

Middle Passage Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
How did people experience the Middle Passage?

Materials:

- Middle Passage PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions
- Copies of Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

Note: Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with European exploration and colonization in the Americas as well as medieval African history. This is not intended to be a comprehensive lesson on the Atlantic slave trade.

1. Introduction: Middle Passage PowerPoint.

- Slide 1. Title slide.
- Slide 2: Atlantic Slave Trade. *In order to establish profitable colonies, European countries needed a large supply of labor. Europeans enslaved indigenous peoples, but because many indigenous populations were decimated by European disease and violence, indigenous slavery didn't meet the labor demands of the colonies.*

In the 16th century, Europeans began purchasing enslaved Africans from West African traders. The forced labor of Africans proved hugely profitable for Europe and its colonies. Slave owners didn't pay their slaves, and the life-long and hereditary nature of slavery guaranteed new generations of free labor. In order to maximize profits for slave owners, working conditions for slaves in the colonies were often atrocious.

Over the course of the next four centuries, it is estimated that more than 12.5 million Africans were taken from Africa. Due to the brutal conditions on the trip to the Americas, historians estimate that only 10.7 million of the captives survived. The vast majority of those slaves were taken to European colonies in South America and the Caribbean. The most recent estimates suggest that less than 400,000 slaves were taken directly from Africa to the present-day United States. The Portuguese, British, French, Spanish, and Dutch were the main slave traders.

The slave trade drastically changed African societies. In the centuries before the Atlantic slave trade, mutually beneficial intercontinental trade was an important part of African states' economies. Many of these relationships were replaced by

the slave trade. In Africa, the slave trade destabilized states, created economic depressions, and led to wars.

- Slide 3: Middle Passage. *The Atlantic slave trade was part of a broader economic system known as the Triangular Trade that connected three continents. European traders would transport enslaved Africans to European colonies in the Americas, where the slaves would work to produce various agricultural goods, including sugar, cotton, and tobacco. Those raw goods were then shipped back to Europe in order to be turned into manufactured goods. European traders would subsequently trade those goods with West African slave traders for more kidnapped Africans, and the cycle would continue. It is important to note that there were also various exceptions to this basic outline. For instance, European manufactured goods were also sold to colonies in the Americas. Similarly, sugar produced in the Caribbean was sold in New England and rum produced in the Americas was sold in Africa.*
 - Slide 4: Central Historical Question. *Although it is important to consider the economic system that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade, the sheer scale of the trade can obscure the experiences of individuals. We don't want to lose track of the individuals involved in the Middle Passage, so we're going to read a series of documents to answer this question: How did people experience the Middle Passage?*
2. Hand out Documents A and B and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer.
 3. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

Students should note that the textbook was written in Portugal, which was deeply involved in the slave trade. Students will likely hypothesize that the textbook's portrayal of the Middle Passage is less critical of the role of Europeans in the slave trade because it was written in Portugal. Students may cite the fact that the textbook emphasizes the challenges the crew faced and the use of the word "migrations" to describe the slave trade as examples of how the document's Portuguese authors may have shaped its content.

Students will likely note that Phillips' position as a slave ship captain led him to emphasize the challenges that the Middle Passage posed for the crew of the ship. Students may further note that Phillips focused on the economic nature of the Middle Passage and bemoaned the fact that whenever a slave died it hurt the voyage's bottom line. In short, Phillips minimized the Africans' suffering and emphasized the challenges that the slave ship's crew faced.

In corroborating Documents A and B, students will likely notice some similarities. Both documents described the challenges that crews faced during the Middle

Passage. In contrast to the textbook passage, Philips provided far more details about conditions that the crew and slaves faced during the Middle Passage.

4. Hand out Document C and D and have students complete the corresponding section of the Graphic Organizer for Documents C and D.
5. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

In contrast to the first two documents, Falconbridge's account provides far more details about the brutal conditions that slaves endured during the Middle Passage. He not only describes the conditions below decks that contributed to widespread disease among those onboard, he also recounts the harsh punishments that slaves received from the crew. In evaluating Falconbridge's account, students should consider his subsequent work with the Anti-Slavery Society.

The diagram of the British slave ship *Brookes* corroborates many of the details that Falconbridge provided regarding the conditions that slaves faced below decks. Students may be particularly struck by the fact that the conditions depicted in the diagram were supposed to represent an improvement over previous conditions and were part of a British effort to regulate the slave trade.

6. Hand out Document E and have students complete the corresponding section of the Graphic Organizer.
7. After students have completed the Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

When students read Equiano's account, it is important to point out the recent controversy regarding Equiano birthplace. This is not a reason to completely discount his autobiography, especially given the scarcity of slaves' accounts of the Middle Passage. Students should note that Equiano corroborates many of the details from the previous documents, particularly about the conditions slaves endured during the Middle Passage. He also details the brutality that many crew members faced.

8. Discussion: Ask students to consider the following questions: *How are these accounts of the Middle Passage similar? How are they different? What are possible reasons for the differences among the accounts?*
9. Final Question: Students use evidence from the Graphic Organizer to determine which document(s) they believe are the most reliable sources of information about the Middle Passage.

Explain to students that it is likely that different students will have different answers. This is part of history. Different people can arrive at different conclusions as long as they have historical evidence to support their claims.

Citations

Document A

History for Grade Ten, Volume 2, Portugal, 1994. In Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward (Eds.), *History Lessons: How textbooks from around the world portray U.S. History*. New York: New Press, 2006.

Document B

Thomas Phillips, "Journal." *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Vol 6. Edited by Awunsham and John Churchill. London, 1746. In Thomas Howard (Ed.), *Black Voyages*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.

Document C

Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. London: 1788.

Document D

"Stowage of the British slave ship 'Brookes' under the regulated slave trade act of 1788." Liverpool: 1884. Retrieved from <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.28204300>

Document E

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself*. London: 1789.

Document A: Portuguese Textbook (Modified)

Portugal was one of the first European countries to engage in the African slave trade. Portuguese ships played a key role in the slave trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas for several centuries. The following excerpt comes from a Portuguese high school textbook.

The development of the slave trade became part of the process of settling the American continent. In comparison with Indian slavery, the blacks had a better physical capacity and resisted better to the climate, two important factors to justify the successive waves of slaves that left Africa towards America.

The time between the moment the slaves were bought and when they arrived at port was very dangerous not only for the European traders but for the slaves as well. Revolts and disturbances occurred frequently. Crossing the Atlantic was extremely difficult for slaves. First there was not enough room in the boats. They suffered from heat, thirst, and a lack of **hygiene**. Even the whites had difficulty with these things.

At the time the European states did not recognize the negative consequences of these massive migrations. On the other hand, a new diverse cultural situation originated on the American continent that resulted from the multiplicity of mixed races and cultures. Brazil became the most **expressive** model of the process carried out by the Portuguese as it melted Indian, white, and black in a complex mix of ethnicities and cultures.

Source: History for Grade Ten, Volume 2, *published in Portugal in 1994.*

Vocabulary

hygiene: cleanliness

expressive: effectively conveying an idea

Document B: Slave Ship Captain (Modified)

Captain Thomas Phillips transported slaves from Africa to Barbados on the ship Hannibal in 1693. The ship left the African island of São Tomé on August 25th and arrived in Barbados on November 4th. The Royal African Company of London funded the trip. This is an excerpt from his journal about the voyage.

There happened such sickening and **mortality** among my poor men and Negroes. Of the first we buried 14, and of the last 320, which was a great detriment to our voyage, the Royal African Company losing ten pounds by every slave that died. . . .

The **distemper** which my men as well as the blacks mostly died of was the **white flux**. . . . The Negroes are so vulnerable to the small-pox that few ships that carry them escape without it, and sometimes it makes vast havoc and destruction among them. But though we had 100 at a time sick of it . . . we lost not above a dozen by it. . . .

But what the smallpox spared, the flux swept off, to our great regret, after all our pains and care to give [the slaves] their **messes**, . . . keeping their lodgings as clean and sweet as possible, and enduring so much misery and stench so long among creatures nastier than **swine**, only to be defeated by their mortality. . . .

No **gold-finders** can endure so much **noisome** slavery as they do who carry Negroes. . . . We endure twice the misery; and yet by their mortality our voyages are ruined.

Source: *Thomas Phillips, A Collection of Voyages and Travels, 1732.*

Vocabulary

mortality: death, especially on a large scale

distemper: disorder or disease

white flux: intestinal infection that caused intense diarrhea

messes: meals

swine: pigs

gold-finders: individuals seeking wealth

noisome: unpleasant

Document C: Slave Ship Doctor (Modified)

Alexander Falconbridge served as a doctor (known as the surgeon on ships) on British slave ships during the 1780s. He later wrote a book, An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa, about his experiences. The book became popular among abolitionists and he later worked with the Anti-Slavery Society. These are excerpts from his book.

The men negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by hand-cuffs on their wrists, and by irons **riveted** on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks. . . . They are frequently **stowed** so close, they can only lie on their sides. . . .

In each of the apartments are placed three or four large buckets [for human waste]. . . . It often happens, that those who are placed at a distance from the buckets . . . tumble over their companions because they are **shackled**. . . . In this distressed situation . . . they give up and relieve themselves as they lie. . . .

Their food is served up to them in tubs, about the size of a small water bucket. They are placed around these tubs in companies of ten . . . If negroes refused to **take sustenance**, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel, and placed so near their lips, as to scorch and burn them. . . .

The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the negroes during the passage, are hard to describe. . . . The exclusion of the fresh air is among the least tolerable. . . . The floor of their rooms was so covered with blood and mucus because of the **flux**, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture to itself a situation more dreadful or disgusting.

The surgeons employed in the **Guinea trade**, are generally driven to engage in so disagreeable a job by their financial situations.

Source: *Alexander Falconbridge, An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa, 1788.*

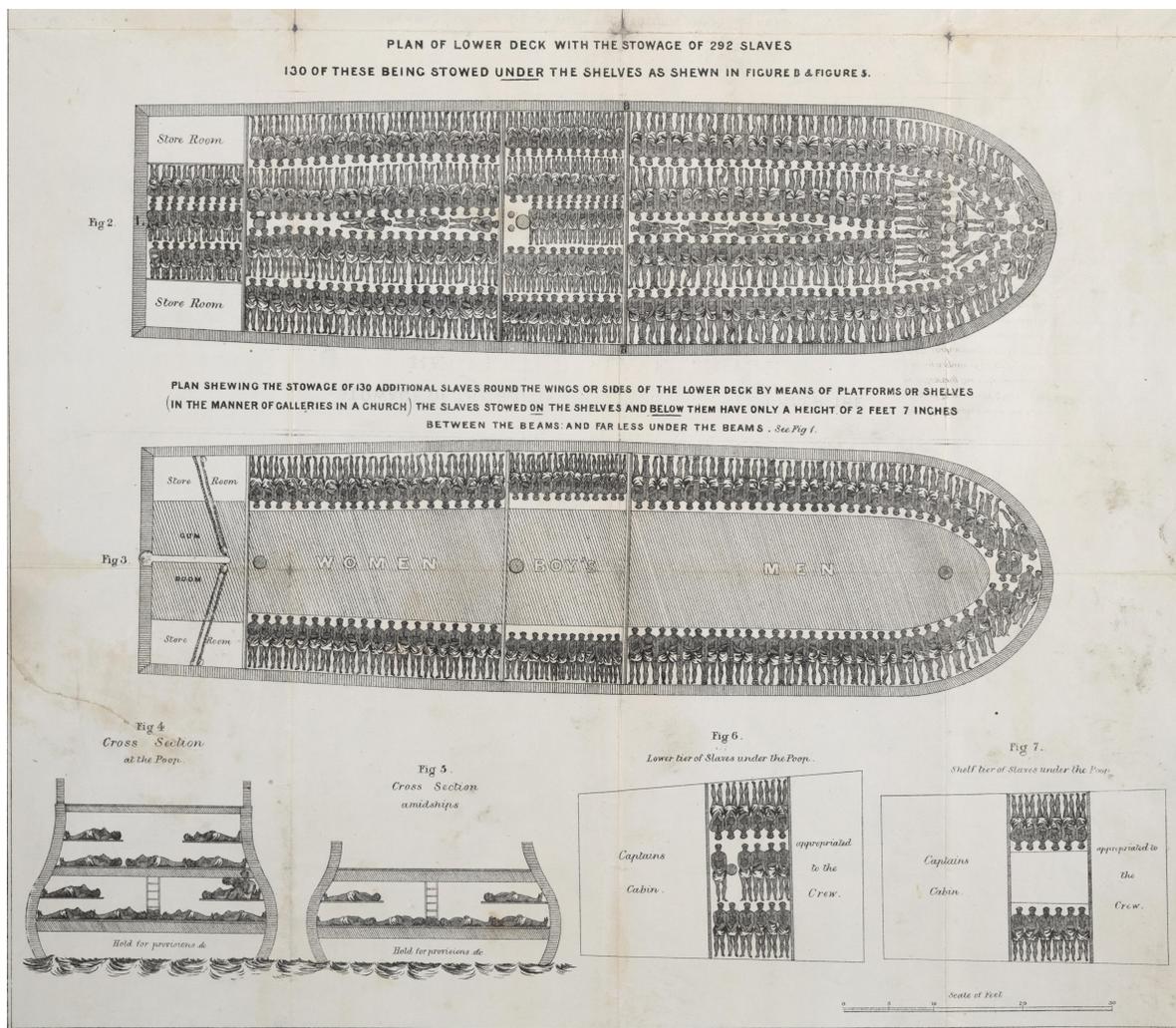
Vocabulary

riveted: metal bolted together
stowed: put in a particular place
shackled: chained
take sustenance: eat

flux: intestinal infection that caused intense diarrhea
Guinea trade: slave trade

Document D: Slave Ship Diagram

*This is part of a diagram depicting the British slave ship *Brookes* after the passage of the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788. This law, which sought to improve conditions on slave ships, was passed in response to rising opposition to the slave trade in England. This document depicts how many slaves could be placed on this ship. With 6' by 1'4" allowed for each man, 5'10" by 1'4" allowed for each woman, and 5' by 1'2" allowed for each boy, the ship could hold 454 slaves. Before Britain began regulating the slave trade, the ship reportedly carried as many as 609 slaves.*



Source: "Stowage of the slave ship '*Brookes*' under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788."

Document E: Autobiography of a Former Slave (Modified)

Olaudah Equiano was born in West Africa. As a young boy, he was kidnapped by an African tribe and sold to European slave traders, who took him to Virginia. He eventually purchased his freedom and moved to England, where he became active in the abolition movement. He later wrote an autobiography describing his experiences as a slave. Recently, a historian located evidence indicating that Equiano was actually born in South Carolina. However, other historians maintain that there is strong evidence corroborating Equiano's account. Moreover, this is one of the only accounts of the Middle passage from the perspective of a slave. These are excerpts from Equiano's autobiography.

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a smell in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the **loathsomeness** of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me food; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the **windlass**, and tied my feet, while the other **flogged** me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before. . . .

The crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, in case we would leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. . . .

I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, **flogged** so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died . . . and they tossed him over the side. . . . This made me fear these people the more.

Source: *Olaudah Equiano*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African, 1789.*

Vocabulary

loathsomeness: unpleasantness

windlass: machine used to raise the anchor

flogged: whipped

Middle Passage Guiding Questions

Document A: Portuguese Textbook

1. (Sourcing) Where was this textbook written? How might this have influenced how it portrayed the Middle Passage?
2. (Close reading) According to the textbook, “The time between the moment the slaves were bought and when they arrived at port was very dangerous not only for the European traders but for the slaves as well.” Why might the textbook’s authors have chosen to compare the experience of the ship’s crew to the experience of the slaves?
3. (Close reading) Why do you think the textbook used the word “migrations” to describe the Atlantic slave trade?

Document B: Slave Ship Captain

1. (Sourcing) Who was Phillips? How might his background have influenced what he wrote about the Middle Passage?
2. (Close reading) According to Phillips, what did the ship’s crew do for the slaves?
3. (Close reading) According to Phillips, why was being a slave trader such an unpleasant job?

Document C: Slave Ship Doctor

1. (Sourcing) Who was Falconbridge? How might his background have influenced what he wrote about the Middle Passage?
2. (Close reading) How might the conditions on the ship have been connected to the diseases that were so common among slaves?
3. (Close reading) Why do you think Falconbridge said that most surgeons only worked on slave ships because of their financial situations?

Document D: Slave Ship Diagram

1. (Sourcing) Why was this diagram produced?

Document E: Autobiography of a Former Slave

1. (Sourcing) Who was Equiano? How might his background have influenced what he wrote about the Middle Passage?
2. (Close reading) Why do you think slaves were punished for not eating?

How did people experience the Middle Passage?

Document	Close reading According to this document, what were 2-3 ways people experienced the Middle Passage?	Corroboration How is this account similar or different from the other documents?	Reliability Why might this be a reliable source to understand the Middle Passage? Why not?
A: Portuguese Textbook			
B: Slave Ship Captain			

Document	Close reading According to this document, what were 2-3 ways people experienced the Middle Passage?	Corroboration How is this account similar or different from the other documents?	Reliability Why might this be a reliable source to understand the Middle Passage? Why not?
C: Slave Ship Doctor			
D: Slave Ship Diagram			
E: Autobiography of a Former Slave			

Final Question

Which of these documents do you believe is the most reliable source of information about the Middle Passage? Select no more than two and explain your selection using evidence from the Graphic Organizer and Guiding Questions.