

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Learning to Read and Write

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in 1818 in Maryland. He learned to read and write, escaped to New York, and became a leader in the abolitionist movement. He engaged in speaking tours and edited North Star, a newspaper named for the one guide escaping southern slaves could rely on to find their way to freedom. Douglass is best known for his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), from which "Learning to Read and Write" is excerpted. In this selection, Douglass tells the story of his coming to literacy. As you read, keep your eye on the ways in which Douglass describes the world opening up for him as he learns his letters and the range of emotions this process evokes in him.

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a

human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamb-like disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a

testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids:—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a *slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently lashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more

painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition*. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no

help. I found it was "the act of abolishing"; but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about. After a patient waiting, I got one of our city papers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between the States. From this time I understood the words *abolition* and *abolitionist*, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, "Are ye a slave for life?" I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus—"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked

thus—"S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus—"L. F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus—"S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus—"L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus—"S. A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write. I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meetinghouse every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

For Discussion and Writing

1. List the different ways Douglass taught himself to read and write. List also some other things he learns.
2. The main focus of this passage is the process by which Douglass began to become literate. Who else in the passage undergoes a "learning" process, and what are the results?
3. Douglass teaches himself to read and write in a society that condemns

Memmi, colonization. Write an essay comparing and contrasting how Douglass and Memmi convey the impact of one person or group wielding power over another.

"Learning to Read and Write" by Frederick Douglass, paragraph 2, pp. 100-101.

From *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, by Albert Memmi:

It is impossible for him [the colonizer] not to be aware of the constant illegitimacy of his status. It is, moreover, in a way, a double illegitimacy. A foreigner, having come to a land by the accidents of history, he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. And this not by virtue of local laws, which in a certain way legitimize this inequality by tradition, but by upsetting the established rules and substituting his own. He thus appears doubly unjust. He is a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper. Furthermore, this is so, not only in the eyes of the colonized, but in his own as well. If he occasionally objects that the privileged also exist among the bourgeois colonized, whose affluence equals or exceeds his, he does so without conviction. Not to be the only one guilty can be reassuring, but it cannot absolve.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

These multiple-choice questions refer to paragraphs 1-4.

- The overall organization of this excerpt can best be described as
 - a chronological sequence of events
 - a first-person narrative with little analytical commentary by the speaker
 - an angry polemic against the evils of slavery
 - a statement of the narrator's accomplishment followed by an explanation of how he reached it
 - a sympathetic portrayal of a system that victimized both the oppressor and the oppressed
- The final sentence in paragraph 1 includes which of the following?
 - understatement
 - figurative language
 - a complex sentence
 - I only
 - II only
 - I and II only
 - II and III only
 - I, II, and III
- In paragraph 2, Douglass uses all of the following EXCEPT
 - metonymy
 - personification
 - anaphora
 - allusion
 - connotation
- What does Douglass mean by his description of his mistress as "an apt woman" (paragraph 2)?
 - admirable
 - appropriate
 - deceptive
 - intelligent
 - shrewd
- What is the rhetorical purpose of paragraph 3?
 - to qualify points made in the previous paragraph
 - to emphasize how Douglass's reactions turned to action
 - to offer a counterargument to the one presented in the previous paragraph
 - to qualify Douglass's understanding of the importance of learning to read
 - to provide a transition from Douglass's past experiences to those in the present
- What is Douglass's attitude toward the young boys he describes in paragraph 4?
 - angry reproach
 - studied indifference
 - condescending pity
 - reflective appreciation
 - grudging respect

- In the context of this passage, all of the following are examples of irony EXCEPT
 - "lacked the depravity" (paragraph 1)
 - "the simplicity of her soul" (paragraph 2)
 - "anxious to do better" (paragraph 2)
 - "first step had been taken" (paragraph 3)
 - "I was much better off in this regard" (paragraph 4)
- The primary audience that Douglass is addressing in this excerpt is/are
 - slaveholders
 - Master Hugh's family
 - sympathizers to the abolitionist cause
 - other ex-slaves
 - readers of *The Columbian Orator*
- Which of the following best describes Douglass's tone throughout paragraphs 1 through 4?
 - sympathetic and reflective
 - respectful but firm
 - sarcastic and angry
 - passionate and determined
 - irate but carefully judicious

SUGGESTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

- Write an essay in which you analyze the appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos in "Learning to Read and Write."
- Write an essay comparing and contrasting the experiences of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X as they learned to read and write.
- Douglass finds that the learning he has experienced has a negative side as well as a positive side. Write about a time when you learned something that had both advantages and disadvantages, or that both helped and harmed you.
- Define another literacy that you have besides being able to read and write (for example, computer literacy, a second language, numerical literacy). What power does it give you? How does it make you a member of a community or of certain groups?

CONNECTIONS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE 50 ESSAYS

INSIDE

The following essays address the power inherent in the mastery of language (reading, writing, speaking):

- "Learning to Read" by Malcolm X
- "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood" by Richard Rodriguez
- "I Just Wanna Be Average" by Mike Rose

OUTSIDE

- African American poet Robert Hayden's 1962 poem "Frederick Douglass," which appeared on the 2001 AP Literature exam, offers a tribute as well as an interpretation of this excerpt by Douglass. Students might discuss how Hayden's view is supported by the essay "Learning to Read and Write": www.ctadams.com/roberthayden1.html
- Students might read Douglass's famous speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" delivered on July 5, 1852, as a study in rhetorical strategies. Since it is quite long, excerpts would be appropriate. douglassarchives.org/doug_a10.htm
- Both Douglass and Malcolm X comment on the role of education in a democracy that has ostensibly failed them or excluded them. Their writings, if coupled with those of early educational theorists like John Dewey and Horace Mann, and with those of more contemporary analysts like Neil Postman and Diane Ravitch, could make for an interesting dialogue about educational development. For a more creative assignment, consider a conversation between, for instance, Douglass, Malcolm X, Dewey, and Ravitch on today's public urban school systems.