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middle level learning

# Harriet Tubman

Emancipate  
Yourself!

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An "Urgent Brief": Social Studies and Writing Skills  
*Thomas N. Turner, Jeremiah C. Clabough,*  
*and William Cole*



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# Harriet Tubman: Emancipate Yourself!

Steven S. Lapham and Peter Hanes

*Argo*, which won the 2012 Oscar for best picture, was about a daring escape of six U.S. diplomats from Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis. Now imagine the hero of that story (the CIA operative Tony Mendez) returning to Iran time and again—rescuing captives with each furtive mission, ready to employ fanciful ruses each time to fool the suspicious enemy. Add miles of hiking through hostile territory in winter to some of these missions. If you perform that “mind experiment,” then you begin to have an idea of the strength, courage, and achievement of a five-foot-tall African American woman: Harriet Tubman. Even then, you’ve considered only one method by which she resisted slavery (escape), one cause of several to which this American devoted her energy during her long life. In addition to being an Underground Railroad conductor and abolitionist, Tubman was a U.S. Civil War Union Army nurse, scout and spy; women’s suffragist; and humanitarian. In 2013, the 100th anniversary of Tubman’s death, UNESCO and U.S. and Canadian government agencies (as well as civic organizations) are creating new resources to help the public learn more about Tubman and her era. We’ve relied on some of these resources in creating this issue of *Middle Level Learning*.

## Historiography

If your students visit websites to learn more about Harriet Tubman (ca. 1822–1913), they’ll likely encounter contradictions. For example, did she rescue about 75 enslaved persons as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, or more than 300? Challenge your students with a question—How can we investigate these discrepancies?—as they work on the following handouts.

As happens to famous persons’ biographies, Tubman’s has been simplified and enhanced in the retelling over the decades by admirers and authors of children’s books.

Recent biographies for adult readers present new evidence of Tubman’s genuine achievements and reveal more about her personal life.<sup>1</sup> In *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*, Milton Sernett explored the interplay of history and iconography in our national consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Tubman “exemplifies what we would all like to be,” said Sernett in a recent interview.<sup>3</sup>

## Hidden Evidence

Conductors and stationmasters on the Underground Railroad like Tubman were careful to hide their illegal activities. Then, during the Civil War, African Americans served the Union as scouts and spies, performing daily acts of secret bravery behind enemy lines. How do you uncover history when the actors methodically erased the evidence of their own accomplishments?

Thomas B. Allen has written an insightful book for middle level students: *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War*, published by National Geographic. Allen describes the craft of the spy and the smuggler, presents available evidence, and then demonstrates how a historian can deduce what probably did happen—thus giving credit to Tubman and several other “invisible heroes.”

## A Lesson that Reveals

Have all students read Handout 1: the two-page biography of Harriet Tubman, known as “Minty” when she was a child. Students who enjoy “being orators” could take turns reading aloud the various passages while others follow the text silently.

Then break up the class into four smaller groups, each of which studies one handout to learn in more depth about one of aspect Tubman’s life. Handouts 2 and 3 describe the transnational (U.S.-Canada-Britain) aspect of her resistance to slavery. Handout 4 describes Tubman’s skills as a “master of disguise.” Handout 5 describes some of her work as a scout and spy for the Union Army. In conclusion, student groups can share what they’ve discovered with the rest of the class. 🌍

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The authors thank C.R. Gibbs, Historian of the African Diaspora, for his valuable input.

## Notes

1. Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004); Jean Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine, 2004); Rosemary Sadlier, *Harriet Tubman: Freedom Seeker, Freedom Leader* (Toronto, Canada: Dundurn Press, 2012).
2. Milton Sernett *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
3. *Maxwell Perspective*, (Syracuse University) 8, no. 2 (Spring 2008).

**ON THE COVER:** Harriet Tubman, full-length portrait, standing with hands on back of a chair, ca. 1860-75. (H.B. Lindsley/Library of Congress)

# A Short Biography of Harriet Tubman

“Minty” was the little girl’s nickname. Araminta Ross was born on a farm, probably in 1822. The farm was on Maryland’s eastern shore. Maryland was a slave state, and Minty was born into slavery. She was the fifth of nine children.

When Minty was still too small to work in the field, a woman whipped her for not dusting well enough. When she was about 12 years old, a master threw a heavy piece of iron at a slave suspected of trying to run away. The object missed its target and hit Minty. It cracked her skull and knocked her out. For the rest of her life, Minty would suffer from this injury. She would suddenly become very tired or even faint. But on most days, Minty could work very hard. She could lift a barrel of flour, chop wood, and haul logs. She was five feet tall, very strong, and pretty.

As a young woman, Minty took on her mother’s name, “Harriet,” and married a free African American named John Tubman. When she was 27 years old, Harriet Tubman emancipated herself: She escaped to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She left in the night, with help from supportive white abolitionists. Her husband, John, decided not to go with her. The year was 1849, and Harriet felt safe in Philadelphia. But the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 called for the return of escaped slaves to their owners. It didn’t matter if you were in a free state. Federal marshals could arrest you and return you to your old master at any moment.

Harriet found safe haven in another country, Canada, but she did not stay there. She became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She returned to slaveholding states to smuggle others, including family members, to freedom. No escapee was ever caught or harmed under her leadership.

Along the Underground Railroad, operatives (both black and white) secretly provided food and shelter to those who were fleeing. Harriet risked her life on at least 12 trips to rescue others, usually in winter. She became the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. She organized with other abolitionists, raising funds, speaking in public, and making secret plans to free more of the enslaved. It’s not known how many she inspired while under cover in the South, encouraging and instructing people to escape on their own.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Harriet became a scout and spy for the Union Army. She also served honorably as a nurse for soldiers and newly escaped slaves. Her military service took her into enemy territory—Virginia, South Carolina, and Florida. She aided enslaved persons, and taught some of them how to be scouts (observing enemy troops) and spies (assuming a false identity and mingling among the enemy on their own turf). This was very dangerous work.

In June 1863, Harriet guided Union troops in South Carolina on a successful raid along the Combahee River (pronounced “Kumbee”). The raid freed over 700 enslaved persons, destroyed Confederate Army supplies and equipment, and left rice plantations and crops in ruins.

After the war, Harriet married her second husband, Nelson Davis, a black Union soldier. They settled

**Underground Railroad:** People’s historic resistance in the United States to enslavement, and the related flight to freedom in the Western hemisphere.

Based on the definition by the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, [www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr)

in Auburn, New York, where Harriet cared for her family and other elderly African Americans. She fought for progressive causes such as education for African Americans and women's suffrage, and met with other agitators for women's rights such as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. She supported schools in the South for newly freed people.

Even though Harriet never went to school or learned to read, she commanded a fierce intelligence and insight. Abolitionist John Brown called her "General Tubman." Escaped slaves called her "Moses" because, like Moses in the Hebrew Scriptures, she led her people to freedom.

Harriet was a deeply spiritual person, involved with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church. On land that she donated to the church, she founded a home for poor and elderly African Americans. Harriet Tubman died on March 10, 1913 at this home in Auburn. She was buried with full military honors at the nearby Fort Hill Cemetery. She was about 91 years old. 🌐

#### Sources

Thomas B. Allen, *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006). Visit [www.nps.gov/hatu](http://www.nps.gov/hatu).

Peter Hanes, International Women's Day Commemoration, *National/International Black History News* (March 8, 2013), and sources therein. [phanes93@gmail.com](mailto:phanes93@gmail.com)

PBS Africans in America Resource Bank, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html).

Search on "Harriet Tubman" at [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org).



Harriet Tubman (c. 1822 – March 10, 1913), far left, with people she rescued from slavery during, during the American Civil War. Left to right: Harriet Tubman; Gertie Davis (Watson), adopted daughter of Tubman; Nelson Davis (husband and 8th USCT veteran); Lee Cheney (great-great-niece); "Pop" (John) Alexander; Walter Green; Blind "Aunty" Sarah Parker; Dora Stewart (great-niece and granddaughter of Tubman's brother Robert Ross aka John Stewart).

# Canada: The Promised Land

On August 1, 1834, the British Imperial Slavery Abolition Act 1833 ended slavery in the British Empire's colonies. This happened 31 years before the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment ended slavery in the United States. The Empire spanned several continents and included parts of the Caribbean, Africa, Canada, India, China, Australia, and South America as far as the tip of Argentina. This historic action fueled abolition movements worldwide, leading to slavery's end in Europe, the Caribbean colonies, the United States, and South America.

Canada was linked closely in government and culture with Great Britain. (It still is.) Harriet

Tubman lived in Canada the decade before the Civil War. She used her home in Canada as the center of planning for her rescue operations—as the base for her Underground Railroad activities. Most of her neighbors in Canada, both black and white, supported her efforts.

Harriet's efforts inspired more recent reformers. In a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio lecture in 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. connected American slavery, the Underground Railroad, freedom in Canada, and the American Civil Rights Movement. Here is part of his speech:

“Canada is not merely a neighbor to Negroes. Deep in our history of struggle for freedom, Canada was the North Star. The Negro slave, denied education, de-humanized, and imprisoned on cruel plantations, knew that far to the north a land existed where a fugitive slave, if he survived the horrors of the journey, could find freedom. The legendary Underground Railroad started in the south and ended in Canada. The freedom road links us together. Our spirituals, now so widely admired around the world, were often codes. We sang of “heaven” that awaited us, and the slave masters listened in innocence, not realizing that we were not speaking of the hereafter. “Heaven” was the word for Canada, and the Negro sang of the hope that his escape on the Underground Railroad would carry him there.

And so, standing today in Canada, I am linked with the history of my people and its unity with your past. The Underground Railroad could not bring freedom to many Negroes, yet it did something far greater. It symbolized a hope when freedom was almost an impossible dream. Our spirit never died, even though the weight of centuries was a crushing burden. Our freedom was not won a century ago. It is not won today. But some small part of it is in our hands. And we are marching no longer by ones and twos, but in legions of thousands, convinced now that it cannot be denied by any human force. Today the question is not whether we shall be free, but by what course we will win.”

## Sources

You can listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Massey Lectures for CBC Radio if you open a free online account at [www.prx.org/pieces/32924-martin-luther-king-jr-massey-lecture-1#description](http://www.prx.org/pieces/32924-martin-luther-king-jr-massey-lecture-1#description).

To learn more, enter keywords “Harriet Tubman” at the Parks Canada website (<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/index.aspx>) and read *The Kids Book of Black Canadian History* by Rosmary Sadlier (Toronto, Canada: Kids Can Press, 2010).

Read about the Anti-slavery Society (UK) Slavery Abolition Act 1833 (also referred to as 1833 Emancipation Act) [www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com/huk-1833act.htm](http://www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com/huk-1833act.htm) and see the 2006 movie *Amazing Grace*.

Smithsonian Anacostia Museum, “About International Emancipation Day,” [http://mysite.verizon.net/peter.hanes/documents/Historical\\_OverviewInternationalEmancipationDay.pdf](http://mysite.verizon.net/peter.hanes/documents/Historical_OverviewInternationalEmancipationDay.pdf).

Search on “Harriet Tubman” at [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org).



After learning of Harriet Tubman through her biography, Queen Victoria of the British Empire invited Harriet to her Diamond Jubilee Celebration in 1897 (60th anniversary of the queen's reign) in England. She sent Harriet royal gifts of a Diamond Jubilee silver medal (similar to the one shown above) and a shawl. (Shawl image courtesy of the Harriet Tubman Collection, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, <http://www.nmaahc.si.edu>). Medal image courtesy of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives, <http://www.heritage.nf.ca>.

# St. Catharines, Canada: Tubman's Home Base

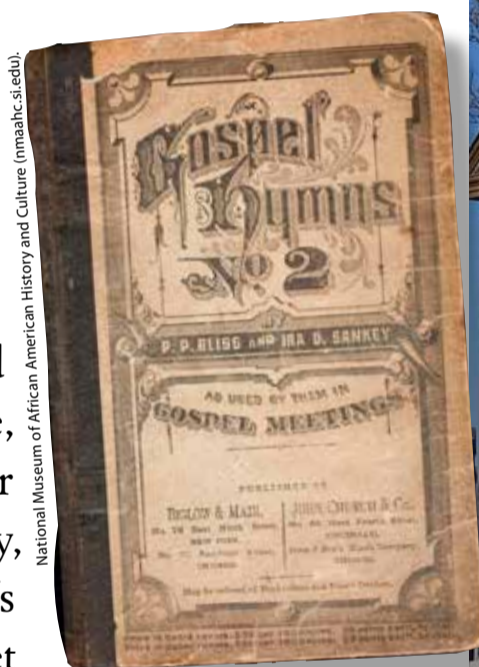
The British Empire (which then included Canada) abolished slavery in 1834 in all British colonies, 27 years before the American Civil War. So Canada became a safe haven for African Americans escaping from slavery. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, even northern U.S. states were no longer safe. For example, if you had been enslaved, but were now living in the town of Oberlin, Ohio, you could be arrested and sent back into slavery in an instant. Only Canada promised true safety.

Southwestern Ontario was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Some escapees decided to make their homes in this part of the “promised land” of Canada. For example, Josiah Henson became a leader in his African Canadian colony, the Dawn Settlement. Henson’s autobiography inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe as she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a best-selling anti-slavery novel that helped bring on the Civil War.

Another escaped slave who lived in Canada was Harriet Tubman. From 1850 to 1861, Harriet lived in St. Catharines, “Canada West” (now called Ontario). Her home was a base of operations for her trips into slave territory to help more people escape. It was here that she gathered the intelligence, financial support, and moral courage to plan trips into Maryland to rescue enslaved African Americans.

Harriet was a highly respected member of the St. Catharines community.<sup>1</sup> Blacks and whites were organizing together, trying to figure out how to end slavery. As the most famous conductor on the

Underground Railroad, Harriet became a leader of the resistance movement. In these days before radio, television, and the Internet, people often learned about public issues at lectures that could last two or



National Museum of African American History and Culture (nmaahc.si.edu).



Salem Chapel, B.M.E. Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, stands today as a tribute to the faith and industry of the brave settlers of African American descent. In 2000, the church was designated a National Historic Site by the government of Canada.

Harriet Tubman’s personal book of hymns (published 1876). Tubman’s favorite hymns are indicated by the book’s use. When the book is gently opened, the pages fall open to the most frequently used pages.

three hours. Harriet Tubman would go up on stage with other abolitionists. Although she was illiterate, she spoke clearly and forcefully. She was eager to tell the world about what life was really like for the

enslaved, drawing upon her own life experience. With other abolitionists, Harriet came to believe that violent conflict was the only way to end the institution of slavery.

Harriet worshipped at the Salem Chapel British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church in St. Catharines, which was active in the antislavery movement. She worked with church groups to help black refugees adapt to life in Canada.<sup>2</sup> It was not easy for newly freed men and women to create a life starting with no possessions, no money, and maybe few skills.<sup>3</sup>

Harriet helped the newcomers learn to survive in the new promised land of Canada.🌍

**Notes**

1. As the U.S. Civil War approached, many Canadians had mixed emotions. On one hand, many had abolitionist sympathies and hoped that slavery would end in the southern United States. On the other hand, some Canadians favored a weakened U.S. government, since they had memories of being invaded by U.S. troops during the War of 1812. Britain was officially neutral during the Civil War, although elite opinion tended to support the Confederacy, while popular opinion supported the Union.
2. Read about Salem Chapel BME Church at [www.salemchapelbmechurch.ca](http://www.salemchapelbmechurch.ca).
3. To learn more, search on “Harriet Tubman” at the Parks Canada website (<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/index.aspx>) and read *The Kids Book of Black Canadian History* by Rosmary Sadlier (Toronto, Canada: Kids Can Press, 2010).

## Some Major Events in the Life of Harriet Tubman

1. Born into slavery
2. Escaped to Philadelphia
3. Refuge in St. Catharines
4. Raid along the Cumbahee
5. Elderly activist in Auburn



For a map showing approximate “Routes on the Underground Railroad” including points in Central and South America and Atlantic islands, visit the National Park Service website [www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/detailedroutes.htm](http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/detailedroutes.htm).



# Underground RR Conductor & “Master of Disguise”

We wear the mask that grins and lies / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes / This debt we pay to human guile / With torn and bleeding hearts we smile / And mouth with myriad subtleties

—From the poem “The Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)

[www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15888](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15888)

After she escaped slavery, Harriet Tubman risked her life by returning to Maryland to help others escape. As a smuggler of human beings, she tried to keep herself and her “contraband” unnoticed, or “invisible.” She could pass as a man by speaking low and wearing men’s clothes. Hunched over, she could look and sound like an elderly woman. “WANTED” posters noted that she was illiterate, so she would pretend to be reading a newspaper if a white southerner approached. She memorized who owned each farm and plantation along the escape route, so she could quickly formulate an excuse for her presence, such as “I’m jus’ delivering this salt to Missus Johnson.” If she learned that she was being followed while steering a horse-drawn carriage with escapees as passengers, she would turn the carriage around and head south.

Harriet’s fame grew as slave catchers failed to detect her. Boston abolitionists often asked her to tell her Underground Railroad stories at fund-raising meetings. She had a natural gift for discovering and learning what modern intelligence agents call “tradecraft”—the tricks and techniques of covert operations.

Sarah Bradford, interviewed Harriet Tubman when writing her 1869 biography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*.<sup>1</sup> Bradford estimated that Tubman led about 300 people to safety. “Harriet was obliged to come by many different routes on her different

journeys.... It would seem, by the computation of others, that there must have been somewhere near three hundred brought by her to the Northern States and Canada.”

Modern researchers have found evidence that Harriet rescued about 70. Thomas B. Allen, in his 2006 book for youth *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War*, briefly reviews the evidence.<sup>2</sup> The question of whether Harriet rescued about 70 or 300 people from slavery does not diminish the scope of her achievements. She voluntarily invaded the South about 12 times to make those rescues. She risked torture and death on each mission. In the decade before the Civil War, she became a world-famous symbol of the determination of enslaved African Americans to be free. Most important, she became a beacon of hope to enslaved persons. She demonstrated that freedom was a real possibility for them.

Harriet was in Troy, New York, on April 27, 1860, when a runaway slave named Charles Nalle was going to be taken south, returned to his master. Newspaper reports described how “an old colored woman” appeared at the window of a second floor room where Nalle was being held. She gave some kind of signal to the crowd below, and suddenly “resolute colored men” surrounded the arresting officers. There were perhaps two thousand people in the chaotic crowd. The “old woman” appeared

on the street, shouting, “Give us liberty or give us death.” Nalle was whisked away to a skiff on the riverbank and taken to the other side. After more scuffles with officers, abolitionists placed Nalle in a wagon—he was still in handcuffs—and got him out of danger. Years later, Harriet told her biographer that she was “the old colored woman,” but she was only 38 years old that day.

When the Civil War began, Harriet worked for the U.S. Army, training other African Americans to be spies and scouts. She encouraged people who had just escaped bondage to turn around and go back across enemy lines to observe Confederate troop movements, or to enter Southern society and

send secret reports—“black dispatches”—to Union intelligence officers. Harriet was herself a scout, and planned the raid along the Combahee River (pronounced “Kumbee”) near Charleston, South Carolina in June 1863. 🌍

**Notes**

1. Bradford, Sarah H., *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York: W.J. Moses, 1869), 53. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bradford/bradford.html>.
2. On page 174 of *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent*, author Thomas B. Allen summarizes recent research. He relates that Kate Clifford Larson, author of *Bound for the Promised Land*, has found evidence for about 13 trips that freed between 70 to 80 people. Jean M. Humez, author of *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, believes that there were 10 or 11 trips and that Tubman conducted 59 to 77 people to freedom. Allen also adds, “No one will ever know how many Maryland slaves were inspired or instructed by Harriet and then left [their place of bondage] on their own.”




Above: Dressed as an older woman, Tubman is depicted as leading a wagon of escaping people in this U.S. stamp.

Right: A recreation of a real notice published in the *Cambridge Democrat* (October 3, 1849), offering a reward for the return of Harriet Tubman and her two brothers. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harriet\\_Tubman\\_Reward\\_Notice\\_1849.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harriet_Tubman_Reward_Notice_1849.jpg)

The use of “ult.,” in this clipping is an abbreviation of the latin *ultimo* and was understood to mean “within the last month.” A “wen” is a harmless growth or tumor. Typing errors like “aged aged” appear as they did in the 1849 newspaper ad.

## THREE HUNDED DOLLARS REWARD.

**R**AN AWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: HARRY, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under his ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; BEN, aged aged about 25 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; MINTY, aged about 27 years is of a chestnut color, fine looking and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward  will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

# The Combahee River Raid: Tubman as Army Scout and Spy

In June 1863, Tubman guided Union troops in South Carolina on a successful raid along the winding Combahee River (pronounced “Kumbee”). The raid freed more than 700 enslaved persons; destroyed enemy commissary stores, rice crops, and buildings; and confiscated Confederate property. Here are excerpts from a front-page report of the raid in *The Commonwealth*, a Boston newspaper, from June 10, 1863.<sup>1</sup>

Col. Montgomery and his gallant band of 300 black soldiers, under the guidance of a black woman, dashed into the enemy’s country, struck a bold and effective blow, destroying millions of dollars worth of commissary stores, [rice crops], and lordly dwellings [plantation mansions], and striking terror into the heart of rebeldom, brought off near 800 slaves and thousands of dollars worth of property, without losing a man or receiving a scratch. It was a glorious consummation....

The Combahee strategy was formulated by Harriet Tubman as an outcome of her penetrations of the enemy lines and her belief that the Combahee River countryside was ripe for a successful invasion.

She was asked by General Hunter “if she would go with several gunboats up the Combahee River, the object of the expedition being to take up the torpedoes [mines] placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and to cut off supplies from the rebel troops.”<sup>2</sup> She said she would go if Col. Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition... Accordingly, Col. Montgomery was appointed to the command ... The whole venture owed its success to the complete preliminary survey made by Harriet Tubman’s espionage troops.


During the night of June 2, 1863, Harriet and Colonel Montgomery, with a party of about 150 Negro

troops in three gunboats, started up the Combahee River. [Confederate] Pickets located at stations near the mouth of the stream spotted the oncoming boats and dispatched word to the [commander] located deeper inland at Green Pond ... Every plantation on both sides of the river was aroused; the Union soldiers, in small detachments, raced from one to another, creating a general devastation of the zone.

In the Combahee Ferry region the Blake, Lowndes, Middleton, and Heyward plantations were in ruins. The [enslaved] Negroes fled to the gunboats and the slave masters skedaddled inland. The bridge at Combahee Ferry was burning too, but not badly.

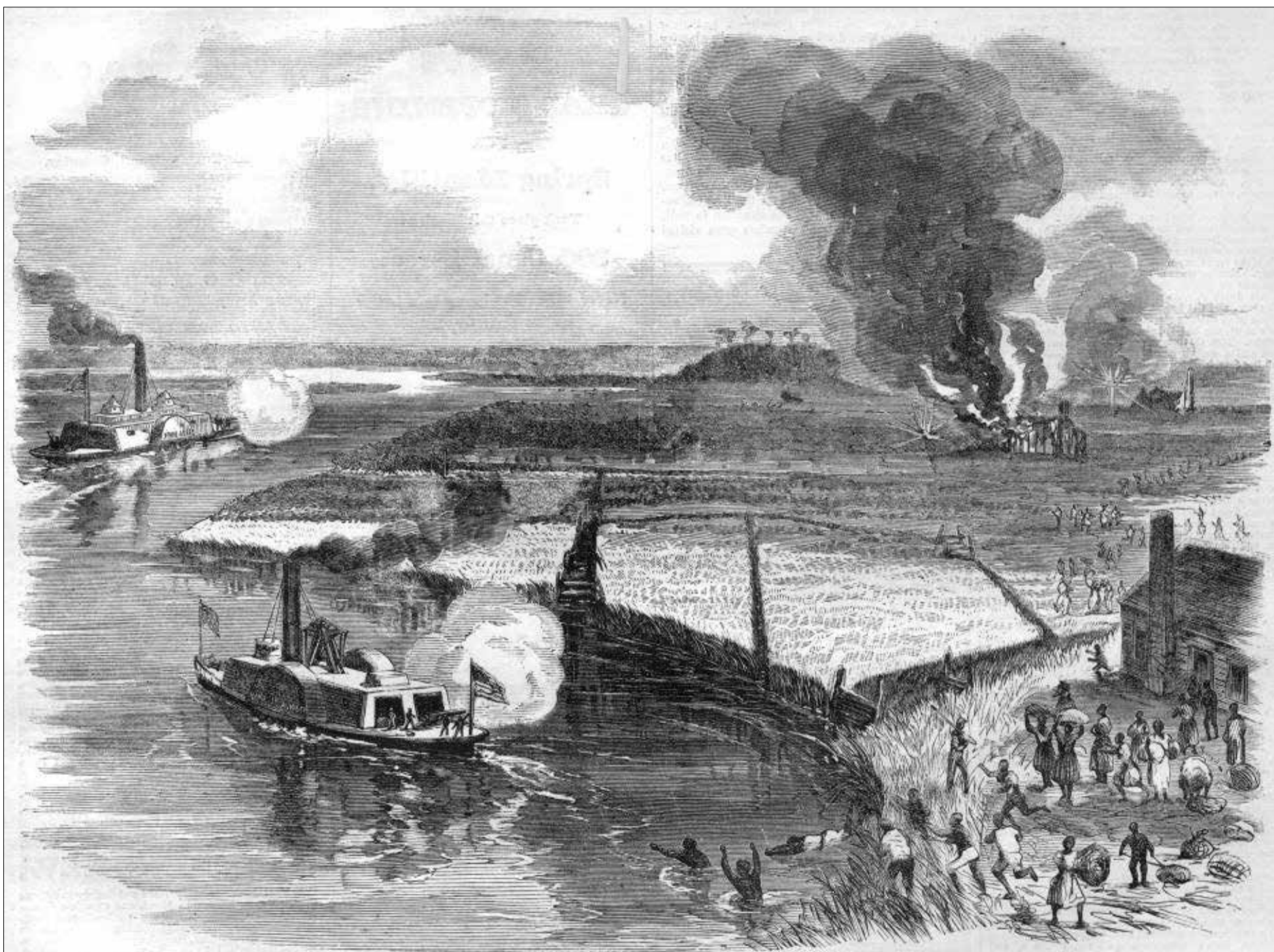
As the gunboats passed up the river, the [enslaved] Negroes left their work and took to the woods, for at first they were frightened. Then they came out to peer, “like startled deer.” ... The word was passed along that these were “Lincoln’s gunboats come to set them free.” From that moment on, the overseers used their whips in vain, for they failed to drive the slaves back to the quarters. They turned and ran for the [three] gun-boats; they came down every road, across every field, dressed just as they were when they left their work and their cabins. There were women with children clinging around their necks, hanging onto their dresses, or running behind, but all rushed at full speed for “Lincoln’s gun-boats.” Hundred crowded

the banks, with their hands extended toward their deliverers, and most of them were taken aboard the gun-boats to be carried to Beaufort.

This is about what happened all through the night and morning of June 2 when Harriet, Montgomery, and the colored soldiers overran the Combahee.<sup>2</sup> 

#### Notes

1. Campaign on the Combahee," *The Commonwealth* (June 10, 1863), <http://www.harriettubman.com/tubman2.html>.
2. A general usually doesn't ask; he gives orders. But Harriet had an odd role," explains Thomas B. Allen in his book *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent* (p. 145). Although she was a civilian, she was also attached to the Union army as a spy and scout. She could spend "secret service" funds, enabling her to work on her own, outside the army chain of command.



# An “Urgent Brief”: Social Studies and Writing Skills

Thomas N. Turner, Jeremiah C. Clabough, and William Cole

Any writer will tell you that writing skills and talent are not static, but dynamic. Even mature authors hope to keep growing in clarity, originality, and eloquence. Educators and psychologists have studied children as they learn to write, and they all note that the process is developmental. For example, students can be observed progressing from recording facts in a sentence, to pairing ideas in “couplets,” to organizing “couplet collections,” and finally to composing complete paragraphs.<sup>1</sup> If we help students put their skills to work regularly, they’ll produce increasingly complex and meaningful works, but for many, it’s a difficult challenge. Maybe for most of us, writing well is a long-term (indeed, lifelong) effort.

How can we, who teach in the middle grades, encourage and support the process of learning to write? Embedding brief writing tasks in social studies lessons can promote the understanding of historical, political, and geographic content—as well as promote writing skills. Educational associations seem to support such an approach. The National Council of Teachers of English has stressed that utilizing innovative strategies can help children learn to write.<sup>2</sup> The Association for Middle Level Education’s *This We Believe* has advocated an interdisciplinary approach to the middle school years.<sup>3</sup> And while National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies lists ten themes that emphasize content, this book also offers a sharp focus on “processes” (what the learners will be capable of doing) and “products” (how learners will demonstrate understanding)—which very often involve writing.<sup>4</sup>

This article briefly describes four writing strategies to implement in the middle school social studies classroom: creating “historical tweets,” composing “historical memos,” using historical photographs as writing prompts, and encouraging expressive writing after students read descriptive articles. These strategies are handy because they can be paired with almost any social studies content (history, geography, civics, etc.) and because they are brief: the time required to explain the assignment and to enact it is not long.

## Tweeting: It’s More than Whistling

Most middle school students have a working knowledge of “tweeting” as a social media tool. A tweet is a short electronic message, typically consisting of 140 characters at most, made with the use of the Twitter application. Ask students to assume the roles of a historical figure and then create tweets about their characters’ accomplishments, aspirations, or opinions. The teacher can have students create a tweet with the standard length of 140 characters or an extend length as needed. Part of the challenge, however, is to use words efficiently in a short statement. No filler or fluff is allowed here.

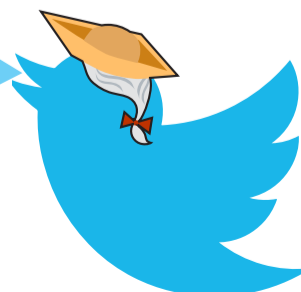
Challenge students to apply their content knowledge as they tweet, but also invite them to write unique or imaginative statements. This activity allows students to demonstrate their knowledge of a historical figure’s contributions, but also to convey emotions and imagined details. You could provide the humorous example below to students as a model for a tweet. This one consists of only 135 characters.



Viking Raiders, 845 C.E. France.  
Today’s forecast: Strong chance  
of looting, pillaging, & maim-  
ing. Give us enough gold & we’ll  
invade nevermore. Odin’s honor.

These days, twitter wars often arise when popular culture figures (like movie stars) have arguments over trivial differences of opinion. Students could examine multiple perspectives about an event by conducting “historical twitter wars.” Select an event and create an opinionated tweet to start the conversation. Students can then create tweets in response that agree or disagree with your initial opinion. This exchange can be the starting point for a deeper discussion about a historical event or a current issue. For an example of a conversation starter, here is a 128-character tweet “from one of the Sons of Liberty about the Boston Tea Party:”

Tea in the Sea, 1773  
C.E. Wonderful time at  
Indian costume party.  
Boston Harbor. No  
theft, but dumped tea  
overboard. King George  
III took one for  
liberty.



Tweets can reveal students' misconceptions. Ambiguities or errors in the message provide opportunities for clarifying discussions. For example, maybe the tweet above reveals that its student author thinks that King George III owned the tea, instead of the East Indies Company. You can ask the author to find out what he or she was thinking. You can also ask students to revise an erroneous tweet so that it's factually correct. Can they keep the corrected tweet short, under 140 characters?

A key aspect of this activity is that students are slowing down the process of writing to consider the language that they used in writing about a historical event. Writing efficiently, with few words, can be challenging. On the other hand, a Twitter message is so brief that revising it doesn't seem like an agonizing task.

### E-mail Messages

E-mails are a natural and familiar form for short writing assignments. Reading and writing e-mails is a daily routine for many adults and teens. E-mails are typically completed in minutes, and often support social networking. For our purposes here, we'll focus on a few specific types of messages for use in historical and geographical contexts. E-mail invitations let people know about events and changes that are about to happen. Sometimes, a reply is requested by an RSVP (*Repondez s'il vous plait*, or "respond if you please").

### E-mail Invitations

To relate this kind of assignment to history, let students choose a single event relative to the period they are studying. Have them write an announcement that might have been sent by one of the key figures involved at the time, imagining that they had e-mail in those days. Encourage students to use humor, but also to do enough research to include accurate, factual information for that time and place. Students may need a list of possibilities from which to select. For example, during a unit on the American Revolution, topics might include: a call to the Second Continental Congress for an important vote; Washington informing the army at Valley Forge that they were going to start drilling with General Von Steuben; and "battle invitations" like this one:

*Dec. 25, 1777.*

*Gentlemen:*

*This Christmas we will be taking a riverboat cruise followed by a nine-mile evening stroll. Then we will be visiting our Hessian friends in the picturesque town of Trenton. Since we expect the weather to be dicey and the river icy, dress warmly and keep your rifles and your powder dry.*

*—Geo. Washington*  
**PS. BYOB** (*Bring your own boat*).  
*I'll be the guy sitting in the bow of the lead boat.*

### E-mail Updates and Directives

Whereas invitations announce future plans, updates aim to let people know about news, and directives give instructions. Such messages are often addressed to single individuals. For a unit on the "Great Depression," for example, students might write brief notifications of the Stock Market Crash; a strongly worded request for payment to an investor who has bought on margin; proposals for work to be done by each of the Roosevelt "alphabet agencies;" or a description of a pivotal bank failure.

*Yesterday, December 20, 1930, some 2,500 of our investors withdrew a little over two million from our Southern Boulevard Branch in the Bronx. Police had to be called to control the 20,000 or so other people outside the bank. Since a lot more people want their money today, we are closing the Bank of the United States and turning its assets over to the Superintendent of Banks. Everyone can line up outside of somebody else's bank now.*

### E-mail Negotiations

E-mails can be exchanged to set up meetings or to suggest solutions to problems that involve two or more parties. Imagining how negotiations could have proceeded in past eras, while assuming the roles of key historical persons, can be a useful writing assignment. For a unit on the Middle Ages, students might be assigned to write e-mails arranging the meeting between King John and the nobles at Runnymede; Polo's setting up an audience with Kublai Khan; or Richard I of England ending the Third Crusade by seeking peace with Saladin.

*To Saladin Yusuf ibn Ayyub, the Merciful, Sultan of Egypt and Syria, and all-around great general:*

*I really admire your work, and you have a rep. as a fair and square dude. We seem pretty well matched. I beat you at Arsul and you surprised me and whipped my boys at Ascalon. By the way, thanks for the two warhorses that you sent when mine was killed at Arsul. You seem to be a class act. So let's not fight anymore. Here's the deal I'm offering—My sister, Joan of England, Queen of Sicily, will marry your brother. I'll give them Jerusalem for a wedding present. Then I can go home and you can go home. My people can meet with your people to work out the details.*

*(Hopefully) Your friend:  
Richard, King of England  
and Head Crusader, Third Crusade*

P.S. You may call me *Coeur de Leon* if you like.

## E-mail Explanations

E-mails and memos are regularly used in both business and personal communications to convey facts, directions, or procedures. Such activity can be easily creatively transformed into a writing assignment for history. If, for instance, the class was engaged in a unit on ancient Egypt, students could be asked to outline a route from Thebes to the Valley of the Kings; to describe the burial chamber of Tutankhamen, to explain how a shadow of works; or to relate the Egyptian idea of what happened to the soul after death (described in the example below). Such assignments teach students to create word pictures, perceive a variety of factors, and think things through.

When the funeral procession reached the tomb, a ceremony was performed in which the mouth and eyes of the mummy were cut open in order for the person to defend his soul in the afterlife. The deceased was then ready to confront several gods (including gods called Bone-Crusher, Shining-Tooth, Blood-Consumer, Entrails-Consumer, and Flint Eyes) and deny any wrong doings. Denial was believed to have the magical ability to make these deeds as though they never happened. The suppliant then had to cry, "I am pure" three times. Anubis then led the deceased by the hand into the hall of Maat, goddess of justice, truth, and order. There, the heart of the dead was placed on one side of a scale to be weighed against a feather on the other. An evil heart is heavy, and Ammut, Devourer of the dead, is waiting to destroy the deceased eternally. But if the heart is pure and light, Thoth, the god of wisdom, records that fact, and Horus leads the soul to meet Osiris.

## Describing an Image

Visual materials of all kinds can be the basis of a variety of writing assignments. Paintings, drawings, and photos can help students write about history. The following description of a photo might be used as a model to get students to write their own paragraph.

A young girl, her age hard to determine, stands in a stark hallway. Behind her is a giant textile machine. It stretches away behind her until it blurs out of sight. It reaches toward us until we feel like it's going to flatten us. The girl stands with the sleeves of her dress pushed up past her elbows. Her hair is in pigtails. Her shoes

are too big for her feet. She stares, with her back to the giant churning machine, out a window in a cold brick wall, with a look on her face that is both childlike and resigned.

When the teacher put this image up on the screen, students made sympathetic sounds. They stared at the glowing picture for a while and then picked up their pens, writing about what they saw.

Teachers commonly show images from history to illustrate points and give students visual representations of a concept. An image can be used to introduce a topic (in which case students can be invited to use their imagination as they write a caption), or it can be used as an assessment (in which case students apply what they have learned in class to the specific situation shown in an image they have not seen before).

Here are guidelines for maximizing the effectiveness of this technique:

1. The image should represent a concept related to the unit of study. For example, the picture of the girl mentioned above was used to illustrate child labor and living conditions during the industrial revolution in America.
2. The images should evoke emotions, encouraging students to form a personal connection with the people pictured. These emotions can be positive or negative. The goal is to make students feel, then write about their feelings as well as describe what they see.
3. The images should be as rich in historical detail as possible. For example, a photograph of a building is not as rich an image as one with people gathered in front of it, dressed in the fashion of the times.

At the beginning of a unit of study, the teacher can give students plenty of time to study a new photograph, while offering little or no direction. Then, the teacher can answer a few questions about the image, meanwhile revealing when and where it was taken. Once the students have studied the photo, the teacher can give them a short (caption) or long (paragraph) writing prompt. For example, "Write a short paragraph telling me what this girl is feeling and why." Encourage reluctant students by reassuring them that "there is no right or wrong answer" to this type of question. "It's okay to use your imagination." After they've written their paragraphs, students can discuss their perceptions. Be sure to praise students for their work, and provide new information about the context of the photo. This completes your introduction to the unit.



A typical spinner, Mamie. Lancaster Cotton Mills. Lancaster, S.C., December 1908 (Lewis Hine).

U.S. National Archives' Local Identifier: 102-LH-355

## Descriptive Articles and Expressive Writing

The hardest part of writing for most students is getting started. One way to help them is to use expressive articles as writing prompts. Look for articles that both relate to the subject being studied and contain lots of descriptive language. (The article or piece of writing could come from a textbook, a trade book, a classroom magazine, or from a website.)

Have students read the article silently, and then instruct them to select the most expressive term from each paragraph in the article and list these terms on a sheet of paper. Provide an example of an unfamiliar vocabulary word in the article, and then invite students to ask questions about any other unfamiliar words. Students can then add all of these words to their lists. In short, rather than hand students a vocabulary list at the outset, lead the class in a discussion during which each student constructs a vocabulary list. While referring to their vocabulary lists, students can compose a summary of the article. How to begin? Write a sentence using a word or two from the top of your vocabulary list.

## Conclusion

In our information age, every citizen needs to be able to participate in solving problems. To do that, we have to be able to communicate our ideas clearly to one another—whether we are tweeting friends, e-mailing colleagues, writing a letter to our legislator, or creating captions for images sent to someone on the other side of the planet. Short writing assignments, such as those described here, can be used in meaningful ways within social studies lessons.<sup>5</sup> They can help students learn to think carefully and then express themselves well in writing, even

as they are learning new content about history, geography, economics, or government. 🌐

## Notes

1. Carol A. Donovan and Laura B. Smolkin, "Supporting Informational Writing in the Elementary Grades," *The Reading Teacher* 64, no. 6 (2011): 406-414.
2. National Council of Teachers of English, *NCTE Beliefs about Writing* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2004), [www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs](http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs)
3. Association for Middle Level Education, *This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools* (Westerville, OH: AMLE, 2012), 30.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
5. Teachers who wish to read more in depth about integrating writing skills into their lessons could refer to these works:
  - Graham, Steve, and Michael Hebert, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve* (Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
  - A theme issue ("Reading and Writing in the Content Areas") of *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 2 (October 2004) featured useful articles—"The Power of Voice" by Tom Romano; "Putting Gel Pen to Paper" by Michael Yell; and "Writing First" by Peter Elbow—that are free online at [www.ascd.org/books-publications.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/books-publications.aspx).

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