

Depending on the location and format of your Reading Douglass event, you may decide to host a group discussion after the public reading. The benefit, of course, is that it gives participants an opportunity to explore and develop a deeper understanding of the speech and its themes. Keep in mind that moderating a group discussion — particularly those that deal with personal and provocative issues like race — takes skill and preparation. If your Reading Douglass event is very large or at an outdoor venue, you will want to consider either skipping the discussion or conducting it in a smaller indoor space after the event.

### General tips for a Reading Douglass discussion moderator

- As the discussion leader, you set the tone and guide the conversation. You are like an orchestra conductor — keeping the rhythm and flow, bringing forward the fruitful ideas and opinions, and softening those that are not constructive.
- Engaging conversations around difficult topics happen when group members feel respected and heard. Set some ground rules at the beginning to make your expectations clear: we will take turns, we will listen, and we will be kind.
- Cultivate comments and opinions that lead to discussion; gently steer the conversation away from grandstanding or unproductive comments.
- Read the speech carefully beforehand, preferably multiple times. Choose two or three major topics you want to cover.
- For a large group, you may want to set a time limit per speaker in advance. If you decide to go this route, you will need someone to monitor the time to keep it equitable.

### “The Meaning of the Fourth of July” sample discussion questions

- What is the rhetorical question in his speech?
- What did the audience expect of Douglass?
- Why was it essential for Douglass to argue that he was a man? (Better: What is a “man” in Douglass’s speech? How does Douglass argue that he is a man? Does he need to?)
- What are the implications today of his words in 1852?
- Have we moved forward as a country?
- What is citizenship?
- What, according to Douglass, is wrong with 1850s America?
- What does this speech tell us about today’s United States?
- What other speech or writing would you compare to this?
- What parts of the speech do you find particularly powerful, and why?
- If Douglass were alive today, what might he be working on?

- Did the audience expect this speech?
- How are speeches important in society? What do they do?

### The “one-word-from-all” method of starting the discussion:

Some Reading Douglass facilitators have found this method a good way to kick off an engaging conversation.

1. Take inventory: start the discussion by going around the room asking for one-word reactions to the reading of the speech. Keep track of some of them, and then return to the people whose one word seems interesting or provocative, or to sum up something, and ask them to explain.
2. When an interesting question or issue comes up, agree with the group to discuss that particular angle for a set amount of time, say five minutes, so that people can participate in that topic, rather than each taking a turn to say something they had in mind from the beginning.

### In-depth discussion questions for smaller groups, or groups that have read something other than the speech:

- Look at the opening. How does Douglass characterize himself and his relationship with the audience? Why do you think he describes himself in those terms?
- Does Douglass stick to that (apologetic) tone, or does he change at some point? How would you explain how and why he changes?
- Does Douglass use “we” and “us” or “you”? If he changes, when does he address the audience as “you” and when does he talk about “us” and “we”? How would you explain this?
- If you were a member of the group of female abolitionists who had invited Douglass to give the speech, how might you feel about his criticism of the Founders and other parts of American history and life? Would you feel personally attacked, or would you agree with his attacks — or both?
- Why does Douglass attack the church, especially given the fact that many abolitionist groups were affiliated with churches? Was this dangerous, and if so, why did he do it?
- What parts of the speech do you find particularly powerful, and why? What would they make you feel or think about if you were a member of his audience when Douglass delivered this speech?
- In the 19th century, oratory was considered both a form of entertainment and a crucial element in public life. To be effective, oratory was expected to address the mind (presumably with information and logical arguments) as well as the imagination and heart (presumably with images and ideas that made you feel a particular way) in order to convince the will (to take a particular action). What parts of this speech might have appealed to the mind and what parts to the heart? If most of his listeners were already abolitionists, what do you think Douglass was trying to accomplish with respect to persuading them to take action?

- What kinds of things does Douglass quote? What impression does this, and his speaking style, give you of what kind of person he was? Would you have found him impressive? Do you find him impressive? If so, does this contribute to the effectiveness of his argument in any way?
- If you were a member of the audience listening to this speech, at what points in the speech might your mood change? How and why? And how would you feel at the conclusion of the speech, and why? Does it matter that he ends with the hymn?

### Topics that might need to be explained before or during the discussion

Wikipedia is a good source of information— for example <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pro-slavery>

- The Fugitive Slave Law.
- The Constitution used as a defense of slavery (while the Declaration of Independence was used as a defense of freedom).
- The meaning of “jubilee.”
- Arguments that were made for and against slavery.
- Attacks (both verbal and physical) made against abolitionists. (In many ways, Douglass is trying to steady the abolitionists so they don’t succumb to pressure from the other side. People need to know what those pressures were.) It is particularly useful to give people samples of arguments in favor of slavery. Usually they don't know those arguments, and as a result, they don't understand why abolitionists are a making particular argument.