

# 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 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](http://greatbooks.org).



# Activities for *American Voices: The New Nation*

Sojourner Truth

## 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

- When someone refuses to do what is right, how do you respond? What are effective ways to respond?
- What do you know about Sojourner Truth or about speeches and memoirs by formerly enslaved Americans?
- What qualities give someone a commanding personal presence? How do these qualities help someone lead a movement for justice?

### 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

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## 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, Sojourner Truth is quoted as saying of escaping slavery that “I did not run away, I walked away by daylight.” What is a text that you think shows how someone left an unjust situation?

## 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

## Sojourner Truth

In the exhibit, Sojourner Truth is quoted as saying of escaping slavery that “I did not run away, I walked away by daylight.” What is a text that you think shows how someone left an unjust situation?

**Text you connect with Sojourner Truth’s statement:** *Kelly Yang, Front Desk*

<p><b>This text is:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> an autobiography   <input type="checkbox"/> a biography <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> a novel   <input type="checkbox"/> something else _____</p> <p><b>When was this text published?</b> <i>2018</i></p> <p><b>When and where do the events in the text take place?</b> <i>1993</i> <i>A motel in California</i></p> <p><b>What are some important parts of the main character’s identity (race, gender, etc.)?</b> <i>Chinese American girl</i></p>	<p><b>What kinds of challenges does the main character face? List as many as you can.</b></p> <p><i>Mia’s family is treated unfairly by the motel owner, Mr. Yao, who makes them pay for lots of things and doesn’t give them as much money as he agreed to.</i></p> <p><i>Mia sees that other immigrants can be treated badly too when her mom’s friend tells her his ID and passport were taken away and he is being forced to work 18 hours a day for his boss.</i></p> <p><i>Mia also finds out that Black people are often treated unjustly when Hank Caleb, one of the people who lives at the motel, is wrongly accused of stealing a car.</i></p> <p><i>Mia tries to win an essay contest so her parents can own a motel, but she doesn’t get first prize. Then she starts a fundraiser to try to help them buy the motel where they work.</i></p>
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## Example, continued

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

Mia and her family move to California from China. Her parents get a job managing a motel, and Mia helps them. She is shocked when the owner of the motel, Mr. Yao, is unfair to her family and makes them pay for things they didn't break.

Mia learns a lot about how other groups of people in America are treated unfairly, and she tries different ways to help them and her family. At the end of the book, Mia helps raise money for her family to buy the motel, and they are able to, even though Mr. Yao doesn't want to sell it to them.

**How does the main character's situation compare to Sojourner Truth's?**

**Most similar:**

Main characters and their families are mistreated because of their race and/or status

Main characters are able to leave an unjust situation and live a better life

**Most different:**

The main characters' lives are over 100 years apart

Sojourner Truth escaped slavery after her "owner" refused to comply with New York's law that abolished slavery

Mia's family left a country where they had little freedom and came to the United States

What do you think your connection shows about how people leave unjust situations?

Both Sojourner Truth's statement and the novel *Front Desk* show that it takes courage to leave a situation where you aren't being treated fairly. Even though slavery was made illegal in New York, Sojourner Truth's "owner" wouldn't let her go. She had to have strength and courage to decide to escape. In *Front Desk*, Mia's family leaves China to live in the United States, and the owner of the motel they work at takes advantage of them. Mia sees how her parents are mistreated, along with other immigrants and Black people. She resolves to find ways to make things better, and even though she doesn't win the essay contest, she comes up with a fundraising idea that allows her family to buy the motel.

# Connect and Compare

## Sojourner Truth

In the exhibit, Sojourner Truth is quoted as saying of escaping slavery that “I did not run away, I walked away by daylight.” What is a text that you think shows how someone left an unjust situation?

Text you connect with Sojourner Truth’s statement: \_\_\_\_\_

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

What do you think your connection shows about how people leave unjust situations? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Activity Summary

Students read a text, 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 (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 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 Sojourner Truth's speech to the Woman's Rights Convention, underline what you think are the two most important questions she asks and the two most important statements she makes. Then, for each one, explain why you think it is important.

Question	Paraphrase	Why you think it is important
I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?	Haven't I worked as hard as any man?	She's saying that her hard work is equal to a man's.
As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and man a quart—why can't she have her little pint full?	If you don't think women are smart, what are you scared of?	She's pointing out that it makes no sense to worry about women getting too much education or power if men don't think they're smart to begin with.

Statement	Paraphrase	Why you think it is important
Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better.	If you're keeping women from having rights, it's more fair for you to give them what they deserve.	She is giving her audience a personal reason to support women's rights, saying they will feel better when they do.
I can't read, but I can hear.	I may not be educated, but I know what's going on.	She is saying that those who can't read and write, such as emancipated slaves, are people who deserve respect and inclusion.

Which question or statement in Sojourner Truth's speech do you think is most important, and why? I think the most important line in Sojourner Truth's speech is "As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and man a quart—why can't she have her little pint full?" This question makes clear how ridiculous the argument against giving women legal rights is. If men are so sure that women aren't as smart as they are, women will never be able to match men's intellect or standing in society if that is the case. In this line Sojourner Truth is arguing that if men really believe what they claim to, then they have nothing to lose by supporting rights for women.

# Author's Craft

As you read Sojourner Truth's speech to the Woman's Rights Convention, underline what you think are the two most important questions she asks and the two most important statements she makes. Then, for each one, explain why you think it is important.

Question	Paraphrase	Why you think it is important

Statement	Paraphrase	Why you think it is important

Which question or statement in Sojourner Truth's speech do you think is most important, and why?

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# Sojourner Truth, speech to the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, May 29, 1851

**Note on the text:** This version of Sojourner Truth's speech was transcribed by Marius Robinson, one of three official secretaries at the convention. It was published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* on June 21, 1851. Because Robinson published his transcription so soon after Truth delivered the speech, some consider it to be more accurate than the more famous version, which Frances Gage, the president of the convention, published in the *New York Independent* on April 23, 1863. Unlike Robinson's version, Gage's version is written in Southern dialect, and it includes the famous line "Ain't I a woman?," which is often used as the title of the speech.

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President<sup>1</sup> said with great simplicity:<sup>2</sup>

"May I say a few words? [Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded.] I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and man a quart—why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we can't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble.

I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the Bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth.

And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard."

<sup>1</sup> **the President:** The president of the convention, Frances Gage.

<sup>2</sup> "... with great simplicity": This introduction seems to have been written by Marius Robinson.

# Written Response

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## 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 15 or 17) 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:

- 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.**
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# Think Like a Writer

## Example

### Speaking Your Truth

Speeches can be used to inspire, create change, and communicate passion for a cause or subject. For example, Sojourner Truth used her speech to motivate her audience to fight for equal rights for women. Using the graphic organizer and prompts below, plan what you might say in a speech about a subject you care about.

Cause or subject	Why I care	Story to use (include details to make it vivid)
Recycling	I care about recycling because it's a way that everybody can help the environment every day.	After breakfast, I was about to throw the empty milk carton in the trash, but my younger cousin stopped me and showed me the recycling code on the carton, which meant it could be recycled. After that, I began noticing recycling symbols everywhere and have even begun to point them out to my friends.
Rescuing animals	I care about rescuing animals because many dogs and cats need homes.	Getting our dog, Chip, from the shelter was one of the best days of my life. When we first met, he ran up to me and started licking my face. He is friendly and kind, and I know other people would love to adopt a pet.
Food insecurity	Many people, including kids, do not have enough food to eat, and that makes me sad.	On a school trip, we went to a warehouse where we helped assemble bags of food for those who couldn't afford to buy it. Some of the food came from people's homes, and some of it came from restaurants and stores. It felt good to help, and it was amazing to see the amount of food that would have gone to waste if it hadn't been donated.

Which cause or subject in the graphic organizer above are you most interested in speaking about? I am most interested in speaking about recycling because it's something we can all do, and it can be done at home and in school.

Write the opening of the speech that you would give, including the story you would tell: Sometimes you learn a lesson when you least expect it. For me, my five-year-old cousin, who is usually pretty silly, reminded me about the importance of recycling. We were cleaning up after breakfast, and I was still half-asleep, about to throw the milk carton in the trash. He shouted, "No!" I was startled, and he continued excitedly, "We can recycle that! Look at the symbol on the carton. We can all help by recycling." I looked more closely at the carton, spotted the small triangle symbol, and placed the carton in the recycling bin instead. After that, I began noticing the recycling symbol everywhere!

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

- Think of a life story that has inspired you. What qualities make it compelling?
- Work with a partner or small group to create a list of topics or subjects for a speech.
- Watch short speeches (or parts of speeches) to see how effective speakers get the audience's attention.
- Identify stories in your life that could inspire others. It may be a time when your viewpoint shifted or expanded.

# Think Like a Writer

## Speaking Your Truth

Speeches can be used to inspire, create change, and communicate passion for a cause or subject. For example, Sojourner Truth used her speech to motivate her audience to fight for equal rights for women. Using the graphic organizer and prompts below, plan what you might say in a speech about a subject you care about.

Cause or subject	Why I care	Story to use (include details to make it vivid)

Which cause or subject in the graphic organizer above are you most interested in speaking about? \_\_\_\_\_

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# Historical Context

## Example

### Sojourner Truth

The exhibit describes how Sojourner Truth spoke out against slavery and on behalf of women's rights. In a speech Truth gave to the first annual meeting of the American Equal Rights Association on May 9, 1867, she had this to say about her role in the fight for equality:

"I come from another field—the country of the slave. They have got their liberty—so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed. . . . I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do; I suppose I am yet to help to break the chain."

Truth lived from circa 1797 to 1883. Below is a timeline of the constitutional amendments that extended the civil rights of Black Americans and American women, both during and after Truth's lifetime. For each amendment, explain how it shows the kind of "chain breaking" that Truth fought for and why it is important.

1865: The Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution abolished slavery throughout the nation. *This amendment broke the literal chains that kept Black people in bondage. Without this change, no other progress for Black Americans could have happened.*

1868: The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granted citizenship to all people born or naturalized in the United States and established that all should have equal protection under the law. *This amendment made Black Americans full citizens for the first time, even though they still didn't have the same rights as white Americans. It granted "equal protection" under the law for all citizens, regardless of race.*

1870: The Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granted Black American men the right to vote. *This amendment allowed Black American men to exercise political power for the first time. It was an important step toward voting rights for all Americans, but women of all races still didn't have the right to vote.*

1920: The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution gave women the right to vote. *Finally, men and women of all races were able to vote and have a say in the government. This amendment broke the "chain" that kept women from having this important legal right.*

Choose one of the amendments and write the beginning of a speech that Sojourner Truth might give about its passage. *Well, it's good to see that the Fifteenth Amendment has passed. The Constitution is now more just than it has ever been. For the first time, Black men can vote and have a say in what the government does. We should be happy that this much more of the chain has been broken, but we cannot rest until women also have the vote. None of us are completely free until all of us are free; the Fifteenth Amendment has not gone far enough. So let's be happy we've come this far but remember that we need to keep going.*



# Historical Context

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