



STUDENT RESEARCH GUIDE

Roots is a historically accurate dramatization of the lives of enslaved people in the United States. It explores many themes related to American culture and society, freedom, and African heritage. Four of these big ideas, each aligned with one of the four *Roots* episodes, are listed in this activity guide. Use the episode summaries and resources to research one of these topics and compare different sources of information. As you gather facts, you'll begin to develop your own perspectives about the subject. Build an argument about how you think the topic should be viewed and support it with evidence from your research. After your research, you'll share your findings in a timeline, a paper, or a presentation.

FACT-FINDING TOOLS

Use the tools below to organize the information you uncover as well as your thoughts about the topic as you research.

Tool 1—Glossary

As you explore resources, build a glossary of terms whose definitions you are unclear about. To create your glossary, write down the term, then write your own definition using context clues before looking up the dictionary definition and incorporating it in your own sentence to confirm that you understand the word's correct usage.

Tool 2—Timeline

On a separate sheet of paper, create a timeline of important facts related to your topic. This will help you create a historic record and make connections with current events. For each fact included on your timeline, identify the source and include a brief note about how the author presents the information. For example, consider each document's titles, labels, tone, and headings.

Tool 3—Graphic Organizer

You will likely encounter multiple perspectives or biases on your topic. You may need to conduct further research to clarify these discrepancies. As you research, create a chart or Venn diagram sorting your sources by the perspectives they take on the topic. Be sure to include a column or section for your own point of view, as well as another area for how the topic is addressed in *Roots*. Use this chart to guide you in including various viewpoints on the topic in your paper or presentation.



RESEARCHING ROOTS

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ROOTS RESEARCH TOPICS

TOPIC 1: THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

(Roots Episode 1)



What were the conditions on slave ships? What methods did slavers use to maintain control of slaves aboard the ships? What were the reactions of the enslaved to their confinement and treatment on slave ships?

Episode Summary

In 1750, Kunta Kinte is born in West Africa. He is a Mandinka and trains as a warrior in the tradition of his culture. As a dedicated student, he dreams of traveling to the university in Timbuktu to become a scholar. After he passes his warrior training, the rival Koros family betrays Kunta and delivers him to English slave traders. In 1767, Kunta travels through the Middle Passage to America aboard the slave ship *Lord Ligonier*, along with 140 other slaves. He barely survives the brutal journey and unsuccessfully leads a revolt. In Annapolis, Maryland, John Waller, a wealthy but spendthrift planter, buys Kunta. Kunta is given the slave name Toby. Kunta strongly resists his new name and enslavement. He relies on the wise counsel of Fiddler, an assimilated slave and sophisticated musician who has been assigned to train him. With Fiddler's help, Kunta fights to survive and maintain his dignity despite the unrelenting violence of the slave system.

Resources

- "The Origins of the Slave Trade," an essay by Ira Berlin, an American historian at the University of Maryland (requires login): gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/origins-slavery/essays/origins-slavery-0
- Information on slave voyages available by searching the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database: slavevoyages.org
- Primary and secondary sources on the Middle Passage: inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=1&topic=5
- A first-person account by a former slave, Olaudah Equiano, of a journey aboard a slave ship: americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/oral_histories/life_at_sea/equiano.htm

TOPIC 2: RESISTANCE

(Roots Episode 2)

How did slave masters work to keep Africans enslaved? What were the various ways the enslaved resisted bondage?

Episode Summary

In 1775, Kunta meets English Redcoats who promise freedom to slaves who run away and join the English governor's Ethiopian Regiment. Kunta joins the soldiers but soon realizes the English are no better than the Americans and leaves the regiment. Slave catchers apprehend him and amputate half his foot so he can't run away again. Outraged, John Waller's younger brother, William, a doctor, buys Kunta. William's cook, Belle, takes care of Kunta until he heals. The two eventually marry. A daughter is born to the couple, named Kizzy, which means "you stay put" in Mandinka. Kizzy gains the attention of William Waller's daughter, Missy, who secretly teaches Kizzy how to read and write. As a teenager, Kizzy uses the skill to forge papers that help a young slave, Noah, escape. As punishment, she's sold to a poor farmer, Tom Lea, who rapes her, fathering a son, George. Kizzy vows to instill in her son both her pride in their African heritage and Kunta Kinte's dream of freedom.



Resources

- "Life in a Slave Society," an essay with primary sources from the Library of Congress: loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/african4.html
- "Slave Resistance," an essay by James H. Sweet, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slaveresist.htm
- "The Material Culture of Slave Resistance," an essay by Douglas R. Egerton, professor of history at LeMoyne College (requires login): gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/essays/material-culture-slave-resistance
- Slave Resistance interactive (requires login): gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/african-americans-and-emancipation/interactives/slave-resistance

RESEARCHING ROOTS

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ROOTS RESEARCH TOPICS

TOPIC 3: FREE BLACKS

(Roots Episode 3)

What was the role of free blacks in the slaveholding South? What rights did they have? What were their limitations? How did they interact with enslaved Africans?

Episode Summary

As George grows into an adult, he exhibits traits of both of his parents. Like Tom Lea, he enjoys cockfighting and carousing. The old slave bird handler, Mingo, resents George, who takes over Mingo's position as pit master. George becomes an accomplished trainer of gamecocks and earns the nickname Chicken George. George marries a preacher's daughter, Matilda, and fathers many children. But George struggles to keep his father, Tom Lea, from his self-destructive ways. From Kizzy, George inherited the strong traditions of family and the desire to be free. He rationalizes his bond with Tom Lea by convincing himself that one day he will buy freedom for himself and his family. When Tom Lea loses a reckless wager with an Englishman, he offers to send his son to work off his debts. George is dragged off to England.



Resources

- The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress, primary sources written by an escaped slave and antislavery activist: [loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection/](https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection/)
- "The Underground Railroad and the Coming of War" (requires login): gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/essays/underground-railroad-and-coming-war
- "African-American Freedom in Antebellum Cumberland County, Virginia—Freedom: Personal Liberty and Private Law," journal article by Ellen D. Katz: scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2979&context=ccklawreview
- A biography of the abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth: nwhm.org/education-resources/biography/biographies/sojourner-truth/

TOPIC 4: SLAVERY AND THE CIVIL WAR

(Roots Episode 4)

What impacts did the Civil War have on slavery? What influence did slaves have on the Civil War?



Episode Summary

After more than 20 years in England, Chicken George is finally given his freedom. He tracks down his family, which has been sold to Benjamin Murray, a respected engineer in North Carolina. George finds that his youngest son, Tom—now a master blacksmith—has taken on the role as leader of the family. The quiet, hardworking young man nurses a cold rage against his father, blaming him for abandoning the family. George is forced to leave the Murray farm and meets up with a young, hotheaded slave named Cyrus. Together they join the Memphis Colored Battery and fight against the South in the Civil War. After the war, southern soldiers launch a terror campaign against freed slaves. Tom journeys to find George and, inspired by a vision of Kunta, rescues his father. Once home, Tom leads his family off the farm to seek a new life. True to Kunta's hope, the family finally finds freedom. In 1976, Alex Haley, a seventh-generation descendant of Kunta Kinte, authors and publishes the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*.

Resources

- "African Americans and Emancipation," an essay by Manisha Sinha, professor of history at University of Massachusetts Amherst (requires login): gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/african-americans-and-emancipation/essays/african-americans-and-emancipation
- Civil War 1: Slaves, includes photos and personal narratives: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/emancipation/text5/text5read.htm
- "The Uncertain Promise of Freedom's Light: Black Soldiers in The Civil War," an online magazine article: smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-uncertain-promise-of-freedoms-light-black-soldiers-in-the-civil-war-9660675/?no-ist
- "Slavery During the Civil War," an essay and with primary sources: encyclopediavirginia.org/slavery_during_the_civil_war