

DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT® ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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Pre-Reading / Introduction

Abraham Lincoln presided over and successfully guided the United States through its greatest crisis, the Civil War. The problems that led to the Civil War did not, of course, develop overnight. Likewise, it took Lincoln a lifetime to acquire the experience and the wisdom, as well as the strength, patience and virtue required to lead our nation through such a crisis. In *Don't Know Much About Abraham Lincoln*, Kenneth Davis notes the parallel history of Lincoln and the United States, and highlights that the lives of nations and of individuals are inextricably tied together. The life of one man, Abraham Lincoln, made all the difference for the life of an entire nation. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln's life was highly influenced by the nation and the times in which he lived. This teaching guide is intended to provoke discussion between teachers and students about this symbiotic relationship. By participating in the activities, students may then connect their own lives to the spirit of the times and the place in which he/she lives, discovering the most important truth that social studies can offer—as John Donne once stated, that *no man is an Island. . . . every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

Chapter One: “An Extra Good Boy”

Lesson 1

Concept: Choices and Consequences

Students will realize that the choices of individuals and nations have far-reaching consequences. When Abraham Lincoln was a child, his father chose to live in Indiana, a free state, rather than Kentucky, a slave state. The fact that Thomas Lincoln made this choice implies an impact that the future of the Lincoln family would have on America.

Activity

After discussing how Thomas Lincoln's choice influenced Abraham Lincoln, students will list three good choices their parents have made and the reasons those choices were made. Students will elaborate on the possible consequences of those choices both for themselves, their own families, their communities, and the future of their nation at large as well as the contemporary social conditions that make such choices necessary. Assign students to write a *friendly letter* to their parents thanking them for making such good choices.

Lesson 2

Concept: Your Reading List. A Totally Absorbing Experience?

Abraham Lincoln's reading list as a child was limited. The short list however, included everything from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to the *Arabian*

Nights and Aesop's Fables. We are told that Lincoln absorbed everything he read and applied the knowledge and wisdom of his reading to his life experiences. One of his greatest speeches addressing the state of a nation in conflict over slavery evokes the metaphor a "house divided," which is actually a quote from the Bible.

Activity

Assign students to name a book they have read that has influenced their lives. Students should elaborate on how the knowledge they derived from that book can help them now and later in life to make good choices. Students should then select quotation(s) from that book that illustrate a concept, and build a short **persuasive speech** around it.

Chapter Two: "The Rail Splitter"

Lesson 1

Concept: The Importance of Unimportant Jobs

As a young man, Lincoln split rails for work. It is interesting to note that the destruction and breaking up of one thing (a tree) into two or more things (rails) can actually make that thing more useful.

Activity

How is the metaphor of splitting rails similar to the splitting up of the country during the Civil War? As a class, discuss the following questions:

- Describe how the destruction of one thing can lead to something new and improved.
- How did the civil war destroy our country and lead to the creation of something new and better?
- Discuss examples of the destruction-reconstruction cycle from natural science (e.g. transition of winter to spring) and one example from history (transition from the Roman Empire to the European Union).
- The Chinese Symbol for crisis (wei-ji) includes both the symbol for danger and the symbol for opportunity. What dangers were inherent in the Civil War? What opportunities existed, and what improvements emerged, from this great national crisis?
- Consider your own lifecycle. How does the end of one stage (childhood) lead to another newer stage (adolescence)?
- Lincoln was an assiduous reader of Shakespeare. **Read, learn** and **memorize** Shakespeare's "seven ages of man" passage from *As You Like It*. Discuss how the word *stage* be understood to mean two things.

Lesson 2

Concept: Don't Miss the Forest for the Trees

We are told that Lincoln not only had the patience and strength to clear forests, but together with Washington and Jefferson was also a surveyor. A surveyor, Davis notes, *measure[s] plots of land, mark[s] boundaries of property, and*

draw[s] maps (page 32). It has been said that if men can be trusted with little jobs they can be trusted with big jobs. Whether it was downing trees to clear forests around his father's farm or bringing down the proud and arrogant institution of slavery in the civil war, Lincoln carried out both small and large tasks with equal virtue and perseverance. In addition, Lincoln performed these tasks with the extended perspective of the surveyor who could calculate the lay of the land, that is, of both natural and political landscapes.

Activity

Ask students to list four jobs that they are responsible for at school, home, or elsewhere. Then ask them to consider how these jobs, though small, can help them to define a job that they may want to do later in life. Assign students to write a **resume** to a prospective employer in the desired occupation, which lists the four above-mentioned jobs as evidence that they can do the job at hand.

Chapter Three: "A Mighty Fine Lawyer"

Lesson 1

Concept: Let's Debate the Matter

With a talent for storytelling and a keen mind shaped by books and his experience, Lincoln grew into a very capable debater. At a time when the country was so galvanized over the question of slavery, Lincoln found plenty of opportunity to exercise his talents of debate with other men in political circles. Debate indeed became an instrument for exploring the nagging question of slavery. Debate is also an instrument for exploring many questions that touch us in our everyday life.

Activity

Debate is a wonderful way to present relevant information for a variety of topics in students' lives. After learning the procedures of debate, students should choose a topic that is familiar to them in their school-life. The question must be one that can be argued successfully from two differing points of view. Assign students to research their topic and present compelling evidence that their chosen point view is the correct one. Then ask students to adopt the opposite point of view and argue it. In the spirit of the Douglas-Lincoln debates, hold a debate in your classroom and watch the intellectual sparks fly!

Chapter 4: "Birth of a Party"

Lesson 1

Concept: Organizing Information for Ready Access

In a debate, the debater must be able to recall facts and figures readily. Organizing information into categories or in chronological order helps simplify the material so that it can be recalled at a moment's notice. By doing this, one may begin to see the forest for the trees, by identifying trends and categories.

Activity

- Assign students to create a **timeline** illustrating the sequence of compromises, acts, and court decisions from the Missouri Compromise in 1820 to the election of Abraham Lincoln. Which side of the slavery argument prospers over time? Which diminishes? How does the Kansas-Nebraska Act influence the Missouri Compromise?
- Using **two categories**—pro-slavery and anti-slavery—assign students to organize each of the above compromises, acts, and decisions. Students should include the names of men who argued either one or the other stance, as well as which political parties asserted what view. If the compromises include both arguments, place distinctive elements of in their proper category. For example, in the Compromise of 1850 closed slave markets in Washington would be placed under anti-slavery category while the fact that slave ownership remained legal would be placed under the pro-slavery category. In another instance, Daniel Webster would be placed under the anti-slavery category while John C. Calhoun would be placed under the pro-slavery category.
- Assign students to prepare an opening argument for a debate that presents the above information in an organized manner.

Chapter Six and Chapter Seven: “Johnny Reb and Billy Yank/A New Birth of Freedom”

Lesson 1

Concept: Continuing to Organize information

Activity

- As a class, create a timeline that chronicles the battles fought. Assign students to categorize which battles the South won and which battles the North won.
- Then assign students to categorize the Union Generals and Confederate Generals, and present the above information in a mock-debate arguing whose army and army staff was superior.

There's no danger of people forgetting Abraham Lincoln. Some 15,000 books have been written about him. And that's not including U.S. history textbooks, which can't ignore his leadership during the Civil War. Support our journalism. Subscribe today. So you may know a lot about the 16th president. But there are many things about Lincoln that don't make it into textbooks. To mark Lincoln's birthday (February 12), KidsPost asked Michelle Krowl, a Civil War and Reconstruction specialist at the Library of Congress, to share 10 things you may not know about one of the nation's most written-about presidents. Despite the Steven Spielberg movie, despite all the books about a figure supposedly written about more than anyone besides Jesus Christ, yes, there are things you probably don't know about him. Here are a few from Rich Lowry's new book, *Lincoln Unbound*. By Rich Lowry. Rich Lowry BuzzFeed Contributor.

We reflexively call Lincoln "Abe," in keeping with the familiarity we feel for our beloved 16th president. But we wouldn't have called him that to his face. He had wanted to escape rural poverty to achieve respectability, and had a formidable sense of his own dignity. So he didn't like the diminutive Abe. At his law office, according to historian David Herbert Donald, he called his younger partner William Herndon "Billy"; Herndon called him "Mr. Lincoln." Abraham Lincoln (/ˈlɪŋkəlɪn/; February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865) was an American statesman and lawyer who served as the 16th president of the United States from 1861 until his assassination in 1865. Lincoln led the nation through the American Civil War, the country's greatest moral, cultural, constitutional, and political crisis. He succeeded in preserving the Union, abolishing slavery, bolstering the federal government, and modernizing the U.S. economy.