

**Lesson
One**

What does it mean to be free?

Aims

In this lesson we are going to learn about:


- the meaning of the terms 'freedom' and 'slavery'
- the beginning of the slave trade in Africa
- the transatlantic slave trade

Context

In this module we will be looking at black peoples of America: from slavery to equality. Here we look at what it means to be free and why that idea is so important.




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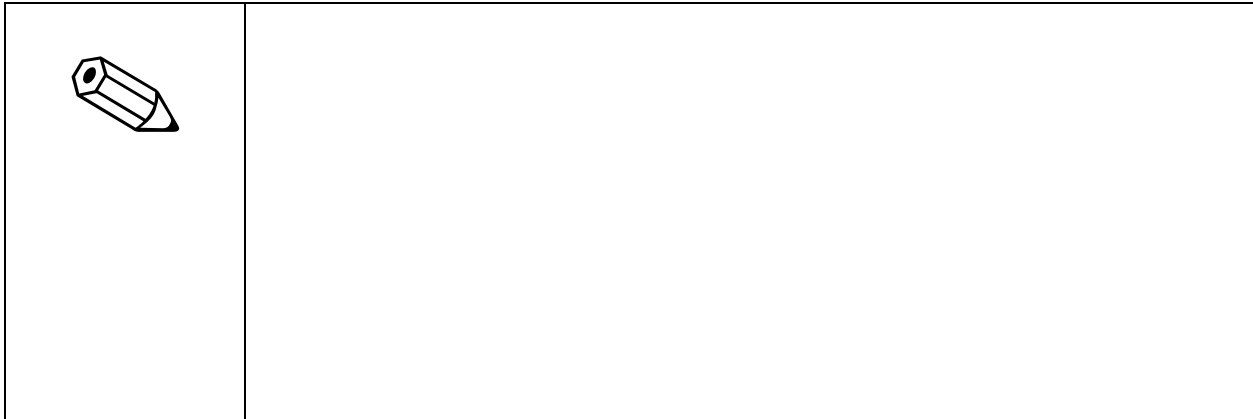
Activity 1	What do you know about slavery? What does it mean? Can you think of examples? For one minute, jot down everything you can think of.
	

Freedom!

We live in a democracy where we have (hopefully) certain guaranteed rights and freedom. In previous lessons we have looked at the issue of voting and considered whether people can be free if they do not have the vote. Slavery goes even further – people are not free at all. They do not have a say in who runs the government but also they do not have a say in what they do each day.

Activity 2	Brainstorm what 'freedom' means. What should freedom mean to people in Britain today? Are we free? Is everyone in the world free?
	

Activity 3	Brainstorm the word 'slavery'. What does it mean? Does slavery still exist in the world today?
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The meaning of the word 'freedom' is contentious and philosophers have spent years debating what it truly means. For the purpose of this module we shall take this as our definition of freedom:

Freedom – ability to act as one wishes, without restraint

Defining 'slavery' is harder still. Slavery is, to begin with, the opposite of freedom. Slaves must do what someone else demands. Slaves are not free to make their own choices about where they live, what they do, who they see, what religion they follow.

Sadly, slavery is still in existence today. In 2007, Britain celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade (we shall learn more about this in subsequent lessons), and a campaign called Stop the Traffik was launched to try to stop the slave trading which is still going on today.

Slavery has always existed – the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece would not have survived without slaves. It is thought that at times in Rome, there were more slaves than freemen. It is a sad fact that men have always controlled other men and treated them badly.

Investigate!



Find out more about the 200th anniversary celebrations and about the Stop the Traffik campaign.

Slavery in Africa

In this module we will be looking at the slave trade in Africa between the 15th and 19th centuries and the subsequent impact it had on America. The focus of the module is on America, but the issues raise interesting questions about the slave trade in Britain and in Africa so if you find the topic interesting you might like to carry out additional research.

Societies have always used slaves. Europeans arrived in Africa in 1415, but slavery existed before then. Some African tribes captured members of other tribes and kept them as slaves. They normally kept people as slaves for a short time and slaves could earn their freedom.

Some Muslim visitors to Africa had started transporting slaves to their lands abroad and about 5,000 Africans were taken overseas every year in the early 1400s. Slavery was in existence in Africa before Europeans found the continent, but it was Europeans who transformed it into a multi-million pound business which transported hundreds of thousands of slaves every year.

European Slave trade: the beginnings

In 1415, the Portuguese discovered West Africa. They transported a number of slaves back to Portugal and also sent some to work on their colonies in Madeira and the Canary Islands. It is estimated that, in the 16th century, about 10% of the population of Lisbon was descended from African slaves.

In 1492, Columbus discovered the West Indies and declared them for the Spanish who subsequently set up plantations over there. The Portuguese sold slaves to the Spanish to use on the plantations. Britain and France had also arrived in Africa by the 1600s and started capturing slaves to sell to the Spanish too. The slave trade had begun.

Africans were transported to America. A small number of black people had already moved to America as settlers or servants. Most black people who are in America now, however, originated from the slave trade in Africa. Moving black Africans into America had an enormous impact on the future of both continents.

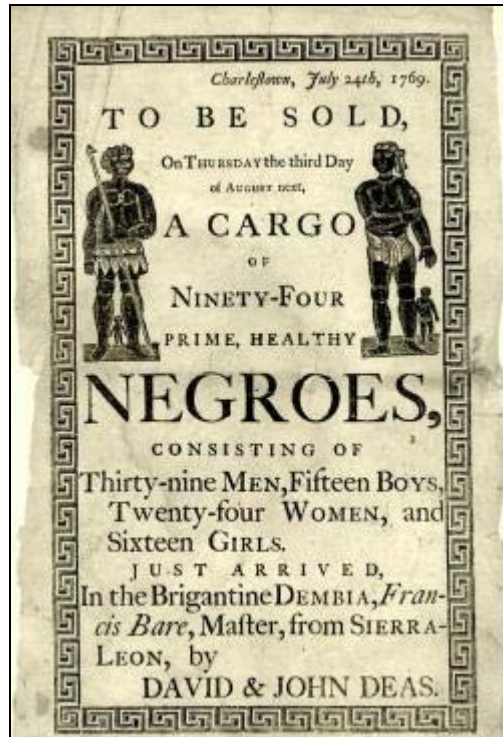
The transatlantic trade slave

The early slave trade had been dominated by the Spanish need for slaves for their plantations. By the 18th century, the British had plantations in America and the West Indies and now they went to Africa to find slaves for their own plantations.



There was a 'triangle of trade' in three stages:

- 1) **Ships went from Britain (or other European countries) to Africa.** The ships carried cotton and metal goods made in Britain, which the ship owners traded to Africans for slaves.
- 2) **Ships were filled with as many slaves as possible and travelled from Africa to America or the West Indies.** This is known as 'the middle passage'. The journey took about 100 days. Conditions onboard were cramped and disgusting. Many people died or became sick. Sick slaves were sometimes thrown overboard by the ship owners so they could receive insurance compensation. Once the ships arrived in American ports, the slaves were transported to nearby towns and sold at auction, for life as domestic servants or, more usually, on plantations. Families were often split up.
- 3) **Ships travelled back from America to Britain.** They took with them exports like tea, coffee, sugar, rum and raw cotton which the British used and sold on the excess. The raw cotton was particularly useful in the flourishing Lancashire cotton mills.



This is a reproduction of a handbill advertising a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1769.

Activity 4

Look at this photograph of a slave boat. This was actually taken in 1869, after the British had abolished slavery and it was taken as part of a campaign by some British people to abolish slavery elsewhere. The ship was probably not British, but this remains a useful and interesting source showing the conditions slaves travelled in.



- 1) Look at the people on board the ship. How many people are visible?
- 2) How old do you think the people on board are?
- 3) Why do you think is an unusual but useful source?



Slavery and Britain

The slave trade made Britain very wealthy. It undoubtedly had a positive impact on her economic and imperial power. Money from the slave trade funded much of the ingenuity and new machinery behind the industrial revolution. The imports Britain received from the plantations were sold on for significant profit. British exports were sold to Africa in exchange for slaves.

People who owned the slave ships made huge profits from cramming slaves into their small ships. It was not just the people directly involved with the slave trade who benefited, however. Industrialists and workers also benefited from the slave trade. Commerce and banking profited from all the money being brought home and needing minding.

The slave trade had a significant impact on port towns and cities in Britain. Glasgow, Bristol, London and Liverpool all grew rapidly as a result of the slave trade. The population of Liverpool increased from 5,000 in 1700 to 80,000 in 1800.

Thus, the slave trade had a very positive impact on the lives of British people of differing classes and contributed to the successes of the British Empire. For the Africans who found themselves transported across the seas to work as slaves for the rest of their lives, it was a very different story.

Activity 5

Imagine you are a British politician in 1800. Write a letter to your friend explaining the benefits of the slave trade.

