

8B: Liberty & Equality

In this unit, students study the writings of Americans who were critically engaged in a debate about the meaning of the words “all men are created equal” during the Civil War. Walt Whitman was a poet who tried to describe something essential about the identity of the American self. Students read excerpts from his poem “Song of Myself,” and try on his poetic form and use of figurative language to craft their own poem about “self.” Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* then guides students as they reflect on the American ideals of equality, opportunity, justice, and freedom. The memoir describes his powerful journey to liberation, and provides the opportunity for students to analyze his potent rhetoric and powerful arguments against slavery. Harriet Ann Jacobs’s memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, allows students to explore her detailed picture of life as an enslaved woman and consider her powerful picture of slavery’s human cost. Excerpts from *The Boys’ War* capture the voices and brutal experiences of adolescents who fought on both sides during the Civil War. After thinking critically about this variety of voices, students consider how the language in the Gettysburg Address presented the American people a way to recommit to their nation and its principles of justice and equality.

NOTE: The texts in this unit focus on Americans’ experiences during slavery and the Civil War. In particular, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs recount the violence, oppression, and degrading language they and other enslaved Americans experienced. Students may want to discuss their reaction to these disturbing accounts.

(Amplify has not edited the language in Douglass’s published account; the censorship of only select offensive terms was done in the original publication of Douglass’s narrative in 1845.)

Core texts your student will read:

- “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass
- Gettysburg Address
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Ann Jacobs
- *The Boys’ War* by Jim Murphy
- *A Confederate Girl’s Diary* by Sarah Morgan Dawson
- Declaration of Independence
- This unit also includes additional excerpts from abolitionist speeches and memoirs.

What my student will do/learn:

- Students study a few sections of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” then imitate his style to write a poem of their own that examines their own sense of self.
- Students read and discuss *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, exploring how each author describes their own enslavement and crafts their memoir to build an argument in support of abolition.
- Students may work with *The Emancipation Project* Quest, exploring primary source material to enrich their understanding of the unit’s historical context.

- Students prepare and deliver an abolitionist speech as part of an Anti-Slavery Fair.
- Students examine the first-hand accounts and images of Civil War boy soldiers in *The Boys' War*, adding to their understanding of and perspectives on the Civil War.
- Students analyze Lincoln's Gettysburg Address by rereading, paraphrasing, and reciting a portion of it to consider the details of his word choice as well as his overall message.
- Students continue to use key classroom routines, including the sharing routine, during which classmates respond to shared writing by noting one effective way the writer used details or evidence.
- Students continue to write in response to prompts 2–3 times weekly, and practice analytic writing in response to text by developing a controlling idea or claim and providing support with details or evidence.
- Students write an end-of-unit essay responding to one of the following prompts: How does Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address, try to change what his readers/listeners believe about what it means to be dedicated to the American idea that "All men are created equal"? OR How does Douglass, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, try to change what his readers believe about what it means to be dedicated to the American idea that "All men are created equal"?

Here are some conversation starters that you can use during this unit to promote discussion and encourage continued learning with your student.

1. After reading Whitman's poem and writing one of your own, what parts of your true self were easy to identify? What aspects required a bit more digging?
2. How did Chadwick Boseman's dramatic readings affect your understanding of and emotional response to Douglass's words?
3. How did reading about Douglass's experiences and analyzing the rhetoric of Senator Calhoun affect your understanding of the world during Douglass's lifetime? Why is it important to read these texts in today's world?
4. Compare *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to Douglass's memoir. How might each author's style have been effective in furthering the abolitionist movement?
5. What surprised you about the experiences of soldiers in *The Boys' War*?
6. Can you share a piece of writing with me in which you support your idea with evidence from the text? (Provide feedback to your student by finding something in their writing that you can respond to as a reader. For example, "You did a good job of using the phrase "brother's blood" to show how Douglass considers all human beings to be equal, but the slaveholders do not.")
7. Considering the texts you've read in this unit, what does "All men are created equal" mean in the United States? Do you think Americans have been successful in upholding this ideal?