

Middle Passage Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
How did people experience the Middle Passage?

Materials:

- Middle Passage PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions
- Copies of Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

Note: Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with European exploration and colonization in the Americas as well as medieval African history. This is not intended to be a comprehensive lesson on the Atlantic slave trade.

1. Introduction: Middle Passage PowerPoint.

- Slide 1. Title slide.
- Slide 2: Atlantic Slave Trade. *In order to establish profitable colonies, European countries needed a large supply of labor. Europeans enslaved indigenous peoples, but because many indigenous populations were decimated by European disease and violence, indigenous slavery didn't meet the labor demands of the colonies.*

In the 16th century, Europeans began purchasing enslaved Africans from West African traders. The forced labor of Africans proved hugely profitable for Europe and its colonies. Slave owners didn't pay their slaves, and the life-long and hereditary nature of slavery guaranteed new generations of free labor. In order to maximize profits for slave owners, working conditions for slaves in the colonies were often atrocious.

Over the course of the next four centuries, it is estimated that more than 12.5 million Africans were taken from Africa. Due to the brutal conditions on the trip to the Americas, historians estimate that only 10.7 million of the captives survived. The vast majority of those slaves were taken to European colonies in South America and the Caribbean. The most recent estimates suggest that less than 400,000 slaves were taken directly from Africa to the present-day United States. The Portuguese, British, French, Spanish, and Dutch were the main slave traders.

The slave trade drastically changed African societies. In the centuries before the Atlantic slave trade, mutually beneficial intercontinental trade was an important part of African states' economies. Many of these relationships were replaced by

the slave trade. In Africa, the slave trade destabilized states, created economic depressions, and led to wars.

- Slide 3: Middle Passage. *The Atlantic slave trade was part of a broader economic system known as the Triangular Trade that connected three continents. European traders would transport enslaved Africans to European colonies in the Americas, where the slaves would work to produce various agricultural goods, including sugar, cotton, and tobacco. Those raw goods were then shipped back to Europe in order to be turned into manufactured goods. European traders would subsequently trade those goods with West African slave traders for more kidnapped Africans, and the cycle would continue. It is important to note that there were also various exceptions to this basic outline. For instance, European manufactured goods were also sold to colonies in the Americas. Similarly, sugar produced in the Caribbean was sold in New England and rum produced in the Americas was sold in Africa.*
 - Slide 4: Central Historical Question. *Although it is important to consider the economic system that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade, the sheer scale of the trade can obscure the experiences of individuals. We don't want to lose track of the individuals involved in the Middle Passage, so we're going to read a series of documents to answer this question: How did people experience the Middle Passage?*
2. Hand out Documents A and B and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer.
 3. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

Students should note that the textbook was written in Portugal, which was deeply involved in the slave trade. Students will likely hypothesize that the textbook's portrayal of the Middle Passage is less critical of the role of Europeans in the slave trade because it was written in Portugal. Students may cite the fact that the textbook emphasizes the challenges the crew faced and the use of the word "migrations" to describe the slave trade as examples of how the document's Portuguese authors may have shaped its content.

Students will likely note that Phillips' position as a slave ship captain led him to emphasize the challenges that the Middle Passage posed for the crew of the ship. Students may further note that Phillips focused on the economic nature of the Middle Passage and bemoaned the fact that whenever a slave died it hurt the voyage's bottom line. In short, Phillips minimized the Africans' suffering and emphasized the challenges that the slave ship's crew faced.

In corroborating Documents A and B, students will likely notice some similarities. Both documents described the challenges that crews faced during the Middle

Passage. In contrast to the textbook passage, Philips provided far more details about conditions that the crew and slaves faced during the Middle Passage.

4. Hand out Document C and D and have students complete the corresponding section of the Graphic Organizer for Documents C and D.
5. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

In contrast to the first two documents, Falconbridge's account provides far more details about the brutal conditions that slaves endured during the Middle Passage. He not only describes the conditions below decks that contributed to widespread disease among those onboard, he also recounts the harsh punishments that slaves received from the crew. In evaluating Falconbridge's account, students should consider his subsequent work with the Anti-Slavery Society.

The diagram of the British slave ship *Brookes* corroborates many of the details that Falconbridge provided regarding the conditions that slaves faced below decks. Students may be particularly struck by the fact that the conditions depicted in the diagram were supposed to represent an improvement over previous conditions and were part of a British effort to regulate the slave trade.

6. Hand out Document E and have students complete the corresponding section of the Graphic Organizer.
7. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

When students read Equiano's account, it is important to point out the recent controversy regarding Equiano birthplace. This is not a reason to completely discount his autobiography, especially given the scarcity of slaves' accounts of the Middle Passage. Students should note that Equiano corroborates many of the details from the previous documents, particularly about the conditions slaves endured during the Middle Passage. He also details the brutality that many crew members faced.

8. Discussion: Ask students to consider the following questions: *How are these accounts of the Middle Passage similar? How are they different? What are possible reasons for the differences among the accounts?*
9. Final Question: Students use evidence from the Graphic Organizer to determine which document(s) they believe are the most reliable sources of information about the Middle Passage.

Explain to students that it is likely that different students will have different answers. This is part of history. Different people can arrive at different conclusions as long as they have historical evidence to support their claims.

Citations

Document A

History for Grade Ten, Volume 2, Portugal, 1994. In Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward (Eds.), *History Lessons: How textbooks from around the world portray U.S. History*. New York: New Press, 2006.

Document B

Thomas Phillips, "Journal." *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Vol 6. Edited by Awansham and John Churchill. London, 1746. In Thomas Howard (Ed.), *Black Voyages*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.

Document C

Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. London: 1788.

Document D

"Stowage of the British slave ship 'Brookes' under the regulated slave trade act of 1788." Liverpool: 1884. Retrieved from <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.28204300>

Document E

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself*. London: 1789.