

A stylized, high-contrast portrait of Frederick Douglass, rendered in a graphic, almost cubist style. The colors are vibrant, with shades of blue, orange, yellow, and red. The background is a mix of these colors, with some faint, illegible text visible. The portrait is the central focus of the image.

**REVOLUTION STARTS  
WITH A VOICE.**

**FEATURING:**

**NICOLE BEHARIE**

**COLMAN DOMINGO**

**ANDRÉ HOLLAND**

**JONATHAN MAJORS**

**DENZEL WHITAKER**

**JEFFREY WRIGHT**

**HBO** ORIGINAL  
**FREDERICK  
DOUGLASS:  
IN FIVE  
SPEECHES**

NEW DOCUMENTARY  
STREAMING FEB 23

**HBO**max

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**





REVOLUTION STARTS  
WITH A VOICE.

HBO ORIGINAL  
**FREDERICK  
DOUGLASS:  
IN FIVE  
SPEECHES**

HBO Documentary Films presents a McGee Media & Inkwell Media Production.

Directed by Julia Marchesi

Produced by Oluwaseun Babalola

Edited by Derek Ambrosi

Narration by André Holland

Historical consultant, David Blight

Executive Produced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Dyllan McGee

Run Time: 57 minutes

Social Media

**Hashtag:** #FrederickDouglassHBO

**Facebook:** @HBO, @HBODocs, @HBOMax

**Twitter:** @HBO, @HBODocs, @HBOMax, @ScenInBlack

**Instagram:** @HBO, @HBOMax, @ScenInBlack

**YouTube  
Website**

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 PICTUREMOTION

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# Introduction

Inspired by historian David Blight's biography of Douglass, the *Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* documentary explores Douglass' life – from his birth into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland, to his freedom as an abolitionist speaker and writer known throughout the world.

Frederick Douglass' life was nothing short of extraordinary. Known now as the “father of the civil rights movement,” Douglass devoted his life to fighting racism and injustice, a fight which continues today.

*\*If you choose to address content warnings, you may inform audience members that the film includes themes of racism, violence, and brief mentions of mental illness.*

*\*Encourage students to do what they need to in order to feel safe and supported before, during, and after their screening. Provide time for reflection and discussion following the screening and ensure that you direct students towards resources that can help them to continue to process and learn after the screening ends.*



A young Frederick Douglass overlooking Baltimore harbor (Courtesy of HBO)

*“I, therefore, leave off  
where I began, with hope.”*

- Frederick Douglass (1852)



# How to use this guide

Thank you for sharing *Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* with your community of students, community members, advocates, activists, or change-makers.

This guide is designed to navigate you and your classroom through a conversation about your thoughts, emotions, questions, and reactions to the film. It contains information about the film, resources for further learning, and discussion questions to deepen your understanding of Douglass' legacy and his impact today, and offer you ways to deepen your own engagement and impact.

We recommend a teacher and/or screening facilitator review this guide and the film before the classroom discussion to ensure they are able to focus on discussion topics and questions relevant to current coursework. After watching the film with students, share this guide with students so that they may review and reflect on discussion topics.

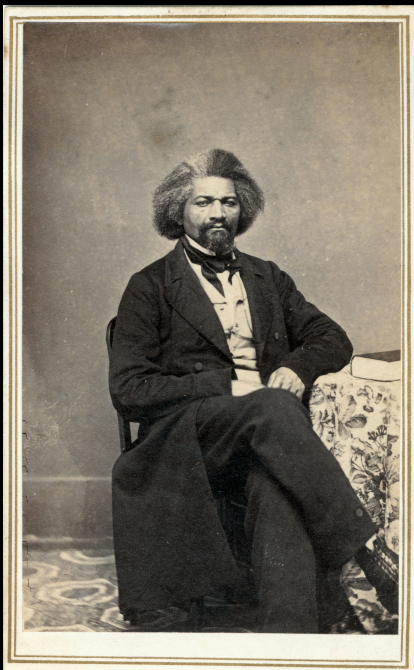


*Frederick Douglass in New York City (Courtesy of HBO)*

# Film overview

*Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* brings to life the words of our country's most famous anti-slavery activist. Acclaimed actors Nicole Beharie, Colman Domingo, Jonathan Majors, Denzel Whitaker and Jeffrey Wright draw from five of Douglass' legendary speeches, to represent a different moment in the tumultuous history of 19<sup>th</sup> century America as well as a different stage of Douglass' nuanced, arduous, and celebrated life. Famed scholars David Blight, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others provide context for the speeches, and, along with André Holland's readings from Douglass' autobiographies, remind us that Frederick Douglass' words about racial injustice and calls for civic engagement and personal storytelling still resonate deeply today.

After his escape from slavery at age 20, Frederick Douglass went on to become the most famous Black man in the nineteenth century, and he achieved that position based on the power of his words. Entirely self-taught, Douglass was a powerful writer and master orator, crafting speeches that called out American hypocrisy and challenged the nation to live up to its founding principles. *Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* offers a new approach to understanding Douglass' story, guided entirely by his own words about this country's struggle for Black freedom and equality. Together with his autobiographies, the writings chart Douglass' rise from a passionate young agitator to a composed statesman, and ultimately to a disenchanted but still hopeful older man.



Frederick Douglass, approx 1863  
(Courtesy of HBO)

*“For it is not light that is needed, but fire;  
it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.  
We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”*

- Frederick Douglass,  
*What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*



# Speech overview

Contextualizing Douglass' writings are scholars David Blight, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Sarah Lewis and Keidrick Roy, artist Bisa Butler, poet Nzadi Keita, and Douglass descendant Ken Morris who offer perspective on Douglass' modern relevance and the unprecedented level of fame and influence to which he rose.

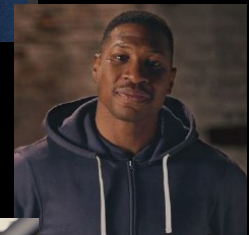
Douglass lived the entirety of the nineteenth century; he saw slavery, freedom, and the betrayal of that freedom. And though his actual voice was never recorded, the power of these performances offers an opportunity to hear the potency of his words with timely urgency over a century later. Featured Speeches Include:

**“I Have Come To Tell You Something About Slavery” (1841)** performed by Denzel Whitaker. At an anti-slavery convention, Douglass recounts his story of being raised as a slave publicly for the first time.



Denzel Whitaker  
(Courtesy of HBO)

**“Country, Conscience, And The Anti-Slavery Cause” (1847)** performed by Jonathan Majors. Douglass addresses the American Anti-Slavery Society on his return from the British Isles which he found to be more accepting and equitable than his own country.



Jonathan Majors  
(Courtesy of HBO)

**“What, To The Slave, Is The Fourth Of July?” (1852)** performed by Nicole Beharie. Douglass reminds his audience of the continuing enslavement of his people, 76 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.



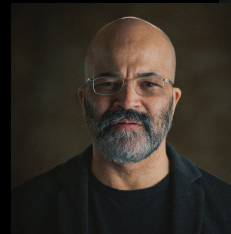
Nicole Beharie  
(Courtesy of HBO)

**“The Proclamation And A Negro Army” (1863)** performed by Colman Domingo. Douglass responds to the Emancipation Proclamation and calls for the Black man to be allowed to fight in the war.



Colman Domingo  
(Courtesy of HBO)

**“Lessons Of The Hour” (1894)** performed by Jeffrey Wright. Douglass urges America to eliminate prejudice and look to its founding principles.



Jeffrey Wright  
(Courtesy of HBO)

[Click to access texts, notes, and chronology drawn from the authoritative Library of America edition, Frederick Douglass: Speeches & Writings, edited by David W. Blight.](#)

# Discussion questions

1. What are your biggest takeaways from *Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches*? Share a single moment, line, or visual that stood out to you.
2. Do you find first-person accounts of being enslaved to be more effective at communicating empathy and emotions than second- or third- person accounts? Do you think that first hand traumatic experiences are more effective in general when garnering support or advocacy for certain issues?
3. Do you think that watching Douglass' speeches is more interesting than reading personal accounts like journals or letters? Which did you find more moving?
4. Douglass' writing transitions from slavery to abolition, and in many of his speeches he also speaks to the idea of labor activism during his time versus the dehumanization of labor for people of color. Douglass deeply understood how interconnected different social issues can be.
  - 4.1. Have you seen similar connections in your personal or educational life? Possible examples include racial justice intersecting with many other issues like voting rights or healthcare.
5. As literary scholar and journalist Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says in the film: "The more human we make our heroes, the more noble they become." The film's examination of the challenges within Douglass' (first) marriage, and some of the criticisms he received around his perceived ego, doesn't always paint Douglass in a flattering light. Do you think that presenting Douglass in a flawed and honest way made him feel more relatable?
6. Did your opinion of Douglass change after seeing the film? If so, how? Do you think of him as more of a human, or more of a hero, or a blend of both?
7. Jonathan Majors noted that Douglass spent his life "interrogating the soul of America." What do you think he meant by that?
  - 7.1. Are there any modern-day activists or leaders who you think "interrogate the soul of America" with their work? Is there anyone in your city, school, religious community, etc who "interrogates the soul" of your community?



8. The film examines the tension between Douglass in his later years and the new generation of young activists. Is this tension between experienced, older activists and young, passionate activists something you have witnessed or encountered? Is it something you see in our current landscape?
9. Douglass' activism was rooted in his own experience being born as an enslaved person in Maryland, and it continued throughout his life as his empathy and passion for justice inspired him to keep fighting even after he himself had escaped, and the Emancipation Proclamation had been decreed.
  - 9.1. How has your life experience so far shaped the issues that you care about?
  - 9.2. Discuss opportunities to bring equity or advocacy to your campus, and how you could get involved.



*Historian, David Blight (Courtesy of HBO)*



*Scholar/Filmmaker, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Courtesy of HBO)*

# Actions & activities

The impact of racism and injustice is felt by people of color in every part of this country, and we cannot wait for those in power to change the system—we have to do what we can as individuals, communities, and advocates to make a difference in our everyday lives. The need to tell the stories of leaders like Frederick Douglass is apparent, and this film seeks to start conversations about the importance of their legacy.

Whether you are a student looking to increase the awareness and visibility of racial justice on your campus, or if you're simply ready to learn more about these issues, we have curated action items to help you get started. If there are programs at your school already doing this work, or if you have additional ideas for ways to get involved, we encourage you to be creative and utilize any ideas you might have.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE FILM

*Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* premiered on HBO Max on February 23rd. Visit the [film's page](#) to learn more, watch it again, or share it with friends and family.

## TAKE ACTION

The NAACP was founded in 1909 as an interracial endeavor to advance justice for Black Americans, and included some of Douglass' contemporaries: W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary White Ovington, Moorfield Storey, and Ida B. Wells. Learn how to find or start an NAACP chapter at your school or find a campaign that aligns with your interests and activities at their [Take Action portal](#).

[Our Turn](#) is focused on ending racial inequity in public schools across the country through centering student voices. Whether you are a student fighting for truth in the education system, or an ally for student led education justice, join their ongoing Truth(Ed) initiative, which encourages curriculum that tells the truth about the legacy of racism in this country, leading toward a more just future: [Our Turn Student Pledge](#)

Voting rights are under attack nationwide, and democracy works best when all eligible voters can cast their ballot freely and fairly. In 2021, more than [500 anti-voter bills](#) were introduced in 48 states, seeking to make it more difficult for eligible voters to register to vote, vote by mail, and/or vote in person. [Send a message](#) to urge Congress to pass the [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#) and protect against discrimination in voting.

Join [YWCA's Stand Against Racism](#) initiative this spring by hosting a community event at your school to provide information, bring allies together, increase awareness about systemic and institutional racism in your community, and celebrate victories.



Consider teaming up with a teacher or coach on campus to sign up for the [Stand Against Racism Challenge](#), a virtual community of growth and learning around social, systemic, and institutional racial inequity.

## **DEEPEN YOUR LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING**

Find more resources about the life and work of Frederick Douglass at the [Library of Congress' Frederick Douglass Resource Guide](#)

To participate in democracy and help make change, it's important to know where your elected officials stand on the issues you care about. Even if you are not old enough to vote yet, you can use the comprehensive [ACLU Legislative Scorecard](#) to look up the positions of your representatives and gain an understanding of your community leaders.

Learn more about how racial justice intersects with health and well being, climate justice, and more on the NAACP's [Know the Issues](#) hub.

[Visit I,000 Cut Journey](#) to access a Virtual Reality experience in which participants embody a Black male, Michael Sterling, as he experiences racism at different points throughout his life. *\*Content warning: This experience may be triggering for Black people and people who have experienced different forms of racism and discrimination.*



Frederick Douglass, (Courtesy of HBO)