

Activity 1. Introducing Young Frederick Douglass

Student Name _____ Date _____

Directions: In these excerpts from the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, read each section, then the accompanying questions, and reread the section to find the answers. The underlined words are important for understanding the passage. See if you can figure out the meaning of the terms from the context. If necessary look them up in a good dictionary.

Section 1 I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. <u>I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.</u> By far the larger part of the <u>slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.</u> <u>I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday.</u> They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. <u>A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood.</u> <u>The white children could tell their ages.</u> I could not tell why I ought to be <u>deprived of the same privilege.</u> I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.	Why is young Frederick ignorant of his age? Why do most slaves remain ignorant of their birthdays? Why is Frederick unhappy with his ignorance? What does his unhappiness tell us about his character? Do you think the phrase “restless spirit” applied to Douglass’s character is well chosen? What do such words or phrases as <i>accurate knowledge, authentic record, want of information, privilege, improper, impertinent, and evidence</i>, connote about the author? What do we learn about the way masters rule their slaves from this passage? What rhetorical appeals is Douglass making in this paragraph?
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Section 2

My father was a white man. He was **admitted** to be such by all I ever heard speak of my **parentage**. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a **common custom**, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's **affection** toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the **inevitable** result.

How does Douglass arrive at the conclusion that his father was a white man? Why does he not claim that his master was his father?

What is the “common custom” discussed in this section? Is the phrase “common custom” effective? Why?

How does this paragraph illustrate Douglass's capacity to reason about life?