

Liberty & Responsibility in the Political Thought of Frederick Douglass (228 pages)

*The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches* available on [Amazon](#) (\$19.00 each)  
**Douglass, Frederick. *The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Nicholas Buccola. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016.**

**Reader Abstract:** This reader moves chronologically through Frederick Douglass's life and thought process, with reference to the events taking place in the United States at the time of the given writing. The first session deals with his life as a slave, followed by his abolitionist writing, his writings on the Constitution and the antebellum political controversies, and finally, his post-emancipation political writings.

Session I: *Autobiography as Political Philosophy* (31 pages)

Selection 1. Chapter V. Gradual Initiation to the Mysteries of Slavery, Excerpt from *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855)

Selection 2. Chapter X. Life in Baltimore, Excerpt from *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855)

Selection 3. Chapter XVII. The Last Flogging, Excerpt from *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855)

Selection 4. "Letter to Henry C. Wright," published in *The Liberator*, January 29, 1847

Selection 5. "Letter to My Old Master," published in *The Liberator*, September 22, 1848

**Session Abstract:** The autobiographical pieces each have a different theme, beginning with the cruelty of slave masters, the importance of education in instilling the idea of freedom, and the resistance to an oppressor. The two articles from *The Liberator* deal with natural rights and self-ownership.

Session II: *Douglass on the Law, Politics, & Morality of Abolition* (53 pages)

Selection 6. "The Constitution and Slavery" an essay published in *The North Star*, March 16, 1849

Selection 7. "Change of Opinion Announced," an essay published in *The Liberator*, May 23, 1851

Selection 8. "Is Civil Government Right?" an essay published in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 23, 1851

Selection 9. "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" a speech given on July 5, 1852

Selection 10. "The Fugitive Slave Law," a speech given on August 11, 1852

Selection 11. "Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?" an essay published in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 2, 1854

Selection 12. "Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," a speech given on July 12, 1854

**Session Abstract:** The first two pieces present Douglass's rejection and later adoption of the arguments that the Constitution was anti-slavery. The third selection deals with the legitimacy of government as a counterview of the anarchistic abolitionists. The fourth reading deals with the hypocrisy of a country that celebrated freedom while holding people in bondage, and the fifth asserts the natural law view that slavery cannot be made legal by government fiat. The sixth piece builds on this by defending resistance to slave kidnappers, and the final piece builds further by arguing what constitutes a "human" so as to meet the requirements for having natural rights.

Session III: Douglass on Patriotism, the Constitution, and the American Founding (46 pages)

- Selection 13. "The Kansas-Nebraska Act," a speech given on October 30, 1854  
Selection 14. "What is My Duty as an Anti-Slavery Voter?" an essay published in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 25, 1856  
Selection 15. "Fremont and Dayton," an essay published in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 15, 1856  
Selection 16. "The Dred Scott Decision," a speech given on May 14, 1857  
Selection 17. "Letter to James Redpath," published in *The Liberator*, July 27, 1860  
Selection 18. "The Prospect in the Future," an essay published in *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1860

**Session Abstract:** These pieces all relate to the goings-on of the 1850's United States, from the territorial dispute over Kansas, voting on principle versus pragmatism in the 1856 election, and the Dred Scott decision. The "Letter to James Redpath" follows up the speech about Dred Scott by contending that slavery would only be ended through violence, and the final piece presents an optimistic view about how people in society react to revolutions for liberty.

Session IV: A New Birth of Freedom and Responsibility – Reflections of an Elder Statesman (97 pages)

- Selection 29. "Our Composite Nationality," a speech delivered on December 7, 1869  
Selection 30. "Politics an Evil to the Negro?" an essay published in *The New National Era*, August 24, 1871  
Selection 31. "The Labor Question," an essay published in *The New National Era*, October 12, 1871  
Selection 34. "John Brown," a speech delivered on May 30, 1881  
Selection 36. "It Moves, or the Philosophy of Reform," a speech delivered on November 20, 1883  
Selection 37. "Address to the Annual Meeting of the New England Woman Suffrage Association," a speech delivered on May 24, 1886  
Selection 39. "Self-Made Men," a speech delivered in March, 1893  
Selection 40. "Blessings of Liberty and Education," a speech delivered on September 3, 1894

**Session Abstract:** This final session presents a variety of political positions Douglass took up after emancipation. The first piece presents the argument for national unity that consisted of racial diversity, with reference to the then-current controversy over Chinese immigration. The second reading deals with the question of political participation, and the third reading with the hegemony of the employer over the worker. The speech on John Brown attempts to answer criticisms of John Brown calling him a failure by showing that his action helped bring about significant political change. The "Philosophy of Reform" argues that the extremes on each end of the political spectrum are minorities that affect change by influencing the intermediary majority. The sixth reading presents female suffrage as a logical extension of abolitionist political philosophy. The final two readings present the benefits of a merit-based economic system and the importance of identifying as a member of humanity rather than valuing any specific racial identity.