



ABOUT THE BOOK

Adapted from Clint Smith's #1 *New York Times* bestselling and universally acclaimed *How the Word Is Passed*, this must-read narrative takes readers to historical sites across America, exploring the legacy of slavery to help readers make sense of our nation's past and present, and be better stewards of their own future.

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PRAISE FOR *HOW THE WORD IS PASSED* (ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS)

- ★ "This lyrical, moving, and engrossing investigation offers readers outstanding examples of ways to engage with and talk about the history that shapes our present-day lives, whether we're aware of it or not." — *Kirkus Reviews*
- ★ "Deeply engaging, this is a timely and important contribution to reshaping the American experience to include all participants." — *Booklist*

IN THIS GUIDE

- Goals
- Pre-class preparation
- Tools for Teaching About Slavery
- Inquiry-Based Learning
- How Did Slavery Shape My State?
- Discussion and Exploration

GUIDE GOALS

Taking into consideration the [Southern Poverty Law Center's Key Concepts of the Teaching Hard History K-12 Framework for Teaching American Slavery](#) and the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#), this guide includes flexible, inquiry-based activities and critical thinking discussion and exploration opportunities that build upon students' skills. This work can be integrated in curriculum and teaching with *How the Word Is Passed: Remembering Slavery and How It Shaped America*.

PRE-CLASS PREPARATION

Echoed across the research is that it can be challenging for teachers to talk about issues related to race and racism. This is particularly true for White educators. With more than 70% of educators in public schools across the country identifying as White, it is essential that White educators take time to interrogate their own racial and cultural identities as well as the ideas they've come to believe. The work of confronting the ways we are socialized into beliefs and actions that perpetuate white supremacy and racism is critical for all educators, and it is important to recognize that this work is an ongoing process in order to prevent harm. Further reflection when specifically considering the topic of slavery includes:

- How do you remember and reckon with slavery?
- Which reassuring narratives about slavery have you been told and perhaps held onto?
- How have you worked to confront mistruths and myths about slavery and instead acknowledge the unsettling truths of slavery and its lasting impact?
- What have you learned about Black people prior to their enslavement in the United States?
- How have you taught about Black people without solely focusing on narratives of oppression?

Too often, there are educators who fail to do the kind of self-reflection that would prevent racist lessons and activities from occurring in classrooms as misguided attempts to teach about American slavery. Mock slave auctions, simulations where Black students are assigned to play the role of enslaved people, cotton picking and cleaning social studies and science lessons, math problems about the number of enslaved people on ships, and violent images shown to students continue to be spotlighted in the news. Avoid enactments and sharing racist images and videos. Children do not need to experience trauma or see violent images to feel empathy. Review materials prior to sharing them with students. Commit to reflection prior to, during, and after teaching with *How the Word Is Passed (Adapted for Young Readers)* in order to avoid such dehumanizing teaching approaches that are intellectually and psychologically damaging to students.

TOOLS FOR TEACHING ABOUT SLAVERY

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has done extensive research on the ways slavery is taught in schools across the United States. Findings include that, “Most students leave high school without an adequate understanding of the role slavery played in the development of the United States—or how its legacies still influence us today.” To address this gap in curriculum, the SPLC, in collaboration with Learning For Justice, provides numerous resources to support instruction. Specifically, the K–12 framework for Teaching American Slavery, Teaching Hard History Text Library, and Teaching Hard History Inquiry Design Models. Each of these are powerful tools to support teaching with *How the Word Is Passed (Adapted for Young Readers)*.

- [Teaching Hard History: American Slavery | Learning for Justice](#)
- [A Quick Reference Guide to Teaching Hard History](#) – A K-12 FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING AMERICAN SLAVERY
- [Teaching Hard History Text Library | Learning for Justice](#)
- [Teaching Hard History Inquiry Design Models | Learning for Justice](#)

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

PRIMARY SOURCE GALLERY

“There is no shortage of documentation demonstrating that the Southern states seceded and began sowing the seeds of war in order to defend slavery. To look at primary source documents and convince yourself that the central cause of the war was anything other than slavery requires a remarkable, and dishonest, contortion of history.” (p.111-112)

To help students grasp an accurate understanding of the history of enslavement in the United States, set up a gallery display of primary resources that include excerpts from letters, speeches, newspaper reports, documents produced by government officials, poetry, photographs, audio recordings of interviews, and other historical documents.

The American Library Association defines primary sources as “original records created at the time historical events occurred or well after events in the form of memoirs and oral histories.” (American Library Association, Reference and User Services, History Section)

The following sites provide searchable platforms as well as resources for locating and teaching with primary sources. When possible, provide a transcript of written historical documents to make the reading of them accessible to young readers. Share tools with students such as graphic organizers that support analysis of specific types of primary sources.

How the Word Is Passed (Adapted for Young Readers)

- [Getting Started with Primary Sources | Teachers | Programs | Library of Congress](#) – Includes links for finding primary sources, primary source analysis tools for students, prompting questions for teachers to support student analysis, and more.
- [Teaching Hard History Text Library | Learning for Justice](#) – A collection of more than 100 primary sources to support teaching and learning about American slavery.
- [Educator Resources | National Archives](#) – Access analysis worksheets and additional support for teaching with primary sources that engage students in the processes of historians as they make sense of the past through document analysis.

Display the primary source gallery on a bulletin board or table and include as many sources as reflect the needs of students and length of time available for engagement. Number the documents in the gallery using post-its and create a corresponding guide sheet with the titles, dates, author, and additional information for each document for students to refer to and display it in the gallery area. Working individually, in partnerships, or small groups, invite students to use critical thinking skills to analyze primary sources like a historian.

As students analyze primary sources, they can apply the following 3-step process:

Observe — Have students identify and note details.

Reflect — Encourage students to generate and test hypotheses about the source,

Question — Have students ask questions to lead to more observations and reflections.

The Library of Congress provides teaching recommendations and tools to support students as they analyze and interpret several types of primary sources.

- [Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Primary Sources](#)
- [Analyzing Oral History](#)
- [Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Photographs & Prints](#)
- [Primary Source Analysis Tool](#)

Students can revisit their notes, information organizers, and reflections to create podcasts, written reflections, infographics, digital, annotated timelines, etc. representative of their learning and interpretations of history from primary sources. Prompts to support notetaking and discussions include:

- How do these primary sources help you to interpret the past?
- How do they provide fuller and more accurate understandings about people, events, slavery, and the history of the United States?
- How do they provide context for people, events, and experiences today?

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HOW DID SLAVERY SHAPE MY STATE?

(Prologue) *"The history of slavery was all right in front of me, even when I didn't know to look for it. But now I did."*

Clint Smith explores the landscape of New Orleans, Louisiana and determines its relationship to slavery. During his visit to New York City, Smith disrupts commonly held narratives that the history of enslavement is located primarily in the United States South. Download and review the inquiry design model created to provide an adaptable framework for states, regions, and local communities to understand how slavery significantly impacted all areas of the United States. Use this model and framework to customize the collection of a variety of sources, questions, prompts, and performance tasks that support student inquiry of their own state.

- [How did Slavery Shape My State?](#)
- [How Did Slavery Shape My State? Using Inquiry to Explore Kentucky History](#)

DISCUSSION & EXPLORATION

IDENTITY

"So, how I interact with a plantation, a prison, a cemetery, or a museum—and how the people in these places interact with me—are tied to various parts of my identity: being Black, being the descendent of enslaved people, being born and raised in the South, being a straight man, being a father, being a poet, and being a PhD student at the time this book was originally written." (p. 276-277)

Identity is multidimensional, encompassing a complex interplay of social, cultural, and personal factors that influence our experiences in the world. Consider the multiple and intersecting identities that shape Clint Smith and his writing of *How the Word Is Passed: (Adapted for Young Readers)*.

- In what ways do Smith's identities serve as a lens through which he interprets the truths and myth-making that has shaped the history of the United States?
- How does he draw upon his personal experiences, beliefs, and background to write this memoir?
- In what ways do you lean into your own unique perspectives and lived experiences as a writer?

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

"Wallace is one of the many majority-Black communities that line the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. As a result of their proximity to petrochemical plants, they form what has come to be known as 'Cancer Alley.' Neighborhoods here have some of the highest cancer risks in the country, and chemical emissions from these plants are linked to many serious health ailments." (p. 47)

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Learn about the conditions that contribute to environmental racism in Wallace, New Orleans. [The Descendants Project](#), founded by twin sisters Jo and Joy Banner, works to “preserve and protect the health, land, and lives of the Black descendant community located in Louisiana’s River Parishes, also known as *Cancer Alley*.” Invite students to research and create a timeline of events that have created toxic conditions for residents of this community. Students might also branch out and research other communities plagued by significant health crises due to environmental hazards. Consider ways these communities can in fact be part of a larger conversation about environmental racism in the United States.

- What data can be analyzed about the locations and communities most impacted by environmental racism?
- What can be noticed about where chemical plants, landfills, and hazardous waste sites are located; the people, including children, most affected by cancer, lead poisoning, and other diseases; and governmental response to natural disasters?
- What are some of the racist policies and practices that contribute to the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities?
- What will it take for the most marginalized to experience environmental justice?

STATUE OF LIBERTY

“The commonly held narrative that the statute welcomes new immigrants to America’s shores was never part of its original meaning. And the idea that the statue was meant to celebrate the promise of America is only part of the story.” (p. 217)

From Clint Smith’s experiences and research in New York City, readers learn that the Statue of Liberty, originally named “Liberty Enlightening the World,” was conceived as an antislavery, abolitionist symbol. This plan was then altered. Invite students to follow in Clint Smith’s footsteps, virtually, to explore the Statue of Liberty Museum and learn more about its history. How does this altered iconography contribute to understandings or misunderstandings about slavery in the United States?

- [Overview + History | Statue of Liberty](#)
- <https://www.statueofliberty.org/statue-of-liberty/statue-of-liberty-museum/>
- virtual tour – [The Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island](#)
- [Iconic America | How the Statue of Liberty’s Anti-Slavery Origins Evolved | Episode 5 | PBS](#)

MEMORIALIZING SLAVERY

“The racial inequity that exists in our country was not an accident; it had been created on purpose. When I understood this, it freed me from that shame. It gave me power. It gave me hope. If the country had been built this way, it meant that we could rebuild it into something else, something new, something better. This is what knowledge does, it allows you to see that something else is possible. It allows you to dream.” (Introduction)

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In some of these historical sites Clint Smith visits there are tours, museums, reenactments of historical events, Confederate iconography, commemoration celebrations, weddings, gift shops, and other events and activities. From Smith's experiences, readers learn how some places recognize or minimize the impact of slavery while others revere white supremacy and silence the brutalities of enslavement. Invite students to consider the possibilities of a focus on historical truths as well the impact of ahistorical mythmaking about slavery in the United States.

- How do you think the legacy of slavery should be remembered and reckoned with?
- How should this be reflected in plantations and iconography such as monuments and statues across the United States read as well as in teachings at school?
- How, and by whom, should this be decided?

ABOUT THE WRITERS



CLINT SMITH

is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. His narrative nonfiction book, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America*, was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, the Hillman Prize for Book Journalism, and selected by the *New York Times* as one of the 10 best books of 2021.



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