
Is it Ever OK to Break the Law?



Supporting Questions

1. What was the fugitive slave act?
2. What were the risks and rewards of helping runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad?
3. Why would someone choose to assist runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad?

Is it ever OK to break the law?	
Michigan Content Expectations:	4 – H3.0.3 Use case studies or stories to describe the ideas and actions of individuals involved in the Underground Railroad in Michigan and in the Great Lakes region.
Staging the Compelling Question:	Display photographs of Rosa Parks (next page). Discuss her actions and their consequences.

Supporting Question 1
What was the Fugitive Slave Act?
Formative Performance Task
Write a synopsis and identify who would be in favor of the law and who would be opposed to it. Or Draw and identify 2 figures (one opposed to the law and one in favor of the law) explaining their position on the law
Featured Sources
A: Operations of the Fugitive Slave Law B: The Underground Railroad C: Fugitive Slave Law Reading D: Video segment

Supporting Question 2
What were the risks and rewards of helping runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad?
Formative Performance Task
Create a T Chart with partner or small group that identify the risk and rewards.
Featured Sources
A: The Fugitive Slave Act B: Discover Education Video

Supporting Question 3
Why would someone choose or not choose to assist runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad?
Formative Performance Task
Use a cause and effect graphic organizer to identify the outcome of both scenarios.
Featured Sources
A: Harriet Tubman Video

Summative Performance Task	Argument: Imagine you are living in the Southern Michigan in 1850. Your friendly neighbor, an abolitionist, asks you for help hiding runaway slaves traveling to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Knowing you would be breaking the law, what would you do? When, if ever, is it OK to break the law?
	Extension: Are there laws today that you disagree with?

Overview

This upper level elementary inquiry guides students through grappling with something that may be difficult for them to comprehend - times when following the rules conflicts with doing the right thing. Fourth graders in Michigan explore parts of the Civil Rights movement and use this as a framework for exploring the compelling question “Is it ever okay to break the rules?”

Staging the Compelling Question

Display the following photographs of Rosa Parks. Discuss her actions and their consequences.



Supporting Question 1 - Overview

What was the Fugitive Slave Act? After learning about the Underground Railroad and Michigan's role in it, introduce the Fugitive Slave Act. Generate discussion on why the act was created and who was in favor of it and who was opposed to it.

Supporting Question 1 - Featured Source A



<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-underground-railroad-and-the-fugitive-slave-act-of-1850/sources/1050>

Supporting Question 1 - Featured Source B



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THE Underground RAILROAD

The “Underground Railroad” meant freedom for thousands of slaves in the South. The Underground Railroad was not a real railroad; it was the name given to the route of roads and homes used to help slaves escape from their southern masters. Many slaves escaped to the northern United States and Canada where they could be free. Many slaves came to Michigan from Kentucky.

Escaping was dangerous. If they were caught, slaves were often whipped or beaten and made to wear chains. Many who made it to the North worked to help other slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. The routes they took were kept secret. Escaping slaves, or **fugitives**, traveled by foot, horse, train or even fancy



carriages. They often wore disguises. Railroad terms, like “depot” and “conductor,” were code words.

In most towns in southern Michigan there were conductors, or people, who helped protect those running away from slavery. Slaves were hidden in homes or barns during the day. These places were called depots. At night, they went to a depot in the next town. Some of the slaves went to Canada. Some chose to stay in Michigan.



This painting shows slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad during winter.

Supporting Question 1 - Featured Source C

This controversial law allowed slave-hunters to seize alleged fugitive slaves without due process of law and prohibited anyone from aiding escaped fugitives or obstructing their recovery. Because it was often presumed that a black person was a slave, the law threatened the safety of all blacks, slave and free, and forced many Northerners to become more defiant in their support of fugitives. S. M. Africanus presents objections in prose and verse to justify noncompliance with this law.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/03/0305001r.jpg>

Supporting Question 1 - Featured Source D (Video Clip)



Supporting Question 2 - Featured Source A

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

In 1850 Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. It was favored strongly by, and signed by US President Millard Fillmore a native of Buffalo. Only John P. Hale, Charles Sumner, Salmon Chase and Benjamin Wade voted against the measure. Slave hunters were allowed to capture an escapee in any territory or state and were required only to confirm orally before a state or federal judge that the person was a runaway. At the behest of Senator Henry Clay, it was legislated that any United States Marshall who did not arrest an alleged and who refused to return a runaway slave would pay a hefty penalty of \$1,000. The law stated that in future any federal slave could be fined \$1,000. People suspected of being a runaway slave could be arrested without warrant and turned over to a claimant on nothing more than his sworn testimony of ownership. A suspected black slave could not ask for a jury trial nor testify on his or her behalf.

Any person aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter, food or any other form of assistance was liable to six months' imprisonment and a \$500 fine an expensive penalty in those days. Those officers capturing a fugitive slave were entitled to a fee and this encouraged some officers to kidnap free Negroes and sell them to slave-owners. Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison and John Greenleaf Whittier led the fight against the law. If an escaped slave was sighted, he or she should be apprehended and turned in to the authorities for deportation back to the "rightful" owner down south. It was thought that the Fugitive Slave Act would diminish the incentive for slaves to attempt escape. The rationale behind this was the slaves' realization that even if they managed to escape from their plantation, they could still be caught and returned by any citizen in the United States. Even moderate anti-slavery leaders such as Arthur Tappan declared he was now willing to disobey the law and as result helped fund the Underground Railroad.

The law was opposed in many Northern states; several reacted by enacting legislation to protect free black Americans and fugitive slaves. The 'personal liberty laws' compelled a slave catcher to furnish corroborative proof that his captive was a fugitive and frequently accorded the accused the rights to trial by jury and appeal. Laws in some states made it easier to extradite a runaway if his or her slave status were confirmed.

<http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/0history/SlaveActs.html>

Supporting Question 2 - Featured Source B (Video Clip)



Supporting Question 3 - Harriet Tubman (Video Clip)



Summative Performance Task Overview

Imagine you are living in the Southern Michigan in 1850. Your friendly neighbor, an abolitionist, asks you for help hiding runaway slaves traveling to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Knowing you would be breaking the law, what would you do?

Students must take a position on whether or not they would participate in the Underground Railroad. Position must be supported by evidence. Responses must reflect their understanding of the risks and/or rewards.

When, if ever, is it OK to break the law?

Students must take a position on whether or not breaking a law is justified. Position should be supported by example and/or evidence.