

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Citing Evidence from Primary Sources to Support Arguments Video Transcript

LeRoy Votto:

So what we're going to do is survey the reading on the Wendell Phillips speech of 1853. Take a look at the questions I posed, pick some passages, offer some explanation and analysis. And then after the writing is concluded, then meet together in your groups of three and just converse.

Student:

Our group believes that they need to be harsh.

Student:

I think their harshness is a necessity, and the reason why it's not too far...

Votto:

Well, this was one class in the sequence of classes on the study of the abolitionist movement exclusively through the sources.

Talk about it, exchange ideas, then later on we'll meet together as a whole class.

We investigate every topic that we study through primary sources. I give some context written in additional notes, they'll read the document, they'll read it carefully, they'll annotate it at night, they'll come back for the next class and they'll write about what they have read. I'll either introduce a prompt or it will be kind of a you pick them. Say something interesting about this particular document. The general game plan here is to have the students arrive at their own conclusions about the nature of the abolitionist movement, the core beliefs, an appreciation of the language that the abolitionists used. Using the primary sources has all sorts of benefits. You really get a tremendously rich education in how argument is structured, in how it's presented. I try to use the in-class writing as a way of sort of opening up the topic.

Student:

When I was writing I was talking a lot about how he uses Christianity...

Votto:

And then using the class discussion as a way of deepening their understanding.

Student:

So he's using things like Christianity to get these people to feel more personal.

Student:

No, I think like I actually think like bringing God into his speech so much was good because it connected the audience really to like his message. They might actually be like more convinced by it.

Student:

They had to pick a side and a lot of people weren't comfortable with having to do that. The only reason this institution is staying around is because you're just selfish.

Student:

Abolitionists, for them to leave their church is like such a statement.

Student:

His views are like on par. Like that he has really good views. He just needs to have more respect for the people that he's trying to convert.

Student:

He also just used like really strong metaphors. Like on page seven when he was talking about slavery as like the South as one great block. "Where half a million of women are flogged to prostitution, or worse still are degraded to believe it is honorable."

Votto:

I want them to actually take me and the rest of the class exactly to that passage. In their papers I expect to see citations from passages that are quoted and for passages that are referenced. I want them to anchor their ideas into the source.

And now what we're going to do is take some of those ideas that you talked about in the small groups and share them with the entire class. Do you think that there's something that just is too antagonistic about this movement? Is it too combative, too confrontational? Or do you feel that they're basically on the right track?

Student:

They're really attacking the Southerners and just like the slaveholders for like just being sinners and being like criminals. And I think that that's a little harsh sometimes.

Student:

Our group believed that they need to be harsh. It relates to the metaphor that Garrison made about the... you wouldn't moderately save someone from a burning building. You need to be aggressive and just go all out with your cause.

Votto:

You feel that does have some kind of productive, positive results?

Student:

Yeah.

Student:

You have to like understand that like this is like a way of life for them and--

Sophie:

One of my classmates kind of discussed that it was really harsh for maybe someone who it was like part of their community, that slavery was part of their community, it was the norm. And they might not have really thought of it as even a bad thing. But from reading this text I've really become empathetic for how terrible it was. And I think it is necessary that he was like severe in his speech, that he spoke of like how horrific slavery really was and that it needs to be changed and how adamant he was with that I think is just like... I think it was completely necessary.

Votto:

Through the process of the discussion I want to see if they're actually listening to each other.

Student:

I was just going to go back to Gwen's point of...

Votto:

I like it when they say, "As so and so said," "As Chloe said."

Student:

A lot of people were choosing to ignore the fact that slavery is a sin and that it was so terrible. So I think that it's important that it's just sparking the conversation and making them pick a side. So that they no longer can ignore this terrible thing that's going on. They have to face it and they have to live with themselves picking one side or the other.

Votto:

They're making us talk.

Student:

Yes.

Votto:

About something that nobody wanted to talk about before Garrison came around.

What you're doing in the discussion, you're trying to connect ideas one to another, you're trying to bring out some people who maybe are quieter. Anybody else that hasn't had a chance to say anything?

Student:

Just going off of Chloe's point on what I personally would have liked to see in the speech, on page 13 he's already noted religion and politics in the speech. And I thought it was cool that he would bring arts into the mix with Uncle Tom's Cabin and how that brought in a number of people into his cause.

Votto:

In a democracy, people have a voice, people should also be thoughtful about exercising that voice, but not timid. So I'm hoping that the discussion, even though at times it might not get right to the point and we may be sometimes off on the periphery, I'm hoping that students have at least had an opportunity to find a voice about ideas and about issues.

Do you want to read this? I think this is really a powerful paragraph on 13 and continues onto 14, I believe.

Student:

"Going up and down the land, coming into close contact with the feelings and prejudices of the community, he is sometimes a better judge than you are of its present state. An abolitionist has more motives for watching and more means of finding out the true state of public opinion than most of those careless critics who jeer at his assertions today and are the first to cry just what I said when his prophecy becomes fact tomorrow."