

What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July? (Frederick Douglass, 1852)

Author (Who wrote or created this document? What do you know about this person or organization?)

What biases or assumptions might they have which could impact how you understand this document?)

Frederick Douglass was a former slave who'd escaped North. He was already well-known for his autobiography and was a famous abolitionist and public speaker. He was extremely educated, which was particularly impressive since he'd taught himself to read and write. He understood both slavery and freedom firsthand and was educated and experienced enough to think and speak clearly on both.

Place & Time (Where and when was this produced? How do you know? What was going on which might have impacted the writing of this document?)

This excerpt is part of a speech given to a lady's anti-slavery society in Rochester, New York, in 1852. Tensions over slavery had been escalating across the nation in reaction to the Compromise of 1850, especially the "Fugitive Slave Act" passed as part of that package. The speech was given on July 5th, so the contrast with Independence Day celebrations provided a strong contrast with the realities of slavery.

Audience (For whom was this document created? How do you know? How might the audience have shaped the choices made while creating this document?)

FD was famous enough that he was fully aware his words would be reported and distributed nation-wide (or at least across the North). It was unlikely most southerners would read it, or be impacted by it if they were. Most northerners already didn't love slavery, but not all were actively working to end it. His primary audience was those who could have been doing more, but weren't.

Reason (Why was this document created? What did the author hope would happen as a result? It's almost never "to inform." Usually the author wanted someone to THINK or DO SOMETHING differently.)

Most of FD's audience were already opposed to slavery, but it seems like he wanted to fire up those actively working to end it and to challenge those who weren't to get involved and recognize that slavery wasn't just bad for the enslaved - it undercut everything the U.S. claimed to stand for & celebrated every 4th of July.

The Main Idea (If you were to reduce this document to a short, simple sentence or two, what would it say? This is NOT the same as explaining what the document is ABOUT. What does it SAY?)

The nation is celebrating its Founding Fathers and national ideals, and both probably deserve it. But celebration is hypocritical as long as slavery continues in the U.S. At least nations ruled by despots who abuse their power are consistent; America proclaims and celebrates freedom while denying it to millions. This reality makes a lie out of the Declaration of Independence, the 4th of July, and even the Christian faith so many of you claim to hold.

Yeah, So What? (Why is this source important? What is there to be learned from analyzing it? To put it another way, why did your teacher make you read or examine this?)

We've been covering various reform movements of the first half of the 19th century, and abolition was certainly a biggie. Frederick Douglass was a major figure of the time period, and slavery was already the source of most sectional tensions we know are about to lead to the Civil War. Our teacher also probably wanted to push us to do more close reading and understand tone and context in primary sources like this one.