# Preparing to Read

## *from* Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Based on the autobiography by Frederick Douglass

### LITERARY FOCUS: DICTION

**Diction** is a writer's or speaker's choice of words. A writer's diction should fit with his or her subject, purpose, and audience. Diction can be formal or informal, fancy or plain, and so on. Frederick Douglass is admired as a speaker and writer. His words are often very common words, but he uses them clearly, effectively, and powerfully.

### READING FOCUS: ANALYZING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Writers use different kinds of writing to achieve their **purposes**. They might tell a story (narration), describe a scene (description), set forth the facts (exposition), or try to convince you of their point of view (persuasion). Persuasion is only one of the kinds of writing Frederick Douglass uses to convince readers of the horrors of slavery. As you read, notice how Douglass *describes* his life and *narrates* his experiences to achieve his purpose.

### VOCABULARY

Look for these words and their context as you read the selection.

**stagger** (STAG UHR) *v.:* walk unsteadily.

**defiance** (DIH FY UHNS) *n.:* resistance to authority.

### INTO THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery. His experience of the extreme cruelty of the slave system convinced him he had to be free. He escaped to the North when he was about twenty-one years old. From there he went to England, where friends bought his freedom. In 1847, Douglass returned to the United States and started an antislavery newspaper called the *North Star*. He also worked to abolish slavery in the United States.

SKILLS FOCUS

**Literary Focus**
Understand diction.

**Reading Focus**
Identify the writer's purpose or intent.

Copyright © by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. All rights reserved.

# *from* Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

## Based on the autobiography by Frederick Douglass

### The Battle with Mr. Covey

I have already hinted that the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's were much worse than the last. The events that brought about the change in Mr. Covey's attitude toward me are an important chapter in my humble history. I have told you how a man was made a slave; now you will hear how a slave was made a man. A

On one of the hottest days of the month of August 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes, a slave named Eli, and myself were fanning wheat.[1] Hughes was clearing the fanned wheat from in front of the fan, Eli was turning the fan, Smith was feeding in the grain, and I was carrying wheat to the fan. The work was simple, requiring strength rather than intellect; yet, to one not used to such work, it was very hard.

About three o'clock, my strength began to fail. I kept going as long as I could stagger to the fan's hopper, or bin, with the grain. B When I could no longer stand up, I fell down. Of course, the fan stopped. Everyone had his own work to do, and no one could do the work of another and his own at the same time.

Mr. Covey immediately came down from the house and wanted to know what was the matter. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring the wheat to the fan. I had crawled under the fence to get out of the sun.

Mr. Covey came over, gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. C I managed to get up and stagger to

1. Here, **fanning wheat** refers to separating usable grain.

**A HERE'S HOW**

**Reading Focus**

In the first paragraph, I think Douglass states directly the **purpose** of the story he is about to tell: To show how he regained his dignity and sense of self-worth. I will keep reading to see how Douglass accomplishes this goal.

**B HERE'S HOW**

**Vocabulary**

I am unsure about the definition of *stagger*. The dictionary says it means "walk unsteadily." This makes sense because Douglass says that he has very little strength.

**C HERE'S HOW**

**Literary Focus**

I am finding Douglass's **diction** to be simple but strong. Words like *crawled* and *savage* paint a powerful picture of what his life was like.

the grain tub but fell down again. Mr. Covey picked up a piece of wood, hit me on the head, and again told me to get up. Blood was running from the wound on my head. I decided to run away, tell my master what had happened, and ask his protection. D

I waited until Covey wasn't looking and headed for the woods. When Covey noticed, he yelled at me, threatening what he would do if I did not come back. I paid no attention and kept on going.

I had not gone far before what little strength I had failed me, and I fell down. After a while, I nerved myself up[2] again and started on my way. It took me five hours to walk seven miles. At last, I arrived at my master's store. My appearance should have melted even a heart of iron. From the top of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were torn bloody by briers and thorns. I looked like a man who had barely escaped a den of wild beasts. E

In this bloody state I stood before my master. I begged him for protection, and I told him I wanted him to get me a new home. I said that Covey would surely kill me if I stayed with him. F

Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me. He said that he would not think of taking me away from Covey because he would lose the whole year's wages I would earn for him. He said that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and if I did not go back, he would whip me. G

I started off to Covey's the next morning. As I was climbing over the fence to Covey's fields, out ran Covey with his whip. I turned and ran back to the woods.

That night I met up with Sandy Jenkins, a slave that I knew. I told him my troubles, we talked the matter over, and I got his advice as to what to do. Sandy told me that I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with Sandy into the woods where a certain root grew. I was to take some of that root with

**D QUICK CHECK**

Why is Douglass going to see his master?

**E YOUR TURN**

**Reading Focus**

Lines 38–42 describe Douglass's appearance after he was beaten and walked seven miles. What do you think his **purpose** is in writing this description?

**F YOUR TURN**

**Literary Focus**

Underline words in this paragraph that emphasize the power of Douglass's **diction**.

**G LITERARY ANALYSIS**

How would you describe the relationship between Master Thomas and Douglass?

2. Here, **nerved myself up** is the same a saying "got my strength and confidence back."

**A YOUR TURN**

**Reading Focus**

Douglass admits that he does not know where he got the idea to fight back. What is the **purpose** of this description of his state of mind?

_____

_____

_____

_____

**B HERE'S HOW**

**Language Coach**

Many English words have **multiple meanings** (more than one definition), even though they are spelled the same. *Lying* in line 80 can have two meanings: (1) "being in a horizontal position," or (2) "making an untrue statement." In this context, I can tell that the first definition is correct.

me, always carrying it on my right side. The root would make it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. At first I rejected the idea, thinking that simply carrying a root in my pocket would not protect me. Sandy told me it could do no harm, so to please him, I finally took the root and, according to his direction, carried it on my right side. This was Sunday morning.

I started for home, and as I walked through the gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to church. He spoke to me kindly, gave me an easy chore, and went on his way. Now, Mr. Covey's strange conduct made me begin to think that maybe there was something in the root that Sandy had given me. All went well till Monday morning. On this morning the power of the root was fully tested.

Long before daylight, I was called out to rub, curry,[3] and feed the horses. While I was doing this, Mr. Covey came in, knocked me down, and started to tie me up. Suddenly—and where the idea came from, I do not know—I decided to fight back. (A) I grabbed Covey by the throat and held on to him. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came and grabbed hold of me. I gave him a hard kick and he let go. Covey dragged me over to a stick that was lying outside the stable door. (B) As he was leaning over to get the stick, I jumped up and threw him to the ground.

By this time, Bill came over, and Covey yelled, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill refused, saying he had been hired out to work, and not to whip me. He left Covey and me to fight it out, and we were at it for nearly two hours. Finally Covey let me go, puffing and blowing, saying that if I had not fought back, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, he had not whipped me at all. He got the worst of the bargain[4]—he had drawn no blood from me, but I had made him bleed. For the rest of the six months that I was with Mr. Covey, he never again laid a finger on me.

3. **Curry** (KUR EE) means "rub and clean a horse."
4. Here, **got the worst of the bargain** means "lost". Covey and Douglass agreed to fight. At the end, Covey was bleeding, but Douglass was not."

Copyright © by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. All rights reserved.

© Art Resource, NY © 2009 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**C QUICK CHECK**

How did the battle with Mr. Covey change Douglass?

The battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my life as a slave. It relit the dying embers of freedom and revived my sense of manhood. It brought back my self-confidence and again inspired me with a determination to be free. C My feeling of triumph made up for whatever else might come to

me, even death. Only someone who has suffered under the bloody arm of slavery can understand how I felt. I felt as I never felt before. My spirit rose, cowardice left me, and bold defiance took its place. (A) I resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I was a slave in fact.

(A) YOUR TURN

**Vocabulary**

Douglass says that he replaced his cowardice with *defiance*. Considering how Douglass stood up to Covey, what do you think the word *defiance* means?

_____

_____

_____

_____

# *from* Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

## USE A DICTION ANALYSIS TABLE

**DIRECTIONS:** On the chart below, analyze how Douglass's **diction** adds to the power of his autobiography.

| Douglass's text | Impact of his diction |
|---|---|
| "My appearance should have melted even a heart of iron." (lines 37–38) | 1. |
| "The battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my life as a slave. It relit the dying embers of freedom and revived my sense of manhood." (lines 93–95) | 2. |
| "Only someone who has suffered under the bloody arm of slavery can understand how I felt." (line 98–99) | 3. |