

Synthesis Essay Materials for Teachers

Synthesis Essay

Goal:

Create a written, documented essay on a specific aspect of the Underground Railroad and present the information orally to classmates.

Students will:

- Understand the basic elements of the illegal Underground Railroad which helped enslaved persons escape to freedom.
- Receive background information on a specific Underground Railroad participant or site.
- Read and take notes from at least three more sources on the topic (one a primary source).
- Write an essay telling in detail about the topic, combining (synthesizing) information from all the sources.
- Include a correctly formatted Works Cited list following the essay.
- Give an oral presentation based on the information to the other members of the class.

Teacher will:

- Give a presentation on the basics of the Underground Railroad (UGRR 101 - Presenter Script)
- Supply students with a summary of this presentation (UGRR 101 - Handouts)
- Go over the expectations on the UGRR Research Essay Assignment Sheet
- Explain use of Cornell Notes and MLA Citation Format
- Distribute Cornell Notes Templates to students
- Assign individual topics to students (or a pair of students)
- Distribute appropriate Topic Sheets to each student/pair
- Use rubric(s) to grade: Synthesis Essay; Cornell Notes; Oral Presentation

Materials provided:

- UGRR 101 - Presenter Script for Teacher
- UGRR 101 - Handouts (students)
- Underground Railroad Research Essay Assignment Directions (students)
- Topics for Kids to Research
- MLA format for citations (students)
- Cornell Notes Template for Print Sources (students)
- Cornell Notes Template for Websites (students)
- Rubrics: Cornell Notes, Essay, Oral Presentation (teacher)
- Individual Topic Assignments with specific information (teacher distributes to students)

UGRR 101 - The Basics - Presenter Script for Teacher

Before the American Civil War ended in 1865, slaves provided the labor on many plantations in the South. Legally the property of their masters, slaves were bought, sold and used just as the master would buy, sell and use a farm horse or an iron plow. Without them, the work on the plantation could not continue, and the master would go bankrupt.

Unlike the horse or the plow, the slaves were human beings. Most of them were Negroes, having been either captured in Africa and brought to America or descended from an earlier generation of African captives. On the plantation, they were given only the basic necessities—food and shelter—to save on expenses. They were bought and sold as economic need demanded without consideration for family ties. Children and parents were separated forever. Couples were split permanently. Siblings were scattered all over the South.

Many slaves were so overwhelmed by the hard work and harsh lifestyle that they were powerless to resist their treatment. Other did rebel by causing problems on the plantation - working slowly, speaking out against the overseer, or breaking various rules. Punishments—including whipping—were harsh both to force the offender back into compliance and to discourage other slaves from similar acts of defiance. Some slaves, however, found the situation so intolerable that they tried to escape from slavery—and a few even succeeded.

The odds were against these freedom seekers. Living only on a few acres their entire lives, they were ignorant of the geography of the larger area. Which way was north? Where were the roads, rivers and towns? Road signs and other printed materials were no help because it was against the law for a slave to be able to read. By their skin color and their shabby clothing, they could be easily identified by anyone who observed them. Since slaves were always closely supervised, a Negro traveling alone would be apprehended and returned to his master unless he could produce papers stating either that he was a free man or that he was on a specific errand for his master. Runaways had no such papers and, being unable to read or write, could not forge any. They were reduced to hiding somewhere by day and traveling, usually by walking, at night. Although they could travel independently for a while, runaways who tried to make it all the way to Canada without any help were usually recaptured. The alternative was to accept help from total strangers, many of whom were white. Who was trustworthy? Who would turn in runaways for the reward?

An informal network of people evolved who did, in fact, help runaways on their journey to Canada. After 1850, it was against the federal law to help runaways anywhere in the country. Helpers had to be as secretive as the runaways themselves because the penalties for helping included going to jail and paying heavy fines. Because it was illegal, this network of helpers created very few written records, which could have been used as evidence against them in court. They planned and cooperated with neighbors who also believed that slavery was wrong and that slaves should be free. Their communications were verbal or by coded words and phrases. Eventually, this secret network of helpers became known as the Underground Railroad.

“Underground” didn’t mean “buried in the earth.” It meant “secret” or “hidden”—“not done in the open for everyone to witness.” “Railroad” didn’t mean tracks with an engine, passenger cars and a caboose. It referred to the speed with which the “passengers” were whisked from “station” to “station”. In the 1850s, railroads were relatively new. They were the fastest means of transportation in their day. A man walking could cover three miles in an hour, a horse walking, the same, and trotting, eight to 10 miles in an hour. A train’s average speed was 30 miles an hour. So the term UGRR referred to a fast, secret means of moving escaped slaves north to freedom in Canada.

In the years since its operation, a goodly number of the participants and locations have been documented and revealed. However, the identities of many other people who helped freedom seekers remains lost in the mists of history.

What would the average citizen do if, in the course of daily activities, s/he encountered a runaway who needed help? Turn the runaway in to authorities because that is what the law required? Walk on and pretend not to see the individual so as to avoid becoming involved? Tell the runaway to go somewhere else - anywhere else? Give the runaway some food, or a warm coat, or a place to sleep and then send him away? Or give him a safe place to stay until transportation to the next safe house could be arranged?



There were three “participants” in every UGRR encounter, even if all there were not physically present. The first was the freedom seeker, desperate to escape a harsh and degrading life, but unfamiliar with the area and its residents and unable to read printed materials which could be helpful. The second was the person pursuing the runaway, who may have been nearby or elsewhere, seeking clues to the runaway’s whereabouts. Some pursuers were representatives of the master looking for the return of his stolen property. Others were free-lance bounty hunters, working for a cash reward. Cash was rare in the 1850s, so finding a way of earning some was very motivating. The third group was the citizens, strangers to the runaways, whose paths they crossed and from whom they sought help. Some citizens were on the lookout for runaways and already had figured out ways to help them. Others were caught by surprise by the encounter and had to make quick decisions on what to do about the moral and strategic dilemma they suddenly faced.



Underground Railroad Topics for Students to Research

UGRR Conductors:

Harriet Tubman (Fugitive, Turned Conductor)
William Still (Pennsylvania)
Levi Coffin (Indiana)
Frederick Douglass (New York) (Fugitive, Turned Conductor, Outspoken Abolitionist)
Thomas Garrett (Delaware)
John Rankin (Ripley, Ohio)
John Parker (Ripley, Ohio)
Horace Ford and his Family (Cleveland, Ohio)
John Malvin (Cleveland, Ohio)
John Brown, The Barber (Cleveland, Ohio)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Famous Fugitives:

Lucy Bagby (Cleveland, Ohio)
Henry "Box" Brown

History Topics:

Fugitive Slave Law of 1850
Secret Codes on the Underground Railroad

Documented Underground Railroad sites still standing today:

St. John's Episcopal Church / Station Hope (Cleveland, Ohio)
Pomeroy House (Strongsville, Ohio)
Unionville Tavern (Madison, Ohio)
Rider's Inn (Painesville, Ohio)
Hubbard House (Ashtabula, Ohio)
Oberlin (Ohio)

Rubrics

Name: _____

Date: _____

Cornell Notes					
	1	2	3	4	
Separate Cornell Note turned in for each source					
Author accurately recorded for all Cornell Note Sheets					
Title accurately recorded for all Cornell Note Sheets					
Other information recorded as indicated for all Cornell Note Sheets					X2
Detailed notes taken for each source; material that is quoted are marked as quotes					X4
Primary / Secondary source indicated					
Subtotal (40 possible)					
Score (120 possible)					X3

Essay					
	1	2	3	4	
First paragraph introduces the topic and tells its background					
Second paragraph tells the actions which were taken					
Third paragraph tells the result and significance of the actions / location					
Specific details from research are used in all three paragraphs to support the statements					
GPS (grammar, punctuation, spelling) are correct; has been proofread for errors					
Subtotal (20 possible)					
Score (100 possible)					X5

Oral Presentation					
	1	2	3	4	
Volume appropriate so audience can hear clearly					
Speed is slowly enough paced to be understood by audience					
Speaker refers to notes, but also has some eye contact with audience					
Subtotal (12 possible)					
Score (60 possible)					X5