

**WHAT, FINALLY, DO THESE
[SLAVE] NARRATIVES TELL US,
. . . THAT, IN THE FACE OF TREACHERY
AND EVIL, SIMPLY TO SURVIVE AND
ENDURE IS ENOUGH; BUT TO THRIVE
AND BEAR WITNESS TO THE
CONTOURS OF HUMAN
EXPERIENCE—WHICH IS,
AT ONCE, BLACK AND
UNIVERSAL—IS
SUBLIME.
—Henry Louis
Gates Jr.**

Unit 2—Lesson 4

Frederick Douglass

INTRODUCTION

In the *Narrative* you will read about Douglass’s early life, so I will not repeat that information here. As the *Narrative* closes, Douglass has become a speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society. Ironically, it was difficult for blacks in the abolitionist movement to have much of a voice—slavery was illegal in the north, but racism was not. Douglass, however, became a famous and admired speaker partly through the help of William Lloyd Garrison (who wrote the introduction to the *Narrative*), but mostly because of his compelling writing and speaking style. Douglass toured, and his speeches were largely stories of his experiences—such as those you are about to read.

Douglass’s speaking ability developed so much over a few years, that it actually proved a hindrance to him. People began to doubt that he had ever been a slave. After one of his lectures in 1844 an abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, reported “How a man, only six years out of bondage, and who had never gone to school could speak with such eloquence—with such precision of language and power of thought—they [the listeners] were utterly at a loss to devise.” It was this reaction which prompted Douglass to write and publish his *Narrative*. This was done at great risk to himself because he was a runaway slave; he had identified himself and his former owner in his *Narrative*, and was now vulnerable to slave-catchers.

Over the next several years Douglass worked hard, not just for the abolition of slavery, but for suffrage for women, temperance, the Underground Railroad (he often hid fugitives in his home), ending segregation in the North, and the right for black men to fight for the Union in the Civil War.

After the *Narrative* was published, with great success, Douglass journeyed to England. This was both to protect himself (slavery had already been abolished in England) and because he had long wanted to travel there. He stayed in England for over two years and continued to lecture on the abolition movement and his own experiences. He apparently enjoyed England

immensely, feeling truly free for the first time, and even finding very little racial prejudice among the English. Friends tried to convince him to settle in England, but he felt that he was needed more in America. Before he returned, two English friends raised enough money (\$710.96) to buy his freedom from his former owner. Douglass returned to the United States a free man at age twenty-eight.

Over the next several years Douglass worked hard, not just for the abolition of slavery, but for suffrage for women, temperance, the Underground Railroad (he often hid fugitives in his home), ending segregation in the North, and the right for black men to fight for the Union in the Civil War. He also raised five children (though one died young) with his wife, Anna. After the Civil War, Douglass worked for suffrage and other rights for the newly freed slaves. He continued to do political work for the rest of his life, and published two more autobiographical works before dying at age seventy-seven of a heart attack.

WHILE YOU READ

Here are some questions to keep at the back of your mind while reading *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself*.

- What facts does Douglass use to persuade his readers?
- How does Douglass support or illustrate his facts?
- Does Douglass use any arguments that aren't factual?
- Which sections do you find most persuasive or moving? Can you explain why?
- Imagine someone from Douglass's time with a pro-slavery stance reading this. Are there sections you think would be particularly persuasive to them?
- Imagine someone from Douglass's time who is anti-slavery, but who has never acted on those beliefs, reading this. Are there sections you think would be particularly motivating to them?



LESSON PREVIEW

This lesson focuses on various methods of writing to persuade. The most persuasive writings and speeches are factual, vivid, and passionate. We will discuss all these things.

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The Slave Narrative

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* was one of the most popular slave narratives of its day and has had more lasting interest than most narratives, but it did not stand alone. There were dozens of antebellum slave narratives, most of them autobiographical (like Douglass's) or biographical. The earliest are from the late eighteenth century, but in the early to mid-nineteenth century (particularly beginning in the 1840s) slave narratives increased in popularity. Not all were books—many were pamphlets or broadsides—but they all contributed to a growing understanding and intolerance of slavery.

Not all were strictly factual accounts either; there were a few novels written by slaves or ex-slaves depicting their experiences. Ironically, the most famous of these today was written sometime in the 1850s but not published until 2002. The original handwritten manuscript for *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts, was purchased at an auction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the chair of Harvard's Afro-American Studies Department. This story is the only known novel by a female African American slave, and possibly the first novel written by a black woman anywhere. The fact that such a remarkable piece of literature could remain unpublished for 150 years illustrates the unique difficulties that the slave narrative, particularly in fictional form, faced.

The increased publication of slave narratives in the mid 1800s was largely due to the abolitionist movement. Abolitionists hoped that genuine accounts of slaves' lives would sway public opinion against slavery. Southerners frequently countered that slave narratives were fabricated, so abolitionists and authors felt increasing pressure to prove the authenticity of these works. Frequently, (as in the case of Douglass's *Narrative*) respected white men wrote prefaces for the works to assert their validity. Slave narratives often included a detailed description of the slave's education (usually self education) to prove that the author was literate. This understandable drive for authenticity left little room for fictionalizing.

Narratives would contribute substantially to future novels though. The novel most closely associated with the slave narrative is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe drew extensively from slave narratives for her characters and events, and she shared the same goal as the writers of the narratives—to convince Americans of the evils of slavery. But the influence of the slave narrative would go beyond contemporary authors and the Abolitionist cause. The narrative was the source from which all African American literature—fiction and nonfiction—would flow.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1

1. What basic information about himself is Douglass unsure about?
2. In this chapter, which group of slaves does Douglass say has more hardships than other slaves?
3. Who are Captain Anthony and Mr. Plummer?

CHAPTER 2

1. What two jobs or tasks does Douglass say slaves saw as privileges for other slaves?
2. Who or what does Douglass say “was rightly named”?

CHAPTER 3

1. What two reasons does Douglass give for why slaves say their masters treat them well, even when this is not the case?

CHAPTER 4

1. What two words best describe Mr. Gore?
 - a. Cruel and unemotional
 - b. Kind and funny
 - c. Hot-tempered and vengeful
 - d. Profane and lazy
2. What three people does Douglass accuse, by name, of having murdered slaves without any reprisal?

CHAPTER 5

1. What does Douglass say he suffered the most from, at this point?
2. What new possession is Douglass promised that excites him greatly?
3. What are Douglass’s feelings about leaving his home?
4. “It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness.” What is Douglass talking about here?
5. To what does Douglass ascribe the fact that he was chosen to go to Baltimore?

[continued]

CHAPTER 6

1. “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.” What is Douglass referring to?

CHAPTER 7

1. Douglass reveals how the evil of slavery impacts even those who practice it (not just those who are subject to it). Describe how.
2. What does Douglass trade bread for?
3. What are some results of Douglass’s reading?

CHAPTER 8

1. What are the next two indictments against slavery that Douglas makes in this chapter?
2. About what does Douglass say, “If any one thing in my experience, more than another, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was . . .”

CHAPTER 9

1. What is a theme in the accounts of various slaveholders and their friends that are given in this chapter?
 - a. Their ignorance
 - b. Their kindness towards their slaves
 - c. Their religion (which is often in contrast to how they treat their slaves)
 - d. Their wealth
2. What is the result when a white resident of the town tries to arrange classes to teach Douglass and other slaves to read the New Testament?
3. What particular deed does Douglass report his master defending with scripture?
4. Which of the following statements (all from chapter 9) is an example of sarcasm?
 - a. Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who holds slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them.
 - b. Not to give a slave enough to eat, is regarded as the most aggravated development of meanness even among slaveholders.
 - c. Bad as all slaveholders are, we seldom meet one destitute of every element of character commanding respect.
 - d. Mr. Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him.

CHAPTER 10

1. Which of the following is not a description Douglass uses of Mr. Covey?
 - a. Deceptive
 - b. Hard-working
 - c. Cunning
 - d. Stupid
2. “Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition.” What type of figurative language does Douglass use?
3. What does Douglass refer to as his turning point in his “career” as a slave?
4. What does Douglass describe as a “safety-valve” for the slaves, without which they would surely revolt?
5. According to Douglass, why do slaveholders grant the slaves holidays off from Christmas to New Years?
6. What does Douglass call “the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed”?
7. Put these events from chapter 10 in chronological order:
 - a. Douglass lives with Mr. Freeland.
 - b. Douglass lives with Mr. Covey.
 - c. Douglass is beaten by four men in the shipyard .
 - d. Douglass plans his escape.

CHAPTER 11

1. In this chapter, Douglass states that he believes thousands of slaves do not escape who might otherwise do so, because of what?
2. What reasons does Douglass give for not detailing his method of escape?
3. What feelings does Douglass have after entering a free state?
 - a. Excitement followed by insecurity and loneliness
 - b. Relief and joy
 - c. Fear followed by relief
 - d. Fear followed by anger
4. Who does Douglass credit with having helped him immensely shortly after he arrived in New York?



LITERARY LESSON: PERSUASIVE WRITING

The techniques of good persuasive writing are some of the most useful. You will encounter times when you want to persuade a family member, a friend, or maybe a politician to agree with your point of view. You stand a much better chance if you don't approach your subject haphazardly, but instead use some writing techniques to bolster your argument.

Factual Arguments Supported by Vivid Examples

You must marshal your facts. This will take a bit of research (unless you already know your topic very well) before you begin writing. Your facts must be accurate—if they are not, chances are someone will catch you in error, and this will throw even your well-documented facts into question.

How you present your facts depends on what the facts are. You may do it in narrative form (the Introduction in this Guide is done that way), or as statistics (which may include graphs or charts). Although statistics can be the more effective way to present some data, I strongly encourage using a narrative form whenever possible. Even when you're presenting factual information, you can write it as a story. Douglass's *Narrative* is all story—stories about what happened to him and to others he's known. That is a large part of what makes it interesting and readable. Statistics are great for an encapsulation or reinforcement of facts, but people like stories, so give information in a story format whenever possible.

Facts by themselves, even in a narrative format, can become dry. Include vivid examples to support those facts. Ideally, your examples should be true, not invented. They then become anecdotal evidence. Anecdotal evidence is a factual story that supports your argument. It is weak if presented alone because it cites merely one case. However, if presented as one example of thousands of such cases, it serves to paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind.

In his first chapter, Douglass introduces some general facts about slavery, but always with a personal anecdote to illustrate the point. For example, he talks about the growing number of slave children who are fathered by a white master, and he himself is an example of this. He introduces the topic of slaves being whipped with the example of the first whipping he saw, that of his aunt. Imagine this chapter without the personal stories, if it only contained philosophical arguments against whipping slaves, for instance. This would have much less impact than the vivid story about his aunt that Douglass tells.

Another powerful passage in the *Narrative* is the last two pages of chapter two, where Douglass describes the slaves singing. Until now, his stories have focused on sight—the reader can clearly see his aunt being whipped, for example. This story focuses on sound, allowing the reader to hear the melancholy tunes of the slaves as they walk or work. When describing a scene, remember not only what your readers can see, but also what they can hear, touch, smell, or taste.

This is advice you'll read again and again in your English classes: Be specific. Being specific is the surest way of painting a vivid picture in your reader's mind. If I tell you that there are trees in my front yard, you have only the haziest of images—and almost certainly your image will differ from that of the next person to read this. If I tell you there are five trees in my front yard, the disparity decreases. If I tell you I have a cherry tree, a mimosa, a sugar maple, and two Douglas firs in my front yard, the picture becomes even clearer. Telling you where each tree is located would make it even more distinct.

**This is advice
you'll read again
and again in your
English classes:
*BE SPECIFIC.***

For your examples, you'll want enough detail to impress the image on the mind of the reader, but not so much that you slow down your pace. This may seem like a vague guide, but as you read and write more, it will become more instinctive. When you aren't sure, err on the side of a bit too much detail. When you review a rough draft, it's easier to see things that should be removed than things that should be added.

Another important point is to remember that humans have five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. Beginning writers almost always confine themselves to describing what they can see. Your examples will be stronger if you can bring in at least one other sense. Compare these descriptive passages:

The flowers vibrated with color—reds, pinks, yellows, blues, with a hint of purple here and there. I watched bees drift from flower to flower and noticed they seemed to prefer the yellow and pink ones. The green grass and blue sky made a nice background for all this, and my black cat curled up in the sunshine at the edge of the garden was like a beautiful statue.

The flowers vibrated with color—reds, pinks, yellows, blues, with a hint of purple here and there. The bees buzzed among the tulips and carnations, but I noticed they seemed to prefer the lilacs and roses. Maybe they're attracted to their sweet smell—I know I am. I leaned back and ran my hand through my cat's soft fur, enjoying the feeling of the warm sun on my face.

The second of these is more successful for two reasons. First, more specific details are given. They're not just flowers, but tulips, carnations, lilacs, and roses. Second, the former paragraph gives only details of sight, while the second gives sound (the bees buzz), smell (the lilacs and roses), and touch (the fur and the warmth).

Detailed, sensory description can be a very powerful thing. One place where you're quite likely to include a detailed description is your emotional argument.

Emotional Argument

In chapter 8, Douglass takes his first major turn from factual evidence to rhetoric, in the story of his grandmother. No doubt she was sent to live alone after the death of her masters, so that

part is factual. Douglass then writes an emotional description of her in her loneliness, but it is important to note that this is an emotional argument, not a factual one (in that Douglass does not know what actually happened to her after she was sent away). Both are important in persuasive writing, though factual arguments are required for an intelligent argument; emotional arguments are a secondary force. Douglass spends far more time on factual arguments (i.e., his eyewitness accounts) than emotional rhetoric. It would be wise for you to do the same. Nevertheless, examine this passage to see how it pulls at the reader's heartstrings. Douglass uses:

- Basic human fears that we all share (loneliness, old age, death)
- Repetition (“the loss of children, the loss of grandchildren, and the loss of great-grandchildren”)
- Sounds (“the moan of the dove . . . the screams of the hideous owl”)
- Physical feelings, (“weighted down by the pains and aches of old age”)
- Strong, staccato verbs (“She stands—sits—staggers—falls—groans—she dies”)

Douglass quotes a poem in the middle of this, but his own language here is so poetic that it is hardly necessary. When you are using emotional rhetoric, the style of your prose is more important than when giving facts. If Douglass had said his grandmother listened to the “coo of the dove” and the “call of the owl,” that would have painted a much more peaceful picture. Simply changing *coo* to *moan* and *call* to *screams* changes the whole feeling of the passage. When striving for emotional impact, choose your words with extra care.

Emotional arguments try to rouse the emotions of the reader into empathy with the writer's cause. Douglass's *Narrative* is very emotional. Most of this emotion, however, is generated from Douglass's examples. In a sense, these examples could be called emotional arguments, but because they are usually eyewitness accounts used to bolster stark facts, I think it's more instructive to look at them in that light. Douglass's story of his grandmother is the most obvious example of an emotional argument here. Douglass paints a picture of an old woman dying alone to stir his readers' emotions.

You do not want to depend on emotional arguments, but they can be very effective, particularly with less intellectually rigorous readers. Also, readers who already agree with your stand, but who have taken no action on their own, may be moved to action by a well-written emotional argument. In a speech, an emotional argument in the hands of a talented speaker can be more powerful than anything.

As with examples, emotional arguments depend on vivid detail. Even more than examples, however, the effectiveness of emotional arguments depends on strong writing. This is because emotional arguments are nothing but words—you have no facts to bolster you.

Anticipating Arguments

Sometimes in his *Narrative*, Douglass anticipates arguments against emancipation and counters them. You may well want to do the same when you write a persuasive paper. Put

yourself in the other shoes for a minute. What are the arguments against your position? Articulate them as well as you can, then come up with the best counter-arguments you can muster.

Sometimes students will offer opponents’ “arguments” but not in a serious manner. They will misrepresent or belittle them. This will not help your position. To any experienced reader, it simply looks like you are too insecure in your own position to seriously address the arguments against you. Douglass doesn’t fall into this trap, and he was arguing against people in favor of slavery. If he was able to seriously address arguments for such an indefensible notion, you can as well, no matter how much you dislike the other view.

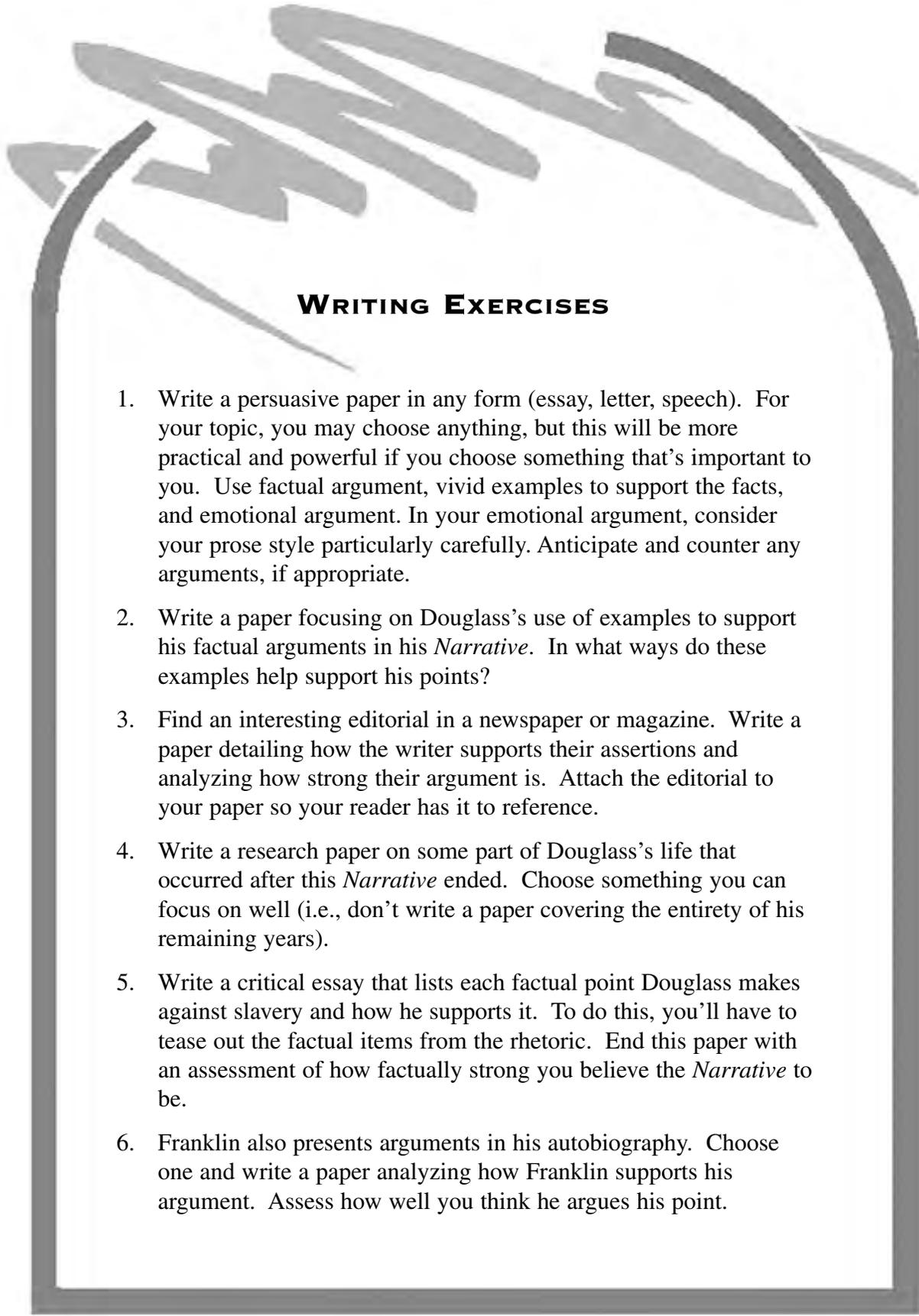
You don’t have to bring up every argument against you, but consider those which are most likely to come up or which arise naturally from the arguments you’ve decided to present in your paper. Express those arguments fairly and respectfully in your paper, then provide your counter-arguments.

For example, if you’re writing a paper to persuade your parents to buy a dog, consider the possible argument that a dog will cost too much to take care of in food, vet bills, etc. How can you counter this argument? You could argue that you will use part of your allowance towards the dog’s upkeep, that you will get a part-time job to contribute even more money towards the dog, that you can get a small dog to cut down on food expenses, that there are recipes for cooking for dogs that would cut the food expenses even more, that animal health insurance is now available to help with vet bills. Anticipating your opponent’s arguments helps you consider your position even more finely and, in the end, will enable you to write a more persuasive argument.

The Digression

On page 89 (chapter 10), at the bottom of the long paragraph, Douglass employs a digression. A digression is a wandering off the topic (a little or a lot). Here, Douglass only wanders a little. He is discussing his reading lessons, which leads to the necessity of keeping them secret, and this leads to his digression about his former experience when the religious leaders attacked the slaves for trying to read the Bible. It is clear what links these ideas. This is, however, still a digression, as Douglass is straying off the topic to repeat a story he has told earlier. This gives a strong sense of how affecting this event was for him. It seems as if he cannot stop himself from mentioning it when the opportunity arises. This also makes the *Narrative* read in a more conversational way—you feel as if Douglass is right there with you, speaking earnestly.

Digressions can be effective (as this one is), but they are tricky. They are most effective in longer speeches (assuming the speaker is a good one) and in longer written works. They would probably be distracting in any paper you would write for this class because of the short length. Even in long works they should be used sparingly. Used too often, they are distracting and can give your reader or listener the sense that you are flighty and unorganized. They can also make you seem too emotionally involved in your topic to have an objective view.



WRITING EXERCISES

1. Write a persuasive paper in any form (essay, letter, speech). For your topic, you may choose anything, but this will be more practical and powerful if you choose something that's important to you. Use factual argument, vivid examples to support the facts, and emotional argument. In your emotional argument, consider your prose style particularly carefully. Anticipate and counter any arguments, if appropriate.
2. Write a paper focusing on Douglass's use of examples to support his factual arguments in his *Narrative*. In what ways do these examples help support his points?
3. Find an interesting editorial in a newspaper or magazine. Write a paper detailing how the writer supports their assertions and analyzing how strong their argument is. Attach the editorial to your paper so your reader has it to reference.
4. Write a research paper on some part of Douglass's life that occurred after this *Narrative* ended. Choose something you can focus on well (i.e., don't write a paper covering the entirety of his remaining years).
5. Write a critical essay that lists each factual point Douglass makes against slavery and how he supports it. To do this, you'll have to tease out the factual items from the rhetoric. End this paper with an assessment of how factually strong you believe the *Narrative* to be.
6. Franklin also presents arguments in his autobiography. Choose one and write a paper analyzing how Franklin supports his argument. Assess how well you think he argues his point.