



## ACTIVITY 32

## FREDERICK DOUGLASS LEARNS TO READ AND WRITE

From *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass

## 32-1

### Learning to Read

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, [around the age of 8], she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was

a grand achievement, and I prized it greatly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it.

... 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 keep 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, 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, 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. . . .

#### Hindsight Questions

- How did Frederick Douglass learn to read? How old was he?

#### Insight Questions

- What was required of Frederick as a person to make this effort? Which C Skills did he use?

#### Foresight Questions?

- What would have happened to Frederick if he had not made the effort to learn how to read?

## 32-2

## Learning to Write

The idea of how I might learn to write was suggested to me [around the age of twelve] 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 "L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked "S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked "L.F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked "S.F." For larboard aft, it would be marked "L.A." For starboard aft, it would be marked "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 a 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 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 in 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.

**Hindsight Questions**

- How did Frederick Douglass learn to write? How old was he? How long did it take?

**Insight Questions**

- What was required of Frederick as a person to make this effort? Which C Skills did he use?

**Foresight Questions?**

- What would have happened to Frederick if he had not made the effort to learn how to write?

**Discussion Opportunity:** Frederick Douglass is a perfect example of Creative problem solving. Frederick had no support system, no one to encourage him or help him except as he enlisted them. But, he recognized that if he wanted to break free from his condition, he had to learn to read and write or he would forever be a slave—if not a slave to someone else, a slave to his own ignorance. Knowledge was to be his passport to freedom. He was surrounded by people who were enveloped with the Puff Prejudice befogger, but he refused to accept their judgment of him. Using a great deal of creativity and initiative, he found the resources to learn how to read and write, resources many people wouldn't even recognize. Eventually, Frederick did gain his freedom and became a powerful and eloquent opponent of slavery, both as a speaker and a writer. He was a key figure in rallying public opinion, both in the North and in Europe against slavery prior to and during the civil war. Character Traits: PR ownership;

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