Between 1936 and 1938, more than 2,300 African Americans shared their memories of slavery with members of the Federal Writers’ Project, a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The result of these oral history interviews was the Slave Narrative Collection, an extraordinary set of autobiographical accounts, now housed at the Library of Congress, that chronicle slave life from the interviewees’ eyewitness perspective.

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives, a powerful new documentary, features readings from these narratives by some of today’s most prominent African-American actors. Accounts of slave auctions, field work, escape attempts and emancipation come to life through these readings, which are juxtaposed with rich historical images and musical interludes to provide context and background. Viewing this film will enable students to hear and analyze the words of former slaves—and to reflect on the “peculiar institution” of slavery as it existed in the U.S.

Before Viewing
To provide context on the scope and history of slavery in the U.S., distribute the inTIME magazine produced to accompany the film. Direct students to page 2 and discuss: How many Africans were taken from their homes and shipped to the Americas between 1450 and 1850? From what countries did these slaves come? What arguments were made for and against slavery? As a class, read “What Are the Slave Narratives?” on page 3, including the note on language. Then turn to pages 4 through 7, and have individual students read aloud these excerpts from the narratives. What does each narrative reveal about life during slavery?

After Viewing
The total running time of Unchained Memories is 75 minutes. This film can spark class discussion and critical thinking on a myriad of topics. Questions to ask after students view the film include:

The Power of Voices
What is the impact of hearing these first-person accounts? Which narratives did you find most powerful? Most disturbing? Most surprising? Most uplifting? Cite specific details. What similarities and contrasts do you see among the narratives? What questions would you like to ask the former slaves?

Memories of Daily Life
What was life like for enslaved children? What does the film reveal about family life, work, community and religion during slavery? What role did music play?

Creating the Narratives
How and when were the slave narratives created? The Federal Government paid interviewees to record the stories of former slaves. Is that a valuable use of taxpayers’ money? What is the role of the government in preserving stories?

The Value of Oral History
What is oral history? Why are oral histories valuable for understanding the past and present? (For a worksheet designed to help students conduct their own “WPA-style” oral histories, see page 3.)
Voices. Voices to connect us to those who came before. We have our students listen to the unforgettable words FDR spoke on “a date which will live in infamy”; our Febru-aries echo with Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream.” When we can provide the voices of our past to the keepers of our future, we enable our students to respond with both their heads and hearts.

The WPA Slave Narratives give us the opportunity to hear and respond to voices long lost. Many of the former slaves speak as people who were denied the right to read and write; both their accents and their syntax are hard for our students to understand. But once you unlock their words, you can unlock their world. They tell of brutal beatings and rape. They tell of families ripped apart. They repeatedly use the word “nigger.” This is their world and these are their words. Times change. Both their lives and our use of that word change. What was appropriate for the former slaves in the 1930s is no longer appropriate in the 21st century. Instead of censoring these words, deal with them. Don’t keep students from these words. They know all these words; they hear them on television. Give students a responsible context in which to deal with this history.

To prepare students for viewing Unchained Memories, divide the class into small groups, giving each group two or three short narratives. After reading the narratives aloud, ask students to identify similarities and differences. What are the common themes? Where did these slaves live? Were any of these slaves sold? What was their relationship to their masters? How old was this narrator when he or she was freed?

“Once you unlock their words, you can unlock their world.”
CONDUCTING YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

As the WPA interviews with former slaves prove, ordinary people often have extraordinary stories to tell. Oral history interviews—in which living people share memories about their own lives—are a terrific way to record and preserve these stories. Working in small groups or as a class, follow the steps below to gather your own oral histories of people in your community or family. And remember: you don’t have to be a celebrity to have powerful stories!

1. Select a topic to explore. For ideas, see the list at right.
2. Identify a person (or group of people) to be interviewed.
3. Create a list of specific questions and general topics about which to ask your interviewee.
4. Practice interviewing other students in your class.
5. Contact the person you want to interview, and schedule a date and time for the interview.
6. Locate a quiet place for the interview. Be sure your interviewee understands the purpose of the conversation. Explain that this is not a private chat: information from the interview will be shared with teachers, classmates and perhaps the community.
7. Start each interview by stating your interviewee’s name; also tell when and where the interview is being conducted.
8. Ask introductory questions first, then move to general topics. Allow the discussion to guide the questions you ask. Stay flexible! Ask whatever questions seem pertinent and interesting, even if they are not on your list.
9. Listen actively. Utilize positive body language, such as nodding and smiling. Encourage your subject with statements such as, “This is fascinating.” or “That is very helpful information.” But don’t interrupt your interviewee.
10. Record the interview on audiotape or videotape, if possible, or take careful notes as your interviewee answers your questions.
11. Follow up the interview by making notes about the session. Notes could include topics to pursue in the next interview, areas for additional research, and questions to ask your instructor.
12. Transcribe and analyze the interview. Did you get the information you wanted? If not, how could you obtain it? Set up another interview if necessary. Send a thank-you note to the interviewee.
13. Share your oral histories with people around the country. Go to www.timeclassroom.com/histories to submit your interviews.

Sharing History: Project Ideas

FAMILY HISTORY Collect oral history from parents, grandparents, great-grandparents or other relatives. You can use audio or video equipment and then transcribe the interviews, or simply write down answers to questions. After gathering the oral history, you might also want to collect family photos and create a book that chronicles your family history.

EXPLORING YOUR COMMUNITY Locate community residents with unusual life experiences, special skills or other valuable insights into your community. For example, the class might want to interview a former mayor, someone who took part in a historic local event, or a doctor who provided medical care to the town for several decades.

MAIN STREET USA Interview longterm operators of downtown businesses about shifts they have observed in your community’s downtown over the years. Topics for discussion include the downtown’s economic health, population shifts, changes in the socioeconomic status of customers, and campaigns for historic preservation and/or revitalization of the business district.

MEMORIES OF IMMIGRATION What do immigrants remember about their homeland? Why did they decide to come to America? Did the reality live up to the expectations?

Six Questions

WPA Interviewers Asked Former Slaves in the 1930s

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Tell about your life with them.
3. What work did you do in slavery days?
4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? Did the slaves have their own gardens?
5. Tell about your master, mistress and their children.
6. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another?

For a full list of questions that interviewers asked the former slaves, see page 19 of the Administrative Files Volume at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ardoc/issue3.html
For Further Exploration

**BOOKS**

**FILMS**
- *Africans in America: America’s Journey Through Slavery* (1998). This documentary series is centered on enslaved Africans’ experiences and the impact of slavery on American society as a whole.
- *Amistad* (1997). Steven Spielberg’s film about the 1839 insurrection aboard the slave ship *Amistad*.
- *Beloved* (1998). Jonathan Demme’s adaptation of Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, in which a former slave named Sethe (played by Oprah Winfrey) is forced to confront her past.

**WEBSITES**
- [www.timeclassroom.com/unchained](http://www.timeclassroom.com/unchained) Resources to help students and teachers delve more deeply into the narratives.
- [www.hbo.com/unchained](http://www.hbo.com/unchained) Additional information about the documentary *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives.*
- [www.undergroundrailroad.org](http://www.undergroundrailroad.org) Using the Underground Railroad as a lens through which to explore a range of freedom issues, this site offers lessons and reflections on the struggle for freedom in the past, in the present and for the future. (The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is due to open in downtown Cincinnati in 2004.)
- [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org) The world’s oldest international human rights organization, Antislavery works against modern-day slavery.

**Starting Points for Writing and Research**

1. **Extending your knowledge.** Select one narrative quoted in *Unchained Memories.* Then visit the “Born in Slavery” website at the address at left and locate the full text of this narrative. What additional details about this former slave’s life are revealed in the interview? When and where was the interview conducted? What can you deduce about the person who conducted the interview? Share your findings with members of your class.

2. **Escaping to freedom.** What does *Unchained Memories* reveal about the risks and benefits slaves faced when they considered escaping from slavery? Imagine you faced the decision that every slave did: Would you attempt to escape from bondage? Why or why not? Respond in a first-person essay.

3. **Analyzing the narratives’ language.** Historian Lawrence Levine has written that the transcripts of the slave narratives contain a mix “of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism.” Choose two (or more) narratives and, working individually or in a small group, look for evidence to support or refute Levine’s observation. In what ways do these transcripts reflect stereotypes about African Americans? Do you see evidence of racism? Empathy? Point to specific passages in each text to support your answer.

**Sharing History**

In addition to *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives,* HBO, in partnership with TIME FOR KIDS, the Library of Congress, and the AOL Time Warner Foundation, is launching the *Sharing History Project.* This multi-faceted community, educational and Web-based effort uses the program as a catalyst for public engagement with history and its impact on contemporary life. Go to [www.hbo.com/unchained](http://www.hbo.com/unchained) for more information.