

Deciphering the Document: Unlocking the Meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation



Introduction: The Emancipation Proclamation is an interesting document to think about for two reasons. First, it is not easy to read. You see this is a legal document, an executive order by the President. It could be challenged in a court of law. Therefore, it was imperative to put the write legal language into the document. This makes it hard for uneducated people to read. But, and here is the second reason, it was directed to and for the people least educated, the slaves. The slaves had the same difficulties (if not more) in reading this document. They didn't let this stop them. They had longed to hear these words and they determined to understand its meaning. They needed help. That's what this lesson will do for the readers in the 21st century. This lesson will help us get around all the legal language and directly to the meaning of the document. By so doing, this will enable us to attach our own meaning and understanding today.

Grades: 5th – 8th

Goal: To gain decode the legal language of the Emancipation Proclamation and discover its true meaning.

Objectives:

- TSW read the Emancipation Proclamation
- TSW identify and define difficult vocabulary words in the document.
- TSW re-write the document in the simpler words
- TSW arrive at the meaning of the document by re-reading it in the words that are better able to be understood.
- TSW tell someone else what the document truly means.

Curriculum Standards:

5th Grade:

5.5.spi.7. interpret a primary reading sample.

5.5.spi.1. interpret sectional differences in the North and South in pre-Civil War (i.e., a map of Union, Confederate, and border-states, pictorial representations of crop production, reading timelines, and interpreting bar graphs showing human,

natural, and manmade resources).

8th Grade:

Content Standards:

8.4.tpi.3. use primary and secondary sources to list the rights, responsibilities, and privileges of a citizen living in a democratic society.

8.5.spi.11. identify conclusions about historical events using primary and secondary sources.

8.5.tpi.17. interpret a historical event from multiple perspectives.

Common Core:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.5](#) Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6](#) Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Guiding Question: What does the Emancipation Proclamation really say? How can we put it in our own words in order to arrive at its true meaning?

Procedures:

1. Read to your students the Emancipation Proclamation. Students will listen to the language and try to understand the document from an audible standpoint. Remind students that most slaves could not read. Therefore, the first time they heard about their freedom it had to be read to them. They did not have the education that student's today have. So they were in the same situation as the students. Most probably couldn't understand it the first time it was read to them.

Read the document.

2. Interactive discussion with the students: Ask the student's, "Do you understand what I just read to you?" Why or Why not? Big words. Weird phrases.

3. Well just like the slaves. We are not going to let the big words get in the way of us understanding the meaning of this document.

4. Divide the class into five groups. Give each group a section of the Emancipation Proclamation (EP).

5. Now have students read silently their passage. Then have them discuss what they think there passage means. Have them all work together.

6. Students should underline the words and phrases they don't understand.
6. Then have students list the words they underlined. They will use this list to research the unknown words or phrases.
7. Using a dictionary or the internet, have students look up the mystery words or phrases. Define these words. Students should use their own words.
8. Once they feel they have unlocked the meaning of the word have them re-write their passage in their own words. Use butcher paper or poster board to write it in big bold letters.
9. When all groups have re-written their passage, have students tape their passages to the wall. The document should now be read in the students' own language.
10. As a class re-read the document. Let leaders from each group read their passage and explain its meaning.
11. Then have all students complete the questions provided. Have them read the passage and answer the questions.

Conclusion:

12. End the lesson with a discussion of the hand out. Ask the students things that surprised them about the document. Ask them what the Emancipation Proclamation did. Ask them what it didn't do. Be sure to drive home the point that while the Emancipation Proclamation freed most slaves it didn't free them all. In order to do that, the 13th amendment to the Constitution was needed.

Assessment: Now that the student's fully understand the document. Pretend they are a part of the Union army. They have just arrived at a large plantation in the Deep South. Slaves there are eager to hear about the Emancipation Proclamation. Have your students write an explanatory letter that helps the slaves understand this important document.