
TEACHING SLAVERY & RECONSTRUCTION

Difficult History Unit

Grades 8 – 12 • 4 Weeks • 20 Lesson Plans

Primary Sources • Enslaved People's Perspectives

Reconstruction Amendments • Redeemer Backlash

Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices

Following Facing History & Ourselves Best Practices

UM Printables

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Unit Overview & Philosophy

This four-week unit examines the institution of American slavery, the promise and collapse of Reconstruction, and the enduring legacy of the Redeemer backlash. Designed for grades 8–12, the unit centers the perspectives and agency of enslaved people while following trauma-informed teaching practices aligned with Facing History & Ourselves.

Core Philosophy: Studying difficult history is not about assigning blame to present-day individuals; it is about understanding how systems of oppression were constructed, how people resisted, and how the consequences reverberate today. This unit creates space for honest investigation while attending to the emotional well-being of all students.

Unit Goals:

- Understand the development and maintenance of chattel slavery in America
- Analyze primary sources from enslaved and formerly enslaved people to center their voices
- Examine the promises of Reconstruction through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments
- Investigate the systematic dismantling of Reconstruction through Redeemer governments
- Develop historical thinking skills: sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, close reading
- Practice civil discourse around contentious historical and contemporary issues
- Reflect on the ongoing legacy of slavery and Reconstruction in American life

Teacher Note: *This unit deals with histories of violence, dehumanization, and racial terror. Review your school's guidelines for teaching sensitive content. Communicate with families in advance. Establish classroom norms for respectful discourse before beginning. Provide opt-out alternatives for students who may be deeply affected. Monitor student well-being throughout.*

Unit Essential Questions:

1. How did the system of chattel slavery shape the United States, and how did enslaved people resist their own oppression?
2. What did the Reconstruction amendments promise, and why were those promises only partially fulfilled?
3. How did the Redeemer backlash systematically undo the gains of Reconstruction?
4. What is the ongoing legacy of slavery and Reconstruction in American society today?

Materials Overview:

- 20 detailed lesson plans with objectives, procedures, and assessments
- 8 primary source analysis packets with documents and guided questions
- Formerly-Enslaved Narrative Analysis Guide
- Reconstruction Amendment Text Analysis sheets
- Backlash Discussion Protocol with structured facilitation guide
- Reparations Debate Activity with position cards and rubric
- Comprehensive unit assessment with answer key
- Trauma-informed teaching guidelines for instructors

Trauma-Informed Teaching Guidelines

The following guidelines are adapted from Facing History & Ourselves and current trauma-informed pedagogy research. These practices must be in place before the unit begins.

Establish Safety

Create physical and emotional safety in the classroom. Set clear norms for discussion. Students must know they can step away or pass without penalty. Designate a 'quiet space' students can access. Display community agreements prominently.

Center Dignity

Always refer to enslaved people as people—never as objects or with dehumanizing language. Use 'enslaved people' not 'slaves.' Emphasize their humanity, agency, and resistance alongside accounts of oppression. Avoid graphic descriptions that serve only to shock.

Provide Context Before Content

Before introducing traumatic material, provide historical context so students understand what they are about to encounter. Give content warnings before particularly difficult readings or images. Allow students to prepare themselves emotionally.

Allow Multiple Entry Points

Not all students process trauma the same way. Offer options: writing, drawing, small-group discussion, or silent reflection. Never force a student to share publicly. Provide alternative assignments when needed without stigma.

Avoid Re-Traumatization

Do not simulate experiences of enslavement. Never ask students to role-play enslaved people or enslavers. Do not show lynching photographs without extreme pedagogical justification and prior preparation. Focus on testimony from those who experienced the history.

Connect Past to Present Thoughtfully

Help students see connections between historical injustice and contemporary issues, but do not equate all experiences. Validate that the legacy of slavery affects communities today. Be prepared for students of color to have personal connections to this material.

Close Each Session

End every lesson with a structured closing activity—do not leave students in a place of distress. Use 'headlines,' gratitude circles, or brief journaling to create a transition out of the difficult content before students leave the room.

Know Your Students

Be aware of students who may have personal connections to this history. Consult with school counselors. Check in privately with students who seem affected. Your role includes being a caring adult, not just a content deliverer.

Teacher Note: *Before beginning this unit, send a letter home to families explaining the content, your pedagogical approach, and how you will support students. Invite questions. Consider hosting a brief informational session for interested families.*

Unit Timeline & Standards Alignment

Four-Week Timeline:

Week	Focus	Key Topics
1	The Institution of Slavery	Middle Passage, daily life, resistance, Equiano narrative
2	Abolition & Road to War	Abolitionists, Douglass, Jacobs, Fugitive Slave Act, Civil War causes
3	Emancipation & Reconstruction	Emancipation Proclamation, 13th–15th Amendments, Freedmen's Bureau
4	Backlash & Legacy	Black Codes, Jim Crow, backlash discussion, reparations debate, synthesis

CCLS / State Standards Alignment:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1 – Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 – Determine the central ideas of a primary or secondary source
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 – Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6 – Compare the point of view of two or more authors
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1 – Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 – Integrate information from diverse sources into an understanding of an idea
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1 – Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1 – Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions
- NCSS Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
- NCSS Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance
- NCSS Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices
- C3 Framework D2.His.1-3 – Analyze and evaluate historical sources and perspectives

WEEK 1: THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY

Lesson 1: Why Study Difficult History? (50 min)

Objective: Students will articulate why studying difficult history matters, establish classroom norms for respectful discussion, and reflect on their own positionality in relation to this content.

Essential Question: *Why is it important to study history that is painful, even when it makes us uncomfortable?*

Materials:

- Chart paper and markers for community agreements
- Student journals or reflection notebooks
- 'Why Study Difficult History?' reflection prompt (written on board)

Procedure:

1. Opening (5 min): Project the question: 'Why might some people want to avoid teaching or learning about slavery?' Allow 2 minutes of silent think time, then ask for 3–4 volunteer responses.
2. Community Agreements (15 min): Facilitate creation of class discussion norms. Chart and post the following starter agreements, then invite additions: (a) Listen to understand, not to respond; (b) Use 'I' statements; (c) No one is forced to share—passing is always okay; (d) Respect the humanity of all people discussed; (e) Ask questions to learn, not to challenge someone's identity.
3. Guided Reflection (15 min): Students respond in journals: 'What do you already know about slavery in America? Where did you learn it? What feelings come up when you think about this topic?' After 8 minutes, invite optional sharing in pairs.
4. Introduction to the Unit (10 min): Provide overview of the 4-week unit. Emphasize that this unit centers the voices and agency of enslaved people. Preview the essential questions. Explain that difficult content will be approached with care and that the teacher is available for check-ins.
5. Closing (5 min): Each student writes a 'headline'—one sentence that captures their biggest takeaway from today. Share with a partner before leaving.

Assessment / Exit Ticket: Collect headline slips as exit tickets. Review journal entries for readiness and potential concerns.

Differentiation: Provide sentence stems for journal reflections. Allow drawing as an alternative to writing. Pair students thoughtfully for discussions.

Teacher Note: *Pay close attention to students who seem withdrawn or distressed during journaling. Check in privately before the next class. Some students, particularly Black students, may have deeply personal connections to this material—be attentive without singling anyone out.*

Lesson 2: The Atlantic Slave Trade & the Middle Passage (50 min)

Objective: Students will analyze the scale and brutality of the Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage, using quantitative data and primary source testimony to understand the forced migration of Africans to the Americas.

Essential Question: *How did the transatlantic slave trade operate as an economic system, and what were its human costs?*

WEEK 4: BACKLASH & LEGACY

Lesson 16: Redeemer Backlash & Black Codes (50 min)

Objective: Students will examine the violent and political backlash against Reconstruction, analyzing how Redeemer governments used terror, Black Codes, and legal manipulation to re-establish white supremacy and disenfranchise Black voters.

Essential Question: *How did Southern Redeemer governments systematically dismantle the gains of Reconstruction, and why were they allowed to do so?*

Materials:

- Mississippi Black Code excerpts (1865)
- Brief historical accounts of the Colfax Massacre (1873) and the Wilmington Coup (1898)
- Disenfranchisement tactics handout (poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses)
- Timeline of Retreat (1869-1877)

Procedure:

1. Opening (5 min): Ask: 'If you build a house but someone actively works to tear it down, who is responsible when the house falls?' Connect this metaphor to Reconstruction.
2. Violent Backlash (12 min): Examine the Colfax Massacre and the rise of the KKK. Discuss: 'What was the purpose of political violence during Reconstruction?' Highlight the federal government's uneven response (Enforcement Acts vs. waning Northern commitment).
3. Legal Backlash: Disenfranchisement (15 min): Analyze how states worked around the 15th Amendment. Review poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses. Students evaluate: 'How did these laws appear race-neutral while being racially targeted?'
4. The Compromise of 1877 (10 min): Explain the backroom deal that removed federal troops from the South. Discuss: 'What message did this send to Black Southerners?'
5. Closing (8 min): Students complete the timeline of retreat. Exit ticket: 'Name two ways (one violent, one legal) that Redeemers undermined Reconstruction.'

Assessment / Exit Ticket: Collect disenfranchisement handouts and timelines.

Teacher Note: *The violence discussed today (lynching, massacres) requires adherence to our trauma-informed guidelines. Do not show graphic images of lynching. Focus on the historical facts, the systemic purpose of the terror, and the resilience of Black communities. Provide content warnings.*

Lesson 17: Backlash Discussion Protocol (50 min)

Objective: Students will engage in a structured, trauma-informed Socratic seminar using the Backlash Discussion Protocol to analyze primary and secondary sources on the collapse of Reconstruction and its legacy.

Essential Question: *Why did the United States fail to uphold the promises of Reconstruction, and whose interests were served by that failure?*

Materials:

- Backlash Discussion Protocol packet (provided later in this resource)

- All primary source packets and notes from Weeks 1-4
- Discussion preparation sheet (completed for homework)
- Community agreements (posted from Lesson 1)

Procedure:

1. Opening (5 min): Review community agreements. Explain the Backlash Discussion Protocol structure: Round 1 (Grounding in Evidence), Round 2 (Connecting Past to Present), Round 3 (Reflection). Explain the use of talking pieces or speaker queues.
2. Round 1: Grounding in Evidence (15 min): Prompt: 'Using specific evidence from the unit, explain how the backlash against Reconstruction was carried out.' Students must cite at least one primary source in their response. No cross-talk; build on previous speakers.
3. Round 2: Connecting Past to Present (15 min): Prompt: 'How do the systems built during the Redeemer era (convict leasing, disenfranchisement, Jim Crow) echo in American society today?' Emphasize respectful, evidence-based connections. Do not equate past and present experiences; focus on systemic patterns.
4. Round 3: Reflection (8 min): Prompt: 'What is the most important lesson we should take from the collapse of Reconstruction?' Students share brief reflections.
5. Closing (7 min): Students write a private reflection in their journals: 'How did today's discussion change or reinforce your thinking?' Emphasize that this journal entry is not collected.

Assessment / Exit Ticket: Observe participation using the discussion rubric. Collect preparation sheets for evidence of source analysis.

Differentiation: Allow students to pass during oral discussion if they submit a written reflection instead. Provide sentence stems for discussion contributions.

Lesson 18: Reparations & Historical Arguments (50 min)

Objective: Students will trace the historical origins of the reparations debate, from the broken promise of '40 acres and a mule' to the activism of Callie House and modern H.R. 40, understanding the arguments for and against reparations.

Essential Question: *What is the historical basis for the argument that the United States owes reparations for slavery and the failure of Reconstruction?*

Materials:

- Reparations Debate Activity packet (background readings)
- Sherman's Field Order No. 15 excerpt
- Callie House biography and the Ex-Slave Pension Movement
- Ta-Nehisi Coates 'The Case for Reparations' excerpt (simplified)

Procedure:

1. Opening (5 min): Define 'reparations' on the board. Ask: 'Have you heard this term before? What does it mean to you?' Clarify that today is about understanding the historical ARGUMENTS, not deciding who is 'right.'
2. Historical Basis: 40 Acres (12 min): Read Sherman's Field Order No. 15 (set aside 400,000 acres for Black families). Then explain how President Johnson revoked it and returned land to former Confederates. Discuss: 'How does the revocation of this land create a specific, concrete grievance?'
3. The Ex-Slave Pension Movement (10 min): Introduce Callie House and the movement for pensions for

Reparations Debate Activity

This structured debate activity requires students to apply their historical knowledge to one of the most debated contemporary issues stemming from slavery and Reconstruction. Aligned with trauma-informed practices, this activity emphasizes evidence-based argumentation, respectful civil discourse, and mandatory de-roling.

Position Cards:

Assign students (or pairs) to one of the following positions. Students may be asked to argue a position they do not personally hold; this is an exercise in historical argumentation and empathy.

Position	Core Argument	Key Historical Evidence to Include
Position A: Pro-Reparations (Financial Restitution)	The U.S. government owes direct financial compensation to the descendants of enslaved people for the unpaid labor of slavery and the systemic wealth destruction during Reconstruction and Jim Crow.	Unpaid labor (slavery); Broken promise of '40 acres and a mule' (Sherman's Field Order 15 revoked by Johnson); Destruction of Black Wall Street (Wilmington, Tulsa); Discriminatory New Deal/Housing policies (redlining); The measurable racial wealth gap.
Position B: Pro-Reparations (Systemic Investment)	Reparations are owed, but they should take the form of systemic investments (e.g., education, housing, healthcare) rather than individual payments, to address the structural inequities created by slavery and Reconstruction's failure.	The 13th Amendment's exception clause leading to convict leasing; Disenfranchisement and Black Codes; Disparities in generational wealth tied to historical housing discrimination; Long-term underfunding of Black institutions.
Position C: Anti-Reparations (Individualism)	While slavery and discrimination were morally wrong, the U.S. government should not provide reparations today because no one living is directly responsible for slavery, and contemporary citizens should not bear the financial burden of historical sins.	The passage of time (over 150 years); The election of Black officials (symbolic equality); The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 as 'corrections'; The difficulty of determining who qualifies and who pays.
Position D: Fact-Checkers / Judges	Rather than arguing a side, these students evaluate the arguments made by Positions A, B, and C for historical accuracy, logical consistency, and strength of evidence.	Must reference primary sources from the unit (e.g., Secession documents, 13th-15th Amendments, Freedmen's Bureau records, convict leasing evidence) to verify claims made during the debate.

Debate Preparation Organizer:

Element	Your Position's Plan
Opening Statement (1-2 sentences stating your thesis)	
Argument 1 + Specific Historical Evidence	
Argument 2 + Specific Historical Evidence	
Argument 3 + Specific Historical Evidence	
Anticipated Counter-Argument	
Your Rebuttal to the Counter-Argument	

Debate Rubric:

Criteria	Exemplary (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Emerging (1)
Historical Evidence	Uses 3+ specific, accurate primary sources to support claims.	Uses 2 specific sources to support claims.	Uses 1 source or evidence is vague/inaccurate.	No historical evidence used.
Argumentation	Claims are clear, logical, and directly address the prompt. Anticipates counterarguments.	Claims are clear and mostly logical.	Claims are present but weak or disconnected from evidence.	Claims are unclear or missing.
Civil Discourse	Engages respectfully, builds on others' ideas, and follows all discussion norms.	Engages respectfully and follows norms.	Sometimes interrupts or struggles to engage respectfully.	Disrespects peers or norms.
Active Listening	References opponents' arguments in rebuttals; asks clarifying questions.	Listens and provides basic rebuttals.	Mostly waits to speak rather than listening to respond.	Does not engage with others' points.

Teacher Note: The de-roling process at the end of the debate (Lesson 19) is non-negotiable. Allow students who feel deeply uncomfortable arguing a specific position to serve as Fact-Checkers (Position D) instead.

Part IV: Essay Rubric & Sample Thesis

Scoring Guide (10 points total):

Category	Points	Criteria
Thesis	2	Clear, defensible thesis that evaluates the extent of failure and takes a stance on 'failure' vs. 'revolution betrayed.'
Achievements Evidence	3	Identifies at least two specific achievements (e.g., 14th/15th Amendments, Freedmen's Bureau, Black elected officials, public schools).
Backlash Evidence	3	Explains at least two specific backlash tactics (e.g., KKK violence, Black Codes, convict leasing, disenfranchisement, Compromise of 1877) and how they undermined achievements.
Argumentation/Conclusion	2	Conclusion effectively synthesizes evidence to argue whether Reconstruction was a failure or a revolution betrayed. Well-organized.

Sample Strong Thesis:

'Reconstruction should not be remembered as a total failure, but rather as a revolution betrayed. While it achieved significant milestones like the 14th and 15th Amendments, which promised citizenship and voting rights, these gains were systematically dismantled by the Redeemer backlash through disenfranchisement and the Compromise of 1877, proving that the failure was not in the attempt, but in the lack of sustained federal commitment.'

Thank You!

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