

Inquiry Activities for the American Writers Museum's *American Voices* Exhibit

These activities draw upon the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning, which is a **collaborative search for answers to meaningful questions**.

Shared Inquiry is a **teaching stance** that emphasizes:

- Genuine curiosity and divergent thinking
- Open-ended questioning
- Students listening to and learning from each other
- Civil discourse, even when disagreement is strong

When conducting any of these activities, focus on modeling curiosity and asking questions about students' ideas, rather than validating or paraphrasing responses. It's also helpful to encourage students to ask each other questions and respond directly to one another.

For more about Shared Inquiry, see the video found [here](#).

Activity Options



Big Ideas: Exploring exhibit themes



Connect and Compare: Making and analyzing a text connection to exhibit content



Author's Craft: Close reading of a text excerpt connected to the exhibit



Written Response: Writing about ideas connected to exhibit materials and concepts
(Think Like a Writer and Historical Context options)

Note: You may choose to link the Author's Craft and Written Response activities by having students write in response to an author's craft exploration.

Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.
2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.
3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.
4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.

About the Great Books Foundation

Founded in 1947, the Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that creates reading and discussion programs for students and adults with the conviction that literacy and critical thinking help form reflective and well-informed citizens.

For more about us, visit greatbooks.org.



Activities for *American Voices: The New Nation*

William Apess

Big Ideas

Activity Summary

Students explore a theme or concept relevant to the exhibit.

Student learning objectives

- To activate and build background knowledge related to the exhibit
- To deepen connections to important ideas in the exhibit

Time needed: 10–15 minutes per question

Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) one of the suggested questions to explore.
2. Choose whether to have students share their ideas verbally (in pairs or small groups) or in writing.
3. If desired, have students share their ideas in a larger group and/or extend their written response.

Suggested Questions

- Why do many people want to know more about their ancestors and their cultural heritage? What does your knowledge of your own background mean to you?
- What do you know about Native American life in the eighteenth century or about the Pequot tribe of Connecticut?
- What do you think motivates authors to write memoirs? Why might sharing a life story be important to someone?

Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
- 3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.**
- 4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.**

Connect and Compare

Activity Summary

Students make and explore a text connection to exhibit information and concepts.

Student learning objectives

- To identify and articulate a significant text connection to exhibit content
- To explore different ways of connecting to exhibit content by sharing responses

Time needed: 25–35 minutes

Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) whether to brainstorm ideas verbally before writing.
2. Share the graphic organizer with students (see page 7). If needed, model how you would begin to complete the organizer (see the example on pages 5–6).
3. Have students share and compare their completed graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.

Suggested connection prompt

In the exhibit, Kelly Wisecup, an assistant professor of English, says that William Apess exposed the “hypocrisy and errors in representing Native people as vanished or as savages” in his writings. What is another text like *A Son of the Forest* that you think shows how a group of people has been misunderstood or misrepresented?

Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.
2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.
3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.
4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.

Connect and Compare

Example

William Apess's *A Son of the Forest*

In the exhibit, Kelly Wisecup, an assistant professor of English, says that William Apess exposed the “hypocrisy and errors in representing Native people as vanished or as savages” in his writings. What is another text like *A Son of the Forest* that you think shows how a group of people has been misunderstood or misrepresented?

Text you connect with *A Son of the Forest*: *Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

<p>This text is: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> an autobiography <input type="checkbox"/> a biography <input type="checkbox"/> a novel <input type="checkbox"/> something else _____</p> <p>When was this text published? 1969</p> <p>When and where do the events in the text take place? 1930s and 1940s Stamps, Arkansas; St. Louis, Missouri; San Francisco, California</p> <p>What are some important parts of the main character's identity (race, gender, etc.)? Black American woman</p>	<p>What kinds of challenges does the main character face? List as many as you can.</p> <p>Maya's parents get divorced when she is three, and she and her brother are sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas; town is segregated and there is a lot of racism</p> <p>Maya and her brother move to St. Louis to live with their mother, and a family friend attacks Maya; she stops talking to almost everyone</p> <p>Maya and her brother move back to Stamps, where Maya works for white people and experiences more racism</p> <p>When Maya is 13, the family moves to California and her mother remarries. When she is 15, she becomes the city's first Black streetcar conductor</p> <p>Maya graduates from high school and has a baby</p>
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Example, continued

How do parts of the main character's identity (race, gender, etc.) affect the life experiences described in the text? How does the main character learn and grow?

Maya faces a lot of racism in *Stamps and St. Louis*. She sees Black people having to work for low wages in the cotton fields and sees violence against them. She also hears a speaker at her eighth-grade graduation say that Black students should be servants. Growing up, she is insecure and thinks she isn't as pretty or smart as white girls.

Maya learns to stand up for herself and be proud of who she is. Bertha Flowers, in *Stamps*, helps her by having her read parts of books out loud. Finally, Maya becomes self-confident enough to get work as a San Francisco streetcar conductor when she is just 15. She is the first Black person to do this.

How does this text compare to *A Son of the Forest*?

Most similar:

Authors and their families are mistreated because of their race

Authors gain self-confidence and are able to tell their own stories

Most different:

The authors' lives are almost 100 years apart

Maya Angelou has experiences as a woman that are different from William Apess's

What do you think your connection shows about how authors choose to tell stories that reveal how people can be treated unfairly because of parts of their identities? These books show that it's important for people who have been mistreated to explain what happened to them and why. Both authors tell about things that happened to them but in a way that shows that similar things happened to other people of the same race. Both authors chose to tell their stories because they hoped things would change.

Connect and Compare

William Apess's *A Son of the Forest*

In the exhibit, Kelly Wisecup, an assistant professor of English, says that William Apess exposed the “hypocrisy and errors in representing Native people as vanished or as savages” in his writings. What is another text like *A Son of the Forest* that you think shows how a group of people has been misunderstood or misrepresented?

Text you connect with *A Son of the Forest*: _____

<p>This text is: <input type="checkbox"/> an autobiography <input type="checkbox"/> a biography <input type="checkbox"/> a novel <input type="checkbox"/> something else _____</p> <p>When was this text published?</p> <p>When and where do the events in the text take place?</p> <p>What are some important parts of the main character's identity (race, gender, etc.)?</p>	<p>What kinds of challenges does the main character face? List as many as you can.</p>
<p>How do parts of the main character's identity (race, gender, etc.) affect the life experiences described in the text? How does the main character learn and grow?</p>	<p>How does this text compare to <i>A Son of the Forest</i>?</p> <p>Most similar:</p> <p>Most different:</p>

What do you think your connection shows about how authors choose to tell stories that reveal how people can be treated unfairly because of parts of their identities? _____

Author's Craft

Activity Summary

Students read a text excerpt, mark it using a note-taking prompt, and complete a graphic organizer documenting their responses.

Student learning objectives

- To explore a literary element used in a text important to the exhibit
- To analyze how the author's choices affect the reader's experience

Time needed: 25–35 minutes

Instructions

1. Share the graphic organizer (page 10) and text excerpt (page 11) with students; if needed, model how you would mark a specific part of the text and how you would note it on the graphic organizer.
2. Have students read the text excerpt and mark it with their notes, then review their notes and complete the graphic organizer.
3. If desired, have students share and compare their graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.

Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

- 1. Respond to the suggested questions verbally, in writing, or both.**
- 2. Share and compare their answers after writing, or share and compare their answers after talking in pairs or small groups.**
- 3. Work independently on responding to questions, or work after you model how to begin the activity.**
- 4. Extend activities by writing after discussing a question, or writing at greater length after an initial response.**



As you read the excerpt from *A Son of the Forest*, mark places where Apess describes a group or individual making a decision about what to do. Then note the words Apess uses to describe that decision.

Decision	Who makes it	Words Apess uses to describe it
to live on the river Thames	Pequot Tribe	"comparative peace"
to betray King Philip	people who sided with the colonists	"overcome by treachery" "betrayed to their avowed enemies"
to take the Pequot Tribe's land	white people	"possess themselves of the goodly heritage" "injustice"
to join the Pequot Tribe	Apess's father	"sufficient age to act for himself" "connected maternally"

Which decision that Apess describes do you consider most important, and why? Why do you think Apess uses the words he does to describe this decision? I think that the white people's decision to take away the Pequot Tribe's land is the most important. King Philip being betrayed is part of why the tribe wasn't able to live peacefully anymore. When Apess says the white people took the "goodly heritage" and acted with "injustice," he is showing how unfair the situation was.

Author's Craft

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Decision	Who makes it	Words Apess uses to describe it

Which decision that Apess describes do you consider most important, and why? Why do you think Apess uses the words he does to describe this decision? _____

William Apess, *A Son of the Forest*

Chapter 1 (excerpt)

William Apess, the author of the following narrative, is a native of the American soil, and a descendent of one of the principal chiefs of the Pequod Tribe¹, so well known in that part of American history called King Philip's Wars.² This tribe inhabited a part of Connecticut, and lived in comparative peace on the river Thames, in the town of Groton or Pacatonic, and was commanded by King Philip. As the story of King Philip is perhaps generally known, it will be sufficient for our purpose to say that he was overcome by treachery. Betrayed to their avowed enemies, the nation was completely routed and the way thereby opened for the whites to possess themselves of the goodly heritage occupied by this once peaceable and happy tribe. But this was not the only act of injustice which this oppressed nation suffered at the hands of their white neighbors. . . .

My grandfather was a white, and married a female attached to the royal family: she was fair and beautiful. How nearly she was connected with the king I cannot tell; but without doubt some degree of affinity subsisted between them. I have frequently heard my grandmother talk about it, and as nearly as I can tell, she was his grand- or great-granddaughter. . . . From what I have already stated, it will appear that my father was of mixed blood—his father being a white man, and his mother, a native of the soil, or in other words a red woman³; but when he attained sufficient age to act for himself, he joined the tribe to which he was connected maternally, shortly after which he married a female of the tribe, in whose veins, not a single drop of the white man's blood had ever flowed. He then removed to the back settlements, directing his course to the west and afterwards to the northeast, and pitched his tent in the woods of a town called Colereign, near the Connecticut river, in the state of Massachusetts, where he continued for some time. During the time of their sojourning here I was born—January 31, 1798.

¹ **Pequod Tribe:** The more common spelling today is "Pequot."

² **King Philip's Wars:** This 1675–76 conflict, which killed or left homeless large numbers of people, took place in present-day Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Maine. Also known as the Great Narragansett War, it was fought between Native Americans and British colonists, with some Native American tribes taking the colonists' side. Philip (whose Native American name was Metacom) was a Wampanoag leader of several tribal groups. He was killed by a colonial commander in August of 1676 after an informer betrayed him.

³ **"a red woman":** This way of referring to a person with Native American ancestry is offensive today, but it was commonly used in the nineteenth century.

Written Response

Activity Summary

Students write about ideas connected to exhibit materials and concepts.

Student learning objectives

- To respond creatively to exhibit materials and concepts
- To develop an individual voice in writing and use it to share ideas that are personally significant

Time needed: 25–35 minutes

Instructions

1. Choose (or have students choose) the Think Like a Writer or Historical Context option to write about.
2. Have students use the appropriate planning sheet (page 14 or 16) to plan their work.
3. If desired, have students share and compare their graphic organizers in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class.
4. Have students complete their writing on a computer or in a notebook.

Choices for Engaging Students

You can help students get the most out of these activities by making time for them to process their thinking by writing or speaking. Choose whether to have students:

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Think Like a Writer

Example

Introducing an Autobiography

When an author chooses to write their life story, they must decide where to start and how to invite the reader to understand them. Using the planning sheet below, make notes for what you would include in the opening paragraph of your autobiography.

Planning your opening paragraph

What details do you want your reader to know about your background? *I have cerebral palsy and grew up with some people making fun of me, but my family always supported and helped me.*

What kind of tone (for example, funny or serious) do you want to use? *Serious*

Do you want to start with the beginning of your own life or go back further in time? *Start with my own life*

How will you grab your reader's attention with the first few lines? (For example, you might use a quotation, a surprising or exciting event, or a strong opinion.) *Surprising event*

What do you want to say or suggest to your reader about why your life story matters? *If I was able to find good friends who appreciate and understand me, I think almost anyone can.*

Need some inspiration? Try doing one or more of the following:

- Brainstorm your paragraph with a partner.
- Imagine how a friend or family member might start telling your life story.
- Pretend you are going to share your life story in a conversation, and think about how you would sit, how your voice would sound, and what you might say.
- Look at the opening paragraphs of two or three autobiographies to see how other writers have started their life stories.

As I was falling, my brain was screaming, "No! No! No!" I didn't want to fall in the first-grade hallway, in front of all the other students, on the first day of school. But I did fall down, and a teacher helped me up. Most kids were nice, but a few laughed. I was so embarrassed. How many people would only see my cerebral palsy and the way it makes my legs stiff? Would anyone in my class want to be friends with me? How could I show my classmates that I was a fun person who loved Scooby-Doo movies, swimming, and going as high as I could on the swings? Well, it took some time and it wasn't easy, but now I can look back and say that I did find friends who see me for all the things I am. They don't just see my cerebral palsy. And if I can make friends like that, I think that almost anyone can.

Historical Context

Example

William Apess

Consider the following events in William Apess's life that are described [in the exhibit](#). Put a ★ next to the two that you think are the most important.

Apess is taken away from his Pequot family and forced to work for white families.

★ Apess writes *A Son of the Forest*, one of the first published works by a Native American.

Apess becomes an ordained Methodist minister.

Apess gives a speech saying that both George Washington and Wampanoag chief King Philip were fathers of America.

★ Apess creates alliances between Native American tribes, such as the Pequot and the Haudenosaunee peoples.

After choosing the two events you think are most important, complete this thesis statement, and list the reasons behind your decision: I believe the two most important events in William Apess's life are *his writing A Son of the Forest and his building alliances between different North American tribes*.

Reason 1: *He was able to write a book about the injustices he suffered instead of being stopped by them.*

Reason 2: *He became one of the first Native Americans to be published.*

Reason 3: *He didn't stop with the injustice that was done to his own tribe; he cared about what happened to other tribes and helped them work together.*

Write a paragraph using your reasons to back up your thesis statement.

William Apess had a hard life, but he didn't let that stop him from doing important things. I believe the two most important events in William Apess's life are his writing A Son of the Forest and his building alliances between different North American tribes. As a small child, he was taken away from his Pequot family and made to work as a servant for white families. But when Apess got older, he learned more about his heritage, and he became one of the first Native Americans to be published. A Son of the Forest explained what happened to him and helped more people understand how unfairly Native Americans were being treated. He was so concerned about injustice that he didn't just try to help his own Pequot family. He created alliances between tribes so that they could work together and help each other.

Historical Context

William Apess

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Apess creates alliances between Native American tribes, such as the Pequot and the Haudenosaunee peoples.

After choosing the two events you think are most important, complete this thesis statement, and list the reasons behind your decision: I believe the two most important events in William Apess's life are

Reason 1: _____

Reason 2: _____

Reason 3: _____

Write a paragraph using your reasons to back up your thesis statement.
