

4.6 WHAT A BLACK MAN WANTS: THE 15TH AMENDMENT AND THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Essential Question(s): What is the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? What was Frederick Douglass's argument for why Black men should have the right to vote?

Overview

During the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War, large questions loomed about the futures of four million formerly enslaved people. The 15th Amendment, one of three crucial amendments passed in the immediate wake of the Civil War, was essential to securing voting rights for African-American men. One of the most outspoken proponents of the 15th Amendment was Frederick Douglass, a national leader of the abolitionist movement after escaping slavery, who worked diligently through writings and speeches to ensure that voting could not be denied based on race.

Snapshot

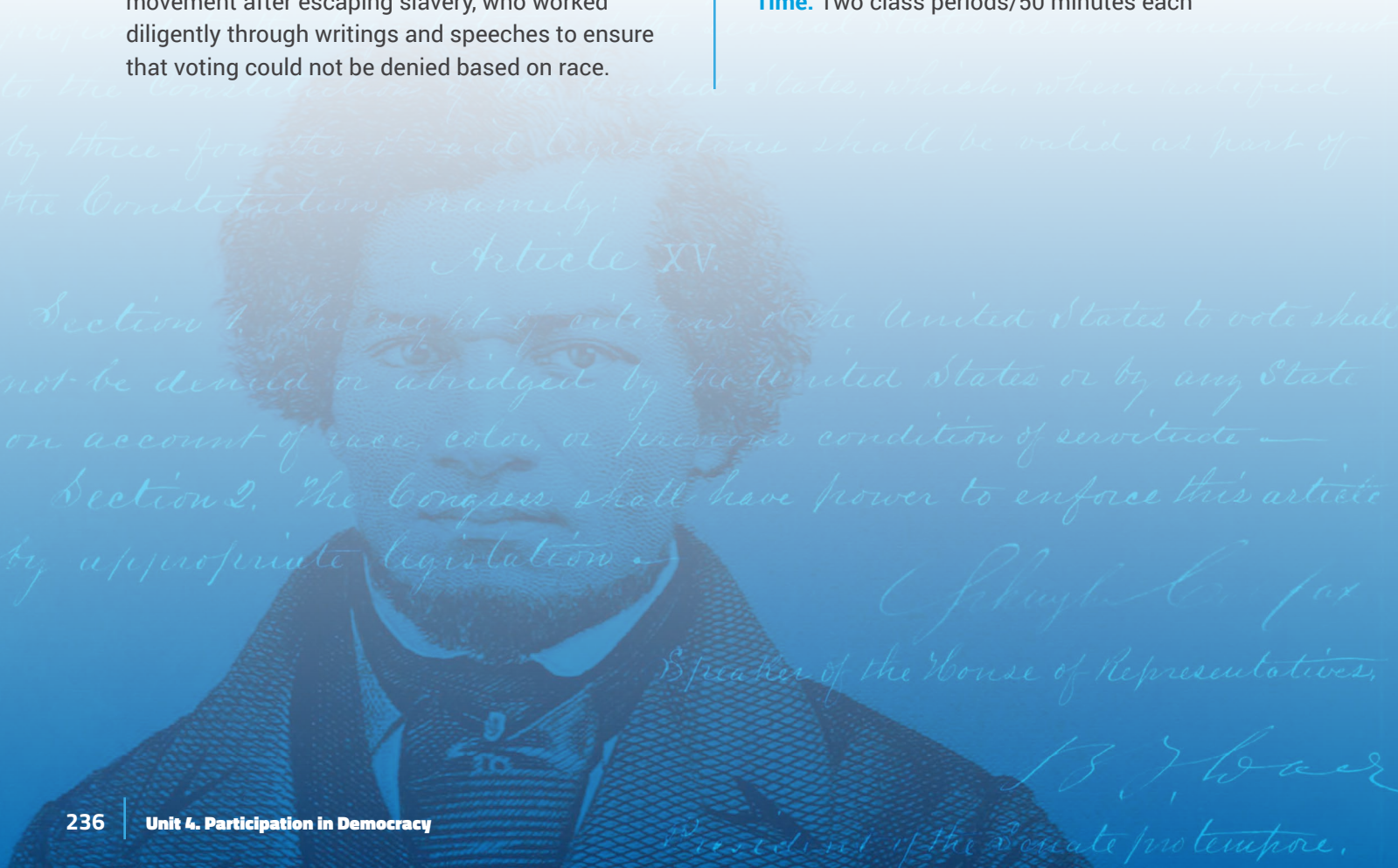
What Students Will Learn:

In this lesson, students will analyze one of Douglass's speeches. They will then create their own artistic argument from his speech by using a method of poetry called *blackout* or *erasure poetry*.

Standard(s):

D2.Civ.2.9-12

Time: Two class periods/50 minutes each



Objectives

- Describe the 15th Amendment and how it addresses voting rights.
- Analyze the Douglass' speech, "What the Black Man Wants."
- Create a black out poem based on one of the themes of "What the Black Man Wants."

Differentiation

Newsela provides articles at different lexile levels so you can differentiate to several reading levels if needed. (You will need to create a FREE Newsela account in order to access the article.).

What's Needed

- Writing utensil and paper or 1:1 technology
- WiFi, internet, computer, screen or projector, speakers
- "What are the Reconstruction Amendments?" PBS video clip (2012, 1:16 min., PBS, www.pbs.org/video/slavery-another-name-what-are-reconstruction-amendments/)
- Make enough copies of the article "A History of the 15th Amendment," (Newsela, February 7, 2017, <https://www.adl.org/media/16096/download>, one for each student).
- Prepare the information about the 15th Amendment in step #7 of Day One to be projected for whole class viewing.
- Make enough copies "What the Black Man Wants: Speech of Frederick Douglass" and the "Blackout Poetry Instructions," one of each for each student.

Classroom Setup

Students will work independently and collaborate with the whole class. Desks should be set up to support easy access to art supplies.

Direct Teaching: Day One

1. Welcome students to class. Start by asking:

What kinds of laws or protections do you imagine, think, or know would be needed for a group of people who were formerly enslaved?

Students will share either background knowledge or reflections on what might be needed in the wake of slavery.

Key Vocabulary

amendment
constitution
suffrage
vote
voting



2. Explain to students that, in the wake of the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), the country grappled with many questions, including the potential rights of four million formerly enslaved people. The Reconstruction Amendments were enacted between 1865 and 1870 to address some of these questions and needs.
3. Show students the video clip, [“What are the Reconstruction Amendments?”](#)
4. Facilitate a brief discussion by asking students the following questions:
 - What information surprised you in this video?
 - What did you already know?
 - What questions did it raise?
 - What is the 15th Amendment?
5. Distribute the Newsela article, [“A History of the 15th Amendment”](#) to each student and read as a class. Students should follow along while you read, or have the class do popcorn reads—taking turns reading aloud. Encourage students to take note about what they have questions about or find particularly interesting.
6. Facilitate a brief discussion by asking students the following questions:
 - What information surprised you in this article?
 - What did you already know?
 - What are your thoughts about what you read?
7. Project the following information for whole class viewing and have students write down the information. You can have a student read each section out loud.

The 15th Amendment prohibited states from blocking a person from voting on the basis of race. Previously, only white men/land owners were allowed to vote. The 15th Amendment was passed by Congress on February 26, 1869 and ratified on February 3, 1870. It has two sections.

The first section reads:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

The second section reads:

The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
8. Tell students we are going to read a speech written and orated by Frederick Douglass and then create a poem using Douglass’ words. Share that Douglass, a Black man who escaped slavery and went on to become one of the most famous abolitionists, orators, and writers of the time, gave this speech in 1865 at the annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society in Boston, Massachusetts, just as the Civil War was ending and many questions lingered about the rights of newly freed people.
9. Distribute [“What the Black Man Wants: Speech of Frederick Douglass”](#) to each student and ask them, “When did Douglass present this speech?”

Answer: April 1865
10. Provide students 20 minutes to read the speech. Depending on your class, have students read independently, in partners or in small groups. Check in with students and apply reading/differentiation strategies if needed to ensure comprehension of the text.

11. As they read, tell students to underline words, phrases and sentences that feel important, powerful, or meaningful to them.

Alternative: Find and play an audio recording of Douglass' speech.

Day One Closing

Instruct students to mark their favorite part of the speech.

Direct Teaching: Day Two

1. Welcome students to class. Ask students to respond to the following prompt:
What was an argument Douglass made that felt important or powerful to you?
2. Distribute the “Blackout Poetry Instructions” to each student. Read through the instructions and answer any questions students have about the activity. You can also provide examples of blackout poetry (<https://austinkleon.com/2018/09/01/the-cruellest-month/>, <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/blog-posts/john-depasquale/blackout-poetry/>).
3. Provide students with the materials they need in order to complete their blackout poems. Check in with students and assign homework as needed to complete the activity.
4. Once students have completed their poems, have them share their poems in small groups or as a whole class. In addition to writing their poems, you could have students read them aloud and /or record them to share in the spirit of hearing the power of their words and as a call back to the power of Frederick Douglass as an orator.

Day Two Closing

Ask students to reflect on their poems by asking, “What theme did you focus on related to Douglass’ speech? Why that theme?”

Extension Activities

- The 15th Amendment prohibits states from blocking a person from voting on the basis of race—but it does not grant the right to vote. This is the loophole that allowed states to make voting more difficult through such methods as poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses (as well as direct intimidation and violence). Today, voting rights are both passionately defended and simultaneously threatened, even more so after the 2013 *Shelby County vs. Holder* Supreme Court decision. That decision undid key elements of the

1965 Voting Rights Act. Have students research recent news articles and other credible resources about defenses and challenges to voting rights. Have them report out their findings to the entire class.

WHAT THE BLACK MAN WANTS: SPEECH OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

At the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at Boston, April 1865.

Mr. President, — I came here, as I come always to the meetings in New England, as a listener, and not as a speaker; and one of the reasons why I have not been more frequently to the meetings of this society, has been because of the disposition on the part of some of my friends to call me out upon the platform, even when they knew that there was some difference of opinion and of feeling between those who rightfully belong to this platform and myself; and for fear of being misconstrued, as desiring to interrupt or disturb the proceedings of these meetings, I have usually kept away, and have thus been deprived of that educating influence, which I am always free to confess is of the highest order, descending from this platform. I have felt, since I have lived out West that in going there I parted from a great deal that was valuable; and I feel, every time I come to these meetings, that I have lost a great deal by making my home west of Boston, west of Massachusetts; for, if anywhere in the country there is to be found the highest sense of justice, or the truest demands for my race, I look for it in the East, I look for it here. The ablest discussions of the whole question of our rights occur here, and to be deprived of the privilege of listening to those discussions is a great deprivation.

I do not know, from what has been said, that there is any difference of opinion as to the duty of abolitionists, at the present moment. How can we get up any difference at this point, or any point, where we are so united, so agreed? I went especially, however, with that word of Mr. Phillips, which is the criticism of Gen. Banks and Gen. Banks' policy. I hold that that policy is our chief danger at the present moment; that it practically enslaves the Negro, and makes the Proclamation of 1863 a mockery and delusion. What is freedom? It is the right to choose one's own employment. Certainly it means that, if it means anything; and when any individual or combination of individuals undertakes to decide for any man when

he shall work, where he shall work, at what he shall work, and for what he shall work, he or they practically reduce him to slavery. [Applause.] He is a slave. That I understand Gen. Banks to do—to determine for the so-called freedman, when, and where, and at what, and for how much he shall work, when he shall be punished, and by whom punished. It is absolute slavery. It defeats the beneficent intention of the Government, if it has beneficent intentions, in regards to the freedom of our people.

I have had but one idea for the last three years to present to the American people, and the phraseology in which I clothe it is the old abolition phraseology. I am for the "immediate, unconditional, and universal" enfranchisement of the black man, in every State in the Union. [Loud applause.] Without this, his liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of the mob, and has no means of protecting himself.

It may be objected, however, that this pressing of the Negro's right to suffrage is premature. Let us have slavery abolished, it may be said, let us have labor organized, and then, in the natural course of events, the right of suffrage will be extended to the Negro. I do not agree with this. The constitution of the human mind is such, that if it once disregards the conviction forced upon it by a revelation of truth, it requires the exercise of a higher power to produce the same conviction afterwards. The American people are now in tears. The Shenandoah has run blood—the best blood of the North. All around Richmond, the blood of New England and of the North has been shed—of your sons, your brothers and your fathers. We all feel, in the existence of this Rebellion, that judgments terrible, wide-spread, far-reaching, overwhelming, are abroad in the land; and we feel, in view of these judgments,

just now, a disposition to learn righteousness. This is the hour. Our streets are in mourning, tears are falling at every fireside, and under the chastisement of this Rebellion we have almost come up to the point of conceding this great, this all-important right of suffrage. I fear that if we fail to do it now, if abolitionists fail to press it now, we may not see, for centuries to come, the same disposition that exists at this moment. [Applause.] Hence, I say, now is the time to press this right.

It may be asked, "Why do you want it? Some men have got along very well without it. Women have not this right." Shall we justify one wrong by another? This is the sufficient answer. Shall we at this moment justify the deprivation of the Negro of the right to vote, because some one else is deprived of that privilege? I hold that women, as well as men, have the right to vote [applause], and my heart and voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to woman; but that question rests upon another basis than which our right rests. We may be asked, I say, why we want it. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our *right*, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. We want it again, as a means for educating our race. Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely by the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation. By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men. Again, I want the elective franchise, for one, as a colored man, because ours is a peculiar government, based upon a peculiar idea, and that idea is universal suffrage. If I were in a monarchical government, or an autocratic or aristocratic government, where the few bore rule and the many were subject, there would be no special stigma resting upon me, because I did not exercise the elective franchise. It would do me no great

violence. Mingling with the mass I should partake of the strength of the mass; I should be supported by the mass, and I should have the same incentives to endeavor with the mass of my fellow-men; it would be no particular burden, no particular deprivation; but here where universal suffrage is the rule, where that is the fundamental idea of the Government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority, and to invite to our heads the missiles of those about us; therefore, I want the franchise for the black man.

There are, however, other reasons, not derived from any consideration merely of our rights, but arising out of the conditions of the South, and of the country—considerations which have already been referred to by Mr. Phillips—considerations which must arrest the attention of statesmen. I believe that when the tall heads of this Rebellion shall have been swept down, as they will be swept down, when the Davises and Toombses and Stephenses, and others who are leading this Rebellion shall have been blotted out, there will be this rank undergrowth of treason, to which reference has been made, growing up there, and interfering with, and thwarting the quiet operation of the Federal Government in those states. You will see those traitors, handing down, from sire to son, the same malignant spirit which they have manifested and which they are now exhibiting, with malicious hearts, broad blades, and bloody hands in the field, against our sons and brothers. That spirit will still remain; and whoever sees the Federal Government extended over those Southern States will see that Government in a strange land, and not only in a strange land, but in an enemy's land. A post-master of the United States in the South will find himself surrounded by a hostile spirit; a collector in a Southern port will find himself surrounded by a hostile spirit; a United States marshal or United States judge will be surrounded there by a hostile element. That enmity will not die out in a year, will not die out in an age. The Federal Government will be looked upon in those States precisely as the Governments of Austria and France are looked upon in Italy at the present moment. They will endeavor to circumvent, they will endeavor to destroy, the peaceful operation of this Government. Now, where will you

find the strength to counterbalance this spirit, if you do not find it in the Negroes of the South? They are your friends, and have always been your friends. They were your friends even when the Government did not regard them as such. They comprehended the genius of this war before you did. It is a significant fact, it is a marvellous fact, it seems almost to imply a direct interposition of Providence, that this war, which began in the interest of slavery on both sides, bids fair to end in the interest of liberty on both sides. [Applause.] It was begun, I say, in the interest of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North was fighting to keep it in the Union; the South fighting to get it beyond the limits of the United States Constitution, and the North fighting to retain it within those limits; the South fighting for new guarantees, and the North fighting for the old guarantees;—both despising the Negro, both insulting the Negro. Yet, the Negro, apparently endowed with wisdom from on high, saw more clearly the end from the beginning than we did. When Seward said the status of no man in the country would be changed by the war, the Negro did not believe him. [Applause.] When our generals sent their underlings in shoulderstraps to hunt the flying Negro back from our lines into the jaws of slavery, from which he had escaped, the Negroes thought that a mistake had been made, and that the intentions of the Government had not been rightly understood by our officers in shoulderstraps, and they continued to come into our lines, threading their way through bogs and fens, over briars and thorns, fording streams, swimming rivers, bringing us tidings as to the safe path to march, and pointing out the dangers that threatened us. They are our only friends in the South, and we should be true to them in this their trial hour, and see to it that they have the elective franchise.

I know that we are inferior to you in some things—virtually inferior. We walk about you like dwarfs among giants. Our heads are scarcely seen above the great sea of humanity. The Germans are superior to us; the Irish are superior to us; the Yankees are superior to us [Laughter]; they can do what we cannot, that is, what we have not hitherto been allowed to do. But while I make this admission, I utterly deny, that we

are originally, or naturally, or practically, or in any way, or in any important sense, inferior to anybody on this globe. [Loud applause.] This charge of inferiority is an old dodge. It has been made available for oppression on many occasions. It is only about six centuries since the blue-eyed and fair-haired Anglo-Saxons were considered inferior by the haughty Normans, who once trampled upon them. If you read the history of the Norman Conquest, you will find that this proud Anglo-Saxon was once looked upon as of coarser clay than his Norman master, and might be found in the highways and byways of Old England laboring with a brass collar on his neck, and the name of his master marked upon it. *You were down then!* [Laughter and applause.] You are up now. I am glad you are up, and I want you to be glad to help us up also. [Applause.]

The story of our inferiority is an old dodge, as I have said; for wherever men oppress their fellows, wherever they enslave them, they will endeavor to find the needed apology for such enslavement and oppression in the character of the people oppressed and enslaved. When we wanted, a few years ago, a slice of Mexico, it was hinted that the Mexicans were an inferior race, that the old Castilian blood had become so weak that it would scarcely run down hill, and that Mexico needed the long, strong and beneficent arm of the Anglo-Saxon care extended over it. We said that it was necessary to its salvation, and a part of the “manifest destiny” of this Republic, to extend our arm over that dilapidated government. So, too, when Russia wanted to take possession of a part of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks were an “inferior race.” So, too, when England wants to set the heel of her power more firmly in the quivering heart of old Ireland, the Celts are an “inferior race.” So, too, the Negro, when he is to be robbed of any right which is justly his, is an “inferior man.” It is said that we are ignorant; I admit it. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the Negro knows enough to pay taxes to support the government, he knows enough to vote; taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag, fight for the government, he knows enough to vote. If he knows as much when he is sober as an Irishman knows when drunk, he knows enough

to vote, on good American principles. [Laughter and applause.]

But I was saying that you needed a counterpoise in the persons of the slaves to the enmity that would exist at the South after the Rebellion is put down. I hold that the American people are bound, not only in self-defence, to extend this right to the freedmen of the South, but they are bound by their love of country, and by all their regard for the future safety of those Southern States, to do this—to do it as a measure essential to the preservation of peace there. But I will not dwell upon this. I put it to the American sense of honor. The honor of a nation is an important thing. It is said in the Scriptures, “What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” It may be said, also, What doth it profit a nation if it gain the whole world, but lose its honor? I hold that the American government has taken upon itself a solemn obligation of honor, to see that this war—let it be long or short, let it cost much or let it cost little—that this war shall not cease until every freedman at the South has the right to vote. [Applause.] It has bound itself to it. What have you asked the black men of the South, the black men of the whole country to do? Why, you have asked them to incur the enmity of their masters, in order to befriend you and to befriend this Government. You have asked us to call down, not only upon ourselves, but upon our children’s children, the deadly hate of the entire Southern people. You have called upon us to turn our backs upon our masters, to abandon their cause and espouse yours; to turn against the South and in favor of the North; to shoot down the Confederacy and uphold the flag—the American flag. You have called upon us to expose ourselves to all the subtle machinations of their malignity for all time. And now, what do you propose to do when you come to make peace? To reward your enemies, and trample in the dust your friends? Do you intend to sacrifice the very men who have come to the rescue of your banner in the South, and incurred the lasting displeasure of their masters thereby? Do you intend to sacrifice them and reward your enemies? Do you mean to give your enemies the right to vote, and take it away from your friends? Is that wise policy? Is that honorable? Could American honor withstand

such a blow? I do not believe you will do it. I think you will see to it that we have the right to vote. There is something too mean in looking upon the Negro, when you are in trouble, as a citizen, and when you are free from trouble, as an alien. When this nation was in trouble, in its early struggles, it looked upon the Negro as a citizen. In 1776 he was a citizen. At the time of the formation of the Constitution the Negro had the right to vote in eleven States out of the old thirteen. In your trouble you have made us citizens. In 1812 Gen. Jackson addressed us as citizens—“fellow-citizens.” He wanted us to fight. We were citizens then! And now, when you come to frame a conscription bill, the Negro is a citizen again. He has been a citizen just three times in the history of this government, and it has always been in time of trouble. In time of trouble we are citizens. Shall we be citizens in war, and aliens in peace? Would that be just?

I ask my friends who are apologizing for not insisting upon this right, where can the black man look, in this country, for the assertion of his right, if he may not look to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society? Where under the whole heavens can he look for sympathy, in asserting this right, if he may not look to this platform? Have you lifted us up to a certain height to see that we are men, and then are any disposed to leave us there, without seeing that we are put in possession of all our rights? We look naturally to this platform for the assertion of all our rights, and for this one especially. I understand the anti-slavery societies of this country to be based on two principles,—first, the freedom of the blacks of this country; and, second, the elevation of them. Let me not be misunderstood here. I am not asking for sympathy at the hands of abolitionists, sympathy at the hands of any. I think the American people are disposed often to be generous rather than just. I look over this country at the present time, and I see Educational Societies, Sanitary Commissions, Freedmen’s Associations, and the like,—all very good: but in regard to the colored people there is always more that is benevolent, I perceive, than just, manifested towards us. What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply *justice*. [Applause.] The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with

us. Gen. Banks was distressed with solicitude as to what he should do with the Negro. Everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, "What shall we do with the Negro?" I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are wormeaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! If you see him on his way to school, let him alone, don't disturb him! If you see him going to the dinner table at a hotel, let him go! If you see him going to the ballot-box, let him alone, don't disturb him! [Applause.] If you see him going into a work-shop, just let him alone,—your interference is doing him a positive injury. Gen. Banks' "preparation" is of a piece with this attempt to prop up the Negro.

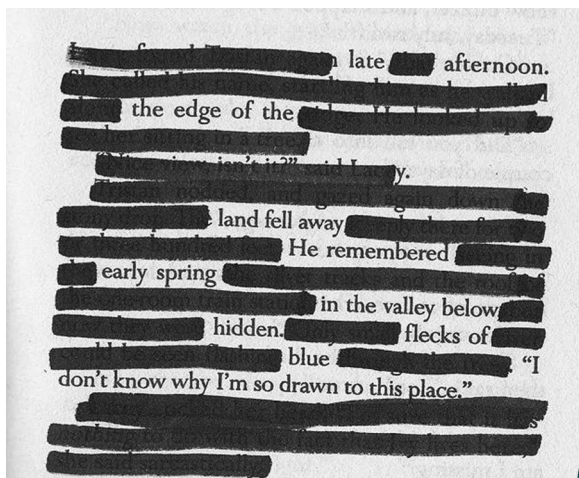
Let him fall if he cannot stand alone! If the Negro cannot live by the line of eternal justice, so beautifully pictured to you in the illustration used by Mr. Phillips, the fault will not be yours, it will be his who made the Negro, and established that line for his government. [Applause.] Let him live or die by that. If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live. He will work as readily for himself as the white man. A great many delusions have been swept away by this war. One was, that the Negro would not work; he has proved his ability to work. Another was, that the Negro would not fight; that he possessed only the most sheepish attributes of humanity; was a perfect lamb, or an "Uncle Tom;" disposed to take off his coat whenever required, fold his hands, and be whipped by anybody who wanted to whip him. But the war has proved that there is a great deal of human nature in the Negro, and that "he will fight," as Mr. Quincy, our President, said, in earlier days than these, "when there is reasonable probability of his whipping anybody." [Laughter and applause.]

BLACKOUT POETRY INSTRUCTIONS

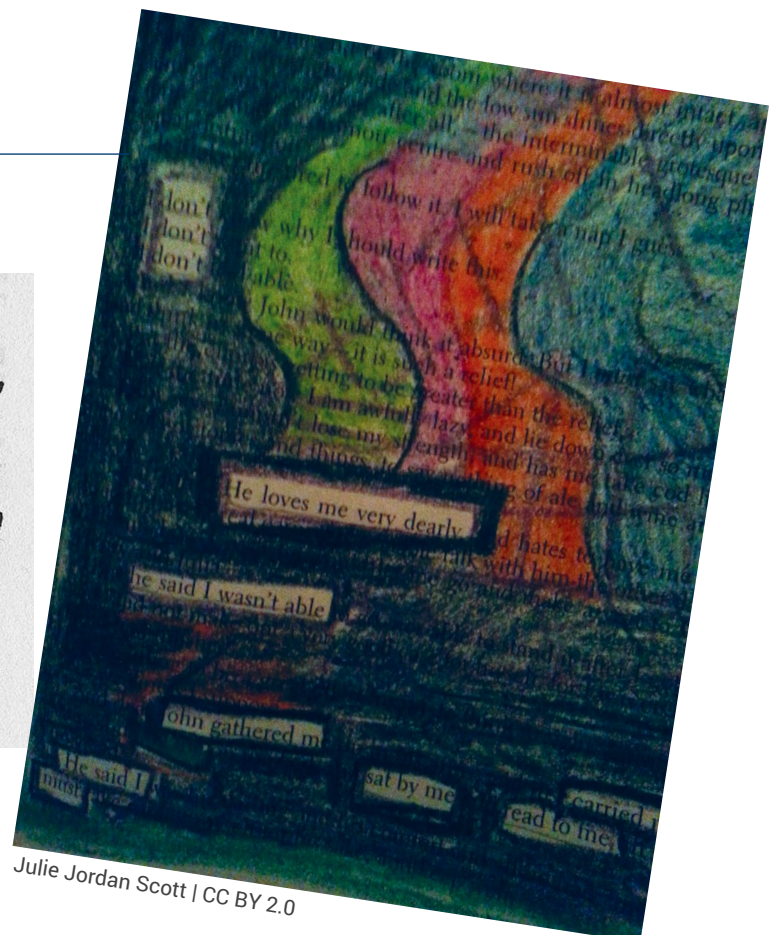
Follow these steps to create a successful and beautiful black out poem!

1. After reading the whole text, choose one page to focus on. This page should be one that interests you.
2. Read the page again, making note of the theme(s) found on that page.
3. Read the page AGAIN!, this time circling single words, or a group of words, that relate to your theme and stick out to you.
4. Write down the words that you have circled in order on a blank piece of paper. This is how you will begin "writing" your poem.
5. Don't change the order of how the words appear. Piece the words together to create the lines of your poem. Let's say that the word in the text is "running," but "run" sounds better and makes more sense, you can absolutely eliminate the "ing." If you're stuck, go back to the text! Don't be afraid to change the words you're using.
6. Go back to your text and make sure all of the words you are using are circled.
7. Erase all of the circles around the words you are not using.
8. Cross out the words you are not using with a black marker. Create an illustration that relates to your poem.
9. Create a title for your poem. Write it at the top of the page.
10. Write your name at the top of the page.

Blackout Poetry Examples



Blue Valley | CC BY 2.0



Julie Jordan Scott | CC BY 2.0