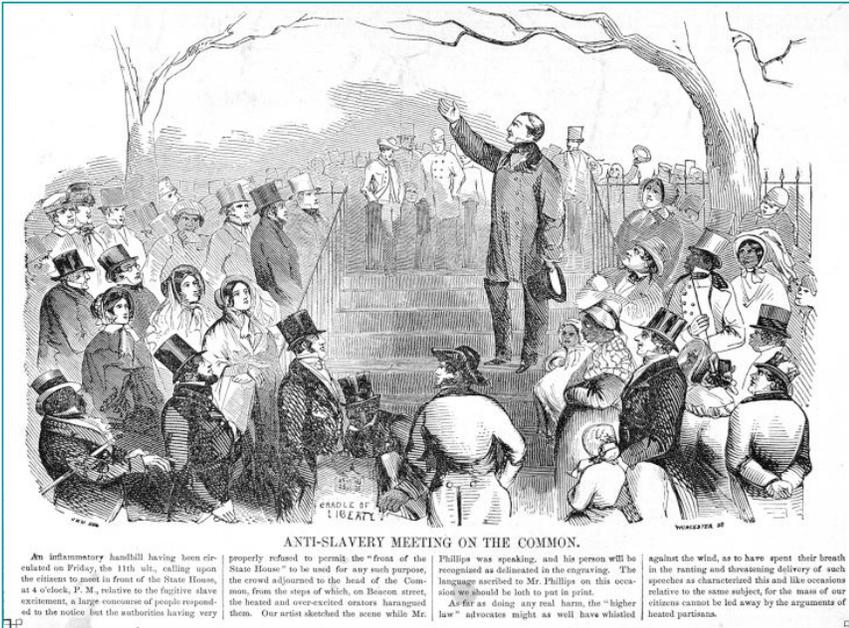
NOTES

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The student handout/worksheet contains some brief background information, a fairly lengthy primary source passage (an excerpt from the founding document of the American Anti-Slavery Society), and seven multiple-choice questions. In addition to answering the multiple-choice questions, students are asked to support their answers by explaining in writing what context clues led them to choose their answers. The short homework assignment contains an additional passage (a speech by abolitionist James Forten, Jr.) and five questions formatted the same way as the questions on the student handout.

NOTES

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Gleason's Pictorial, *Anti-Slavery Meeting on the [Boston] Common*, 1851

The Abolitionist Movement: Determining the Meaning of Words in Texts



1787 emblem showing a kneeling male slave with the text "Am I Not A Man and A Brother," an early slogan used in the campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade

Commentary

- ① This lesson focuses on the process of understanding difficult vocabulary in historical texts and using context clues to approximate the meaning of unfamiliar words. Students do not need to have any particular background with the texts in the lesson, but if time permits, it may be beneficial and useful to discuss the historical details briefly.
- ② See [American Anti-Slavery Society](#) for more background.
- ③ See [William Lloyd Garrison](#) for more background.

Background Information

This lesson is centered around documents related to the American movement to abolish slavery in the middle of the 19th century. The text below is excerpted from the founding document of the American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833 and led for many years by the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Within a decade of the society's founding, it had attracted up to 200,000 members across various states (mostly in the Northeast) and established 2,000 sub-chapters that regularly held meetings, published anti-slavery pamphlets and other documents, and sent petitions to Congress.

The questions contained in the exercise below are all about vocabulary, but make sure to read the entirety of the text so that you have a general understanding of its content and purpose.

①

②

③

Exercise: Determining the Meaning of Words in Context

④

Directions: Read the excerpt and answer the questions below.

Source: American Anti-Slavery Society, *Declaration of Sentiments*, December 6, 1833

1. The Convention assembled in the city of Philadelphia, to organize a National Anti-Slavery Society, promptly seize the opportunity to **promulgate** the following Declaration of Sentiments, as cherished by them in relation to the enslavement of one-sixth portion of the American people.
2. More than fifty-seven years have elapsed, since a band of patriots convened in this place, to devise measures for the deliverance of this country from a foreign **yoke**.¹ The corner-stone upon which they founded the Temple of Freedom was broadly this—“that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” At the sound of their trumpet-call, three millions of people rose up as from the sleep of death, and rushed to the strife of blood; deeming it more glorious to die instantly as freemen, than desirable to live one hour as slaves. They were few in number—poor in resources; but the honest conviction that Truth, Justice and Right were on their side, made them invincible.
3. We have met together for the achievement of an enterprise, without which that of our fathers is incomplete; and which, for its magnitude, **solemnity**, and probable results upon the destiny of the world, as far transcends theirs as moral truth does physical force.
4. In purity of motive, in earnestness of zeal, in decision of purpose, in **intrepidity** of action, in steadfastness of faith, in sincerity of spirit, we would not be inferior to them.
5. Their principles led them to wage war against their oppressors, and to spill human blood like water, in order to be free.
6. Ours forbid the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and to **entreat** the oppressed to reject, the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage; relying solely upon those which are spiritual, and mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. Their measures were physical resistance—the marshalling in arms—the hostile array—the mortal encounter. Ours shall be such only as the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption—the destruction of error by the potency of truth—the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love—and the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance.

Continued on next page...

- ④ It is highly likely that there will be numerous words unfamiliar to the students beyond the ones explicitly asked about in the questions. Encourage students to try as much as possible to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words from context or through discussion with their peers before they resort to Google.

¹ This is a reference to the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia.

7. Their grievances, great as they were, were **trifling** in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those for whom we plead. Our fathers were never slaves—never bought and sold like cattle—never shut out from the light of knowledge and religion—never subjected to the lash of brutal taskmasters.

8. But those, for whose emancipation we are striving—constituting at the present time at least one-sixth part of our countrymen—are recognized by law, and treated by their fellow-beings, as marketable commodities, as goods and chattels, as brute beasts; are plundered daily of the fruits of their toil without redress; really enjoy no constitutional nor legal protection from **licentious** and murderous outrages upon their persons; and are ruthlessly torn asunder—the tender babe from the arms of its frantic mother—the heart-broken wife from her weeping husband—at the caprice or pleasure of irresponsible tyrants. For the crime of having a dark complexion, they suffer the pangs of hunger, the infliction of stripes, the ignominy of brutal servitude. They are kept in heathenish darkness by laws expressly enacted to make their instruction a criminal offence.

9. These are the prominent circumstances in the condition of more than two millions of our people, the proof of which may be found in thousands of indisputable facts, and in the laws of the slaveholding States.

10. Hence we maintain—that, in view of the civil and religious privileges of this nation, the guilt of its oppression is unequalled by any other on the face of the earth; and, therefore, that it is bound to repent instantly, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free.

- ⑤ Emphasize this point. See answer key document for all answers and explanations.

Questions

Note: Only use the Internet for definitions as a LAST RESORT if you can't figure out the best definition from context clues.

⑤

1. a. As used in paragraph 1, **promulgate** most nearly means
 - A. attack harshly
 - B. make widely known
 - C. begin anew
 - D. think deeply about
- b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

2. a. As used in paragraph 2, **yoke** most nearly means

- A. egg
- B. war
- C. compassion
- D. bondage

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

3. a. As used in paragraph 3, **solemnity** most nearly means

- A. sympathy
- B. desire
- C. courage
- D. seriousness

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

4. a. As used in paragraph 4, **intrepidity** most nearly means

- A. diligence
- B. studiousness
- C. fearlessness
- D. happiness

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

5. a. As used in paragraph 6, **entreat** most nearly means

- A. plead earnestly
- B. remember fondly
- C. negotiate peacefully
- D. decide quickly

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

6. a. As used in paragraph 7, **trifling** most nearly means

- A. insignificant
- B. profound
- C. agreeable
- D. pleasant

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

7. a. As used in paragraph 8, **licentious** most nearly means

- A. wise
- B. just
- C. immoral
- D. disloyal

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

The Abolitionist Movement



1787 emblem showing a kneeling male slave with the text "Am I Not A Man and A Brother," an early slogan used in the campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade

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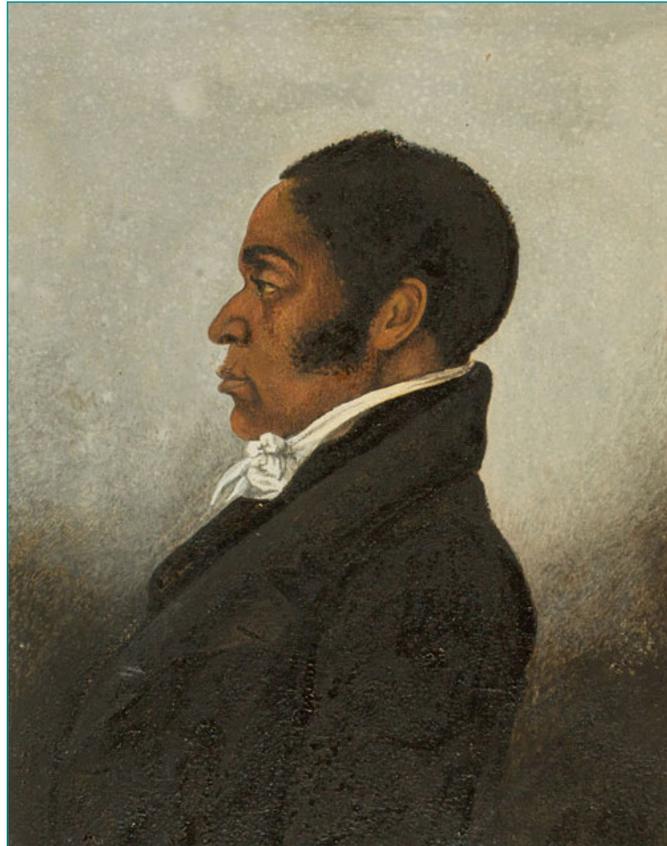
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- B. just
- C. immoral
- D. disloyal

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

The Abolitionist Movement



Unknown artist, portrait of abolitionist James Forten, Jr. (mid-19th century)

Background Information

The passage below is excerpted from abolitionist James Forten, Jr.'s speech to the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, given when Forten was just 19 years old. Born into a family of Black abolitionists, Forten became an activist at a very young age and became the richest Black man in Philadelphia through his successful sailmaking company. Using his wealth, he generously funded numerous Black organizations and antislavery efforts.

Exercise: Determining the Meaning of Words in Context

Directions: Read the excerpt and answer the questions below.

Source: James Forten, Jr., “Put on the Armour of Righteousness,” April 14, 1836

1. LADIES—There is nothing that could more forcibly **induce** me to express my humble sentiments at all times, than an entire consciousness that is the duty of every individual who would wish to see the foul curse of slavery swept forever from the land—who wishes to become one amongst the undaunted advocates of the oppressed—who wishes to deal amongst the undaunted advocates of the oppressed—who wishes to deal justly and love mercy.

2. In a word, it is my **indispensable** duty, in view of the wretched, the helpless, the friendless condition of my countrymen in chains, to raise my voice, feeble though it be, in their behalf; to plead for the restoration of their inalienable rights.

3. As to the character of the ANTI-SLAVERY-SOCIETY, it requires but one glance from an impartial eye, to discover the purity of its motives—the great strength of its moral energies; its high and benevolent-its holy and life giving principles. These are the foundations, the very architecture of Abolition, and prove its sovereignty. In fact, all associated bodies which have for their great aim the destruction of tyranny, and the moral and intellectual improvement of mankind, have been, and ever will, considered as bearing a **decided** superiority over all others.

4. And how well may this Association, before which I now have the honor to appear, be deemed one of that description; and still more is its superiority increased from a knowledge of the truth that it is composed entirely of your sex. It stands aloof from the storms of passion and political tumult, exhibiting in its extended and Christian views a **disposition** to produce an immediate reformation of the heart and soul.

5. Never before has there been a subject brought into the arena of public investigation, so fraught with humanity—so alive to the best interest of our country—so dear to all those for whose benefit it was intended, as the one which now calls you together. How varied and abundant—how eloquent and soul-thrilling have been the arguments advanced in its defence, by the greatest and best of the land; and yet, so boundless is the theme—so inexhaustible the fountain, that even the infant may be heard lisping a prayer for the **redemption** of the perishing captive.

Questions

Note: Only use the Internet for definitions as a LAST RESORT if you can't figure out the best definition from context clues.

1. a. As used in paragraph 1, **induce** most nearly means

- A. cause
- B. teach
- C. prevent
- D. harm

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

2. a. As used in paragraph 2, **indispensable** most nearly means

- A. problematic
- B. necessary
- C. aggressive
- D. faithful

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

3. a. As used in paragraph 3, **decided** most nearly means

- A. chosen
- B. definite
- C. considered
- D. doubted

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

4. a. As used in paragraph 4, **disposition** most nearly means

- A. joyfulness
- B. anxiety
- C. arrangement
- D. mindset

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

5. a. As used in paragraph 5, **decided** redemption most nearly means
- A. destruction
 - B. achievement
 - C. liberation
 - D. imprisonment

b. How do you know? What context clues help you to understand?

Write or type your response in this area.

The Abolitionist Movement: Determining the Meaning of Words in Texts

WORKSHEET

1.
 - a. As used in paragraph 1, **promulgate** most nearly means “make widely known” (B).
 - b. The document is the *Declaration of Sentiments* of the American Anti-Slavery Society, so the authors hope to promote or spread their message.
2.
 - a. As used in paragraph 2, **yoke** most nearly means “bondage” (D).
 - b. The authors are making reference to the American Declaration of Independence from Great Britain in 1776, so the “foreign yoke” pertains to the sense of bondage or servitude Americans felt under the control of the British government prior to independence (a “yoke” is literally a wooden beam attached to the neck of an animal but is often used metaphorically to describe oppression or slavery).
3.
 - a. As used in paragraph 3, **solemnity** most nearly means “seriousness” (D).
 - b. The authors describe their goal of eliminating slavery as hugely significant, transcendent, and having a broad impact on the world, so “seriousness” best captures that meaning.
4.
 - a. As used in paragraph 4, **intrepidity** most nearly means “fearlessness” (C).
 - b. The authors urge their readers to be zealous, steadfast, and sincere in their efforts to fight slavery. “Fearlessness” is most similar to these other terms.
5.
 - a. As used in paragraph 6, **entreat** most nearly means “plead earnestly” (A).
 - b. The paragraph is focused on urging readers to fight immorality and overthrow prejudice, so entreating the oppressed “to reject carnal weapons” means to beg or plead with them to do as the authors urge (see also the end of paragraph 7).
6.
 - a. As used in paragraph 7, **trifling** most nearly means “insignificant” (A).
 - b. The authors are comparing the grievances of the founding generation of Americans (i.e., bondage to Britain) to the plight of the enslaved and making the point that the founders’ troubles were insignificant compared with the suffering of slaves.
7.
 - a. As used in paragraph 8, **licentious** most nearly means “immoral” (C).
 - b. The authors are discussing the horrible treatment endured by slaves. Since the word “licentious” refers to the actions of the oppressors, it must mean something very bad, such as “immoral” (the only other negative answer option, “disloyal,” doesn’t make sense as a way to describe people mistreating slaves).

HOMEWORK

1.
 - a. As used in paragraph 1, **induce** most nearly means “cause” (A).
 - b. Forten introduces his remarks to his audience by stating that his conscience compels him to speak up on behalf of the abolitionist cause, so “cause” has the closest meaning.
2.
 - a. As used in paragraph 2, **indispensable** most nearly means “necessary” (B).
 - b. Forten refers to his duty to speak on behalf of the oppressed, implying that it is “necessary” for him to do so.
3.
 - a. As used in paragraph 3, **decided** most nearly means “definite” (B).
 - b. Forten is discussing the purpose of the anti-slavery society and notes that it is markedly or obviously superior to other associations due to its just moral foundation in opposition to tyranny.
4.
 - a. As used in paragraph 4, **disposition** most nearly means “mindset” (D).
 - b. In paragraph 4, Forten praises the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Association and notes that its members are inclined to have sound motives and good hearts, indicating that their “disposition” is their way of being, character, or way of looking at the world.
5.
 - a. As used in paragraph 5, **redemption** most nearly means “liberation” (C).
 - b. Forten is discussing the urgency of the abolitionist movement and notes how widespread and passionate its supporters are. In a bit of hyperbole, he states that even infants pray for slaves to be redeemed, or freed.