

The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass

Professor David W. Blight

Spring 2023

Course Description

These twelve lectures, the readings, and the discussions are to probe the nature of the life, the work, and the thought of the nineteenth-century abolitionist, orator, and author Frederick Douglass. We will examine in depth the public and private sides of Douglass's life, his importance as a thinker and as a political activist in the great dramas of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras.

Course Readings

1. Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.
2. Buccola, Nicholas. *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*. New York: NYU Press, 2013. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
3. Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Edited by David W. Blight. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
4. Foner, Philip S., and Yuval Taylor, eds. *The Selected Writings of Frederick Douglass*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Contribute to nine discussion boards
- Complete five short papers (1–2 pages)
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page paper or project of appropriate rigor

Learning Objectives

1. To learn and understand the full trajectory of Frederick Douglass's life from 1818 to 1895, as a saga both public and private for one of the most important Americans of the nineteenth century. Douglass's life will be presented in many contexts and through some of the most pivotal events of the century, including slavery's role in disunion, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age retreat from the emancipationist victories of the era Douglass helped to shape.
2. To read and understand Douglass as a writer and an orator. He was a genius with words and left millions of them for us to study in almost all genres—autobiography, short-form editorials, one work of fiction, and thousands of speeches, some of which

are the rhetorical masterpieces of American abolitionism and American letters generally.

3. To grasp and analyze Douglass as a political thinker and actor in the slavery crisis, the war, the great issues of Reconstruction, and concepts such as race, natural rights, memory, modernity, the arts, the nature of the human imagination, and the nature of oppression and resistance against it.

Class Schedule

Week 1: February 9: "A Childhood of Extremes": Douglass's Slave Youth

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 1–3.
- Douglass, first half, and make sure to read James McCune Smith's introduction.

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
-

Week 2: February 16: "Baltimore Dreams" and Escape from Slavery

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 4–7.
- Douglass, second half.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - Short Paper One due February 22
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week 3: February 23: The Making of an Orator and a Writer

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 8–11.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 3–9, 10–20, 55–83.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
- Final Paper/Project Topic due March 1
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the topic of your final research paper or project. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, and a justification for why your particular paper or project is worth pursuing.

Q&A Session One: Wednesday, March 1 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 4: March 2: Independence: Douglass as Editor and His Transition to Political Abolitionism

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 12–14.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 97–100, 111–117, 122–133, 146–150, 163–170, 176–182, 275–282, 282–331.
- Buccola, skim the first half.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - Short Paper Two due March 8
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week 5: March 9: Douglass and Biblical Story: Hope, Despair, and the Coming of the Civil War

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 15–16.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 188–205, 206–209, 219–246, 271–273, 342–390, 417–422.
- Buccola, skim the second half.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
- Revised Topic Proposal and Proposed Bibliography due March 15
 1. Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND

2. Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.

Q&A Session Two: Wednesday, March 15 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 6: March 16: "The Kindling Spirit of His Battle Cry": Douglass and the Meaning of the Civil War

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 17–21.
- Foner and Taylor, read as much as possible from Parts 5 and 6, especially the *Douglass Monthly* editorials from 1861, and then the major speeches for 1862–1864, particularly "Men of Color to Arms!," "Our Work Is Not Done," and "Mission of the War."

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
- Short Paper Three due March 22
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session Three: Wednesday, March 22 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 7: March 23: Othello's New Occupations: Douglass and the Rise and Fall of Reconstruction

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 22–23.
- Foner and Taylor, read as much of Part 7 on Reconstruction as possible, but especially the two pieces in *North American Review* and the *Atlantic*, as well as "Oration in Honor of Abraham Lincoln."

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
- Short Paper Four due March 29
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week 8: March 30: The Aging Douglass: Radical Outsider Becomes the Political Insider

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 25–26.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 615–624.

Assignments

- Paper/Project Preview due April 5
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper.
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Week 9: April 6: Ventures and Failures

Readings

- Blight, Chapter 24.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 625–684.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
- Short Paper Five due April 12
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week 10: April 13: “Joys and Sorrows at Cedar Hill”: Douglass’s Troubled Extended Family

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 27–29.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 685–692 and all documents related to women’s rights and suffrage.

Assignments

- Rough Draft due April 19

- Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages (at minimum) of your final paper.
- Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Q&A Session Four: Wednesday, April 19 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 11: April 20: Douglass and Haiti: Diplomat Trapped between Two Masters

Readings

- Blight, Chapters 30–31.
- Foner and Taylor, pp. 724–740.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine

Q&A Session Five: Wednesday, April 26 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 12: April 27: Douglass and the American Conscience in the Age of Jim Crow and Lynching

Readings

- Blight, Epilogue.
- Foner and Taylor, all relevant speeches and documents on violence and lynching in Part 8.

Assignments

- Final Paper/Project due May 3

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers

Throughout each term students will complete five short papers. Each of these assignments should be 1–2 pages in length, in 12 pt. font, and double-spaced. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings.

Discussion Board Posts

Students will respond to nine virtual discussion board posts for each course. Discussion boards are led by the section professor, who will provide an analytical prompt related to course material and instructions for participation. These prompts will give students the opportunity to interact with fellow students and share their interpretation of course themes.

Question-and-Answer Sessions

Throughout the semester the lead scholar of each course will conduct five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, students must complete a 1–2 paragraph evaluation within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If students cannot attend three of the five Q&A sessions, they may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 1–2 page review of topics covered for each missed Q&A.

Final Paper/Project

For the final assignment of each term, students will choose to complete either a 15-page research paper or a research project. The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts, documentary editing and transcription, podcasts, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans *will not* be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. The section professor must approve research projects.

Both final assignment options require students to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that they do not yet know the answer to. They will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether students choose to pursue a paper or project, papers and projects are broken down into smaller assignments, or scaffolded, throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows students time to incorporate instructor feedback into their assignment.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Paper/Project Proposal (2%):

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final paper or project. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information on and historical context for your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be very specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing), and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (What is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked, such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%):

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan to use in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Paper or Project Preview (5%):

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- Rough Draft (10.5%):

For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- Final Product (21%):

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers.

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.