

Nat Turner Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Was Nat Turner a hero or a madman?

Materials:

- Classroom Textbook Passage on Nat Turner
- Copies of Nat Turner Timeline
- Transparency of Document A
- Copies of Nat Turner Documents A-C
- Copies of Nat Turner Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: *Today we're going to read about a slave who led a rebellion in 1831. Before we begin, let's see what the textbook says.*

Have students read section in classroom textbook about Nat Turner.

Based on the textbook (and anything else you might know), what kind of person do you think Nat Turner was?

Share student answers.

2. Transition. Hand out TIMELINES. Read through timelines and explain:

Today we're going to read three documents that evaluate the kind of person Nat Turner was. We need to decide which of these characterizations we believe.

3. Hand out Document A and have students watch as you practice cognitive modeling of sourcing.

First, I'm going to model SOURCING on Document A.

The Confessions is a tricky document, so I am going to model how to source it. When we source, we always ask how wrote it and when, and what their motivation might have been.

Let's look at the sourcing information at the bottom of the page. We see here that these confessions were made by Nat Turner to a lawyer in prison, and then they were read at his trial.

So right away we want to ask—is this a trustworthy source? We know that Thomas Gray was a lawyer, but was he Turner's lawyer? Is he trying to defend Turner? I don't know. I'm surprised that slaves even had lawyers, but my guess

is that if this lawyer is getting his confession, he's not necessarily trying to get him off the hook.

I also see at the top here that the title says "fully and voluntarily made." I guess that Gray wanted people to believe that he was getting the whole truth. This makes me think that Gray might be more interested in publishing this sensational story than with defending Turner. I'm not sure that I totally trust the account in this document. I will read more and find out. I want to know what Turner has to say.

4. Students complete Guiding Questions for Document A.
5. Review student answers. Discuss Gray's perspective and whether it's trustworthy.
6. Have students read and complete Guiding Questions for Documents B and C.
7. Discussion Questions:
 - Who was Nat Turner? Was he a hero or a madman?
 - What is your evidence?
 - What other evidence would you like to have to inform your decision?
 - Why do the characterizations in Documents A, B, and C differ?
 - Which do you think is most trustworthy?
 - How does the passage of time affect how people view(ed) Turner?
 - How do you think most people today would characterize Turner?

Citations:

Thomas Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, in the Prison Where He Was Confined, Nov. 5, 1831, For His Trial.*

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>

"The Southampton Tragedy." *The Richmond Enquirer*. Virginia, 27 September 1831.

Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address To The Slaves Of The United States" (1843).

<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1843-henry-highland-garnet-address-slaves-united-states>

Nat Turner Timeline: 1831

August 22

The rebellion begins with Nat Turner and his group of men.

August 23

Nat's army disassembles after killing 55 white men, women, and children. Nat disappears. An army is set out to bring him in.

October 30

Nat is captured after 70 days.

November 1-4

Thomas Gray visits Nat and compiles *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

November 5

At his trial, Nat pleads his innocence but is found guilty as an insurgent and is sentenced to be hanged.

November 11

Nat is hanged. He hurries the hangman and dies at noon.

adapted from: <http://www.nathanieltturner.com/nttimeline.htm>

Document A (Modified)

The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray

[To the Public]

Thomas R. Gray: Public curiosity has tried to understand Nat Turner's motives behind his diabolical actions. Everything connected with the rebellion was wrapped in mystery, until Nat Turner the leader of the violent and savage band, was captured. I was determined to end public curiosity and write down Nat Turner's statements, and publish them, with little or no change, from his own words.

Nathaniel Turner:

As I child, I knew I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had showed me visions of things that had happened before my birth. My father and mother said I was intended for some great purpose. I was a child of uncommon intelligence and I knew I was never meant to be a slave. To a mind like mine, restless, curious and observant of every thing that was happening, religion became the subject that occupied all of my thoughts.

Thomas R. Gray: Nat Turner is a complete fanatic. The calm way he spoke of his late actions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him. I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.

Vocabulary

diabolical: evil, like the devil

prophet: a person God chose to protect and lead people

fanatic: intense dedication to an idea

fiend: monster, demon, devil

Source: These confessions were narrated to lawyer Thomas R. Gray in prison where Nat Turner was held after his capture on October 30, 1831. His confessions were published on November 5, 1831 for his trial.

Document B (Modified)

I am led to believe, from all that I can learn, that Nat Turner has been planning his mischief and disruption for quite some time. After pretending to be inspired to rebel by God, he made his announcement of rebellion to the Blacks. He has used every means in his power, to gain control over the minds of the slaves. A dreamer of dreams and a would-be Prophet, he used all the arts familiar to such pretenders, to trick, confuse and overwhelm the slave's minds.

Source: Editor. "The Southampton Tragedy." The Richmond Enquirer. Virginia, 27 September 1831.

Document C (Modified)

You had far better all die—*die immediately*, than live slaves, and throw your misery upon your children. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of freedom without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once--rather *die freemen, than live to be slaves*.

The patriotic Nathaniel Turner was driven to desperation by the wrong and injustice of slavery. By force, his name has been recorded on the list of dishonor, but future generations will remember him among the noble and brave.

Source: Henry Highland Garnet speech, "An Address To The Slaves Of The United States" (1843). Garnet's speech was delivered at the National Negro Convention of 1843 held in Buffalo, New York. The convention drew 70 delegates including leaders like Frederick Douglass.

Guiding Questions

Name _____

Document A

1. Who wrote this document? When and where was it published? What kind of publication is it?
2. Describe Nat Turner according to himself.
3. Describe Nat Turner according to Gray's introduction and conclusion notes.
4. Is there a contradiction between Turner and Gray's description? How and why?
5. Is this a trustworthy source? Does this account of Turner's character seem believable? Explain.

Document B

1. Who wrote this document? When and where was it published? What kind of publication is it?
2. Who is the author of his article speaking to? How do you know this? How does his **audience** affect what he says and how he says it?
3. According to the author of this article, what kind of person is Nat Turner? Think about when this article was written: How might its publication date affect how the author represents Turner? Refer to your timeline if necessary.
4. Is this a trustworthy source? Explain.

Document C

1. Who wrote this document? When? How long after the Turner rebellion was this document written?
2. Who is the author of this document speaking to? How does his **audience** affect what he says and how he says it?
3. According to the author of this speech, what kind of person is Nat Turner? What proof does he provide to illustrate that Turner is this type of person?
4. Why does this author think of Nat Turner in this way? Think about when this article was written: How does the author's historical context shape how he thinks of and represents Turner?
5. Is this interpretation of Turner trustworthy? Why or why not?

In the space below, use information from all three documents to answer the question:
What kind of person was Nat Turner?