6th Grade Close Reading Exemplar for Russell Freedman’s
The Voice that Challenged a Nation

Goal for the Lesson
The goal of this exemplar is to give students the opportunity to explore the importance of Marian Anderson’s concert on civil rights. By reading and re-reading the passage closely, combined with classroom discussion about it, students will analyze the reasons behind her famous performance on the Mall in Washington DC. Students will be directed to pay close attention to the argument Freedman develops and the evidence he provides to support it. When combined with writing about the passage and teacher feedback, students will form a deeper understanding of how this event held symbolic meaning in the struggle for civil rights.

Connection to the CCSS
The following CCS standards are the focus of this exemplar: 6.RL.1-3, 6 & 8; 6.W.1 & 4; 6.SL.1, 3, & 4

Days for the Lesson
The close reading and discussion portion of the exemplar is brief enough to be completed in a single day, though teachers may want to include the argumentative writing response as a second day of instruction. Additionally, they may want to consider one or more of the extension activities, adding further days of instruction.
Chapter One: Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939

Despite cold and threatening weather, the crowd began to assemble long before the concert was to begin. People arrived singly and in pairs and in large animated groups. Soon the streets leading to the Mall in Washington, D.C., were jammed with thousands of people heading for the Lincoln Memorial.

The earliest arrivals found places as close as possible to the steps of the great marble monument. As the crowd grew, it spread back along the Mall, stretching around both sides of the long reflecting pool and extending beyond to the base of the Washington Monument, three-quarters of a mile away. Baby carriages were parked among the trees. Folks cradled sleeping infants in their arms and held youngsters by the hand or propped up on their shoulders. Uniformed Boy Scouts moved through the festive holiday throng handing out programs.

Anticipating a huge turnout, the National Park Service had enlisted the help of some five hundred Washington police officers. By five o’clock that afternoon, when the concert was scheduled to start, an estimated 75,000 people had gathered on the Mall. They waited patiently under overcast skies, bundled up against the brisk wind that whipped in from the Potomac River. They had come on this chilly Easter Sunday to hear one of the great voices of the time and to demonstrate their support for racial justice in the nation’s capital.

Marian Anderson had been applauded by many of the crowned heads of Europe. She had been welcomed at the White House, where she sang for the president and first lady, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. She had performed before appreciative audiences in concert halls across the United States. But because she was an African American, she had been denied the right to sing at Constitution Hall, Washington’s largest and finest auditorium. The Daughters of the American Revolution, the patriotic organization that owned Constitution Hall, had ruled several years earlier that black artists would not be permitted to appear there.

News of the DAR’s ban had caused an angry controversy and set the stage for a historic event in the struggle for civil rights. Working behind the scenes, a group of influential political figures had found an appropriate concert space for Anderson. Barred from Constitution Hall, she would give a free open-air concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Shortly before the concert got under way, the skies above Washington began to clear. Clouds, which had shadowed the monument, skittered away to the north, and the late afternoon sun broke through to bathe the reflecting pool and shine on the gaily dressed Easter crowd. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes appeared on the speaker’s platform. He introduced Miss Anderson, and she stepped forward to the bank of microphones.

The massive figure of Abraham Lincoln gazed down at her as she looked out at the expectant throng. Silencing the ovation with a slight wave of her hand, she paused. A profound hush settled over the crowd. For that moment, Marian Anderson seemed vulnerable and alone. Then she closed her eyes, lifted her head, clasped her hands before her, and began to sing.

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1 Most of the meanings of words in the exemplar text can be discovered by students from careful reading of the context in which they appear. Where it is judged this is not possible, underlined words are defined briefly for students to the right of the text in a separate column. In addition, high value academic or Tier Two vocabulary that can be determined in context has been put in boldface.
Close Reading Exemplar for Freedman, *The Voice That Challenged a Nation*

**Summary of Activities**
1. Teacher introduces the day’s passage with minimal commentary and students read it independently, then reads the passage out loud to the class as students follow along in the text (approx. 10 minutes)
2. Teacher asks the class to discuss the set of text-dependent questions and perform targeted tasks about the passage, with answers in the form of notes, annotations to the text, or more formal responses as appropriate (approx. 40 minutes)
3. Teacher then asks students to write an argumentative essay defending the central point made within Freedman’s text
4. Optional extension activities

### Text Passage under Discussion

Despite cold and threatening weather, the crowd began to assemble long before the concert was to begin. People arrived singly and in pairs and in large animated groups. Soon the streets leading to the Mall in Washington, D.C., were jammed with thousands of people heading for the Lincoln Memorial.

[read the intervening text]

The massive figure of Abraham Lincoln gazed down at her as she looked out at the expectant throng. Silencing the ovation with a slight wave of her hand, she paused. A profound hush settled over the crowd. For that moment, Marian Anderson seemed vulnerable and alone. Then she closed her eyes, lifted her head, clasped her hands before her, and began to sing.

### Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students

1. **Introduce the passage and students read independently.**
   
   Other than giving the brief definitions offered to words students would likely not be able to define from context (underlined in the text), avoid giving background context or instructional guidance at the outset of the lesson, instead letting the students read the text silently. This close reading approach forces students to rely exclusively on the text instead of privileging background knowledge and levels the playing field for all students as they seek to comprehend Freedman’s prose. It is critical to cultivating independence and creating a culture of close reading that students initially grapple with rich texts like Freedman without the aid of prefatory material, extensive notes, or even teacher explanations.

2. **Then read the passage out loud to the class as students follow along.**
   
   Asking students to listen to Freedman’s text exposes them a second time to the rhythms and meaning of his language before they begin their own close reading of the passage. Speaking clearly and carefully will allow students to follow Freeman’s explanation, and reading out loud with students following along improves fluency while offering all students access to this complex text. Accurate and skillful modeling of the reading provides students who may be dysfluent with accurate pronunciations and syntactic patterns of English.
**Text Under Discussion**

Despite cold and **threatening** weather, the crowd began to **assemble** long before the concert was to begin. People arrived singly and in pairs and in large **animated** groups. Soon the streets leading to the **Mall** in Washington, D.C., were **jammed** with thousands of people heading for the **Lincoln Memorial**.

The earliest **arrivals** found places as close as possible to the steps of the great marble **monument**. As the crowd grew, it spread back along the Mall, stretching around both sides of the long reflecting pool and **extending** beyond to the base of the Washington Monument, three-quarters of a mile away. **Baby carriages** were parked among the trees. Folks **cradled** sleeping infants in their arms and held youngsters by the hand or **propped up** on their shoulders. Uniformed Boy Scouts moved through the festive **holiday** throng handing out programs.

Anticipating a huge **turnout**, the National Park Service had **enlisted** the help of some five hundred Washington police officers. By five o’clock that afternoon, when the concert was scheduled to start, an estimated 75,000 people had gathered on the Mall. They waited patiently under **overcast** skies, bundled up against the brisk wind that whipped in from the Potomac River. They had come on this chilly **Easter Sunday** to hear one of the great voices of the time and to demonstrate their support for racial **justice** in the nation’s capital.

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<td><strong>2.</strong> Ask the class to answer a small set of text-dependent guided questions and perform targeted tasks about the passage, with answers in the form of notes, annotations to the text, or more formal responses as appropriate.</td>
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<td>As students move through these questions and re-read Freedman’s text, be sure to check for and reinforce their understanding of academic vocabulary (boldfaced in the text) and sentence structure. At times, the questions themselves may focus on academic vocabulary or syntax.</td>
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(Q1) **Explain how the words Freedman uses in the first two paragraphs set the scene.**

Teachers should draw attention to Freedman’s choice of “cold,” “threatening,” and “jammed” in the first paragraph, but especially “[d]espite,” which as a “pivot” or “turn” word indicates that whatever negative associations regarding the occasion are in fact overcome by what followed (i.e. the bad weather did not keep people away from the concert).

The second paragraph includes mention of “baby carriages,” “sleeping infants,” “youngsters,” and “Boy Scouts,” indicating that this was a concert attended by all ages. Teachers can highlight words like “spread,” “stretching” and “extending” to help students gain a sense of the number of people present.

(Q2) **Why had so many people come to the concert?**

The answer in the text is two-fold: “to hear one of the great voices” and “to demonstrate their support for racial justice.” While students will likely understand the first rationale, teachers should **hold off** explaining the second reason and encourage students to read the remainder of the text like a detective to determine the meaning of racial justice and why the crowd supported it.
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| Marian Anderson had been *applauded* by many of the crowned heads of Europe. She had been welcomed at the White House, where she sang for the president and first lady, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. She had performed before *appreciative* audiences in concert halls across the United States. But because she was an African American, she had been *denied* the right to sing at Constitution Hall, Washington’s largest and finest auditorium. The Daughters of the American Revolution, the *patriotic* organization that owned Constitution Hall, had *ruled* several years earlier that black artists would not be permitted to appear there. News of the DAR’s ban had caused an angry *controversy* and set the stage for a historic event in the struggle for *civil rights*. Working behind the *scenes*, a group of influential political figures had found an appropriate concert space for Anderson. *Barred* from Constitution Hall, she would give a free open-air concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. | *(Q3) Who is Marian Anderson? What were her accomplishments?*  
To build drama, Freedman switches to describing Marian Anderson, which might prove jarring to some students. Reassurance can be provided by having them focus on what the text says about her: she was a singer who had performed for important figures like the President and First Lady and who was “welcomed“ and appreciated for the quality of her singing.  

*(Q4) Ask students to find the point at which the argument pivots in the first paragraph of the fourth paragraph. How does what follows that turning point undercut the claims made in the first portion of the paragraph?*  
A key element of analyzing argumentative writing is identifying how words signal the twists and turns in an argument. Having modeled how to identify and explain the importance of “pivot” or “turn” words in (Q1), teachers should strive to cultivate student independence here in finding such a word (particularly since the evidence for answering (Q3) ends right before “But”). What follows after is an explanation for why despite the accolades she received she was unable to perform in Constitution Hall (“because she was an African American”… a “black artist”). This is a good time to help students connect this explanation to the idea of “racial justice” from (Q2).  

*(Q5) What words did Freeman use to signal the significance of what happened next?*  
Although Anderson was prevented from performing in Constitution Hall, plans were made for her to instead offer an outdoor concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Freedman employed several charged phrases certain to catch the eye of a close reader and infuse the event with importance: “angry controversy,” “historic event,” “struggle for civil rights,” “influential political figures,” and the particularly vexing “appropriate concert space.”  

Sidebar: *The Lincoln Memorial*  
Teachers might pause here to give brief background on the Lincoln Memorial to unpack why it was an “appropriate” setting for a concert in support of “racial justice” and “civil rights.” The prefatory remarks made by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes in introducing Anderson specifically delves into the issue of “appropriateness” (cf. Appendix A for the text and a recording of Ickes speech).
Shortly before the concert got under way, the skies above Washington began to clear. Clouds, which had shadowed the monument, skittered away to the north, and the late afternoon sun broke through to bathe the reflecting pool and shine on the gaily dressed Easter crowd. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes appeared on the speaker’s platform. He introduced Miss Anderson, and she stepped forward to the bank of microphones.

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(Q6) What does the change in the weather symbolize?

The shift in largely negative language characterizing the weather in the third paragraph (“overcast,” “chilly,” and “brisk wind that whipped”) to the positive language employed here (“skies... began to clear,” “Clouds... skittered away,” “late afternoon sun broke through”) foreshadows the positive associations Freedman wants to generate regarding Anderson’s performance, which shortly follows the change in the weather.

(Q7) What language does Freedman use in the closing paragraph to heighten the drama of the scene?

His use of “massive” creates the sense of the weighty figure of Abraham Lincoln looking down on her expectantly, contributing to the sense that she was “vulnerable and alone.” She is able to quiet the “ovation” of an expectant crowd of 75,000 people waiting for her to sing with merely a gesture of her hand. The seriousness of the moment is further emphasized by describing the silence that fell over the crowd as “profound.”

Sidebar: Photo of Marian Anderson at The Lincoln Memorial

Ending the close reading of the text with an image of Marian Anderson about to sing at the Lincoln Memorial can be particularly effective (cf. Appendix B for images of Marian Anderson and concertgoers at the Lincoln Memorial).
3. Argumentative Essay Assignment: Write an essay that argues for the significance of the concert.

Instructions: Students will be asked to respond to a writing prompt with an essay arguing why Marian Anderson’s concert on the Mall was important. Essays should closely hew to the expectations of the CCSS with regard to Argumentative Writing in the 6th Grade:

6.W.1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
   a. Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.
   b. Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.
   c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify the relationships among claim(s) and reasons.
   d. Establish and maintain a formal style.
   e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument presented.

Teachers should share with students the Argumentative Writing Rubric for Grades 6-8, and have been working with students on expectations regarding the use of evidence and support, coherence and organization, and clarity and conventions in writing.

Answers: Essays that offer purposeful organization will note why Marian Anderson was initially prevented from singing in Washington, how the venue was changed, and ultimately why the shift in location symbolized an important step in the struggle for civil rights. They will provide ample evidence for each of these points—evidence that was excavated in the process of performing the close reading above—and explain how it supports the reasons they cite and the ultimate thesis they advance.

In presenting their evidence and reasons they will pay close attention to how their argument unfolds and coheres to support their claim. They will end their essays with a compelling conclusion, linking their analysis back to their thesis one more time. If time permits, students could perform peer edits or revise their essays a subsequent class session.

4. Extension Activities: Additional instructional opportunities exist if teachers wish to extend the amount of time they wish to spend on this exemplar:

(a) Teachers could have students examine and respond to the argument First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt made that led her to resign her membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution (cf. Appendix C for the text of her resignation).

(b) Teachers could have students look more deeply at particular chapters of Freedman’s text that explore issues related to the events surrounding the concert:
   • Chapter Five (“Banned by the DAR”) tells the full story of how Anderson was prevented from performing and the actions of the influential politicians that maneuvered behind the scenes to arrange the outdoor concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial
   • Chapter Six (“Singing to the Nation”) that describes the actual concert itself
   • The opening pages of Chapter Seven (“Breaking Barriers”) that explains the importance of the concert for the fledgling civil rights movement
Appendix A: Harold Ickes introducing Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial

Miss Anderson, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In this great auditorium under the sky all of us are free. When God gave us this wonderful outdoors and the sun, the moon, and the stars, He made no distinction of race, or creed, or color. And 130 years ago He sent to us one of His truly great in order that He might restore freedom to those from whom we had disregardfully taken it.

In carrying out this great task, Abraham Lincoln laid down his life. And so it is as appropriate as it is fortunate that today we stand reverently and humbly at the base of this memorial to the great emancipator where glorious tribute is rendered to his memory by a daughter of the race from which he struck the chains of slavery.


Appendix B: The Mall during Marian Anderson’s Concert
Appendix B: Marian Anderson Performing at the Lincoln Memorial

Appendix C: Additional Instructional Resources related to Russell Freedman’s
The Voice that Challenged a Nation

On February 27, 1939, in response to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) decision not to allow Marian Anderson to perform at Constitution Hall, the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, wrote in her nationally syndicated column that she was resigning her membership in the DAR. What is the argument she presents that led her to this conclusion?

I have been debating in my mind for some time, a question which I have had to debate with myself once or twice before in my life. Usually I have decided differently from the way in which I am deciding now. The question is, if you belong to an organization and disapprove of an action which is typical of a policy, should you resign or is it better to work for a changed point of view within the organization? In the past, when I was able to work actively in any organization to which I belonged, I have usually stayed in until I had at least made a fight and had been defeated.

Even then, I have, as a rule, accepted my defeat and decided I was wrong or, perhaps, a little too far ahead of the thinking of the majority at that time. I have often found that the thing in which I was interested was done some years later. But, in this case, I belong to an organization in which I can do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.