6th Grade Close Reading Exemplar for

Russell Freedman, *The Voice That Challenged a Nation*


**Learning Objective:** The goal of this one day exemplar is to give students the opportunity to explore the importance of Marion 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 concert 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 shaped the struggle for civil rights.

**Reading Task:** Students will silently read the passage in question on a given day—first independently and then following along with the text as the teacher and/or skillful students read aloud. Depending on the difficulties of a given text and the teacher’s knowledge of the fluency abilities of students, the order of the student silent read and the teacher reading aloud with students following might be reversed. What is important is to allow all students to interact with challenging text on their own as frequently and independently as possible. Students will then reread specific passages in response to a set of concise, text-dependent questions that compel them to examine the meaning and structure of Freedman’s prose.

**Vocabulary Task:** 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. Teachers can use discussions to model and reinforce how to learn vocabulary from contextual clues, and students must be held accountable for engaging in this practice. 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 whenever the original text is reproduced. In addition, in subsequent close readings of passages of the text, high value academic (‘Tier Two’) words have been put in **boldface** to draw attention to them. Given how crucial vocabulary knowledge is for academic and career success, it is essential that these high value words be discussed during the instructional sequence.

**Discussion Task:** Students will discuss the exemplar text in depth with their teacher and their classmates, performing activities that result in a close reading of Freedman’s text. The goal is to foster student confidence when encountering complex text and to reinforce the skills they have acquired regarding how to build and extend their understanding of a text. A general principle is to always reread the passage that provides evidence for the question under discussion. This gives students another encounter with the text, helping them develop fluency and reinforcing their use of text evidence.

**Writing Task:** Students will write an argumentative essay using their understanding of the argument in Freedman’s text. Teachers might afford students the opportunity to revise their essays after receiving teacher feedback, allowing them to refashion both their understanding of the text and their expression of that understanding.

**Standards Covered:** The following CCS standards are the focus of this exemplar: 6.RL.1, 6.RL.2, 6.RL.3, 6.RL.4, 6.RL.6, 6.RL.8, 6.W.1, 6.W.4, 6.SL.1, 6.SL.3, & 6.SL.4
Russell Freedman, *The Voice that Challenged a Nation*

**The Text: 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.

Marion 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.
### Instructional 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 (5 minutes)
2. Teacher or a skillful reader then reads the passage out loud to the class as students follow along in the text (5 minutes)
3. 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 (40 minutes)
4. Teacher then asks students to write an essay explicating the central argument within Freedman’s text.

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<tr>
<th>Text Passage under Discussion</th>
<th>Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students</th>
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| 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. | 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 any background context or instructional guidance at the outset of the lesson while students are reading 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. **Read the passage out loud to the class as students follow along in the text.**  
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. |
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>lively</strong></td>
<td>3. 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><strong>park for large gatherings;</strong></td>
<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 in the corresponding text (which will be boldfaced the first time it appears in the text). At times, the questions themselves may focus on academic vocabulary.</td>
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<td><strong>monument in honor of Abraham Lincoln, 16th President</strong></td>
<td>(Q1) Explain how the words Freedman uses in the first two paragraphs set the scene.</td>
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<td><strong>crowd gathering</strong></td>
<td>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 formed regarding the occasion after reading the first half of the opening sentence, they will be overcome by what follows (namely that 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.</td>
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<td><strong>engage</strong></td>
<td><strong>(Q2) Why had so many people come to the concert?</strong></td>
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<td><strong>annual Christian festival; fair treatment of all races</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
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Marion 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.

### Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students

(Q3) **Who is Marion Anderson? What were her accomplishments?**

To build drama, Freedman switches to describing Marion 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 this selection. 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 characterize 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).
Argumentative Essay Assignment: Directions for Teachers and Students: Overview

A helpful tool for generating a thesis is “Burke’s Pentad.” Teachers and students can ask the following questions about a text in order to generate the particular information needed to create a thesis.

- What was done?
- How was it done?
- When and where was it done?
- Why was it done?
- Who did it?

By juxtaposing the “why” question against the others, teachers and students can create thesis questions for essays to answer.

With regard to the text extracted from Freedman’s *The Voice That Challenged a Nation*, an appropriate thesis statement that stems from Burke’s Pentad would be:

**Why was Marian Anderson’s concert on the Mall in Washington an important event in the struggle for civil rights?**

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 it was such an important event for civil rights. They will provide ample evidence for each of these points and explain how the evidence provides reasons in support of their argument regarding the importance of the occasion. In presenting their evidence and reasons they will pay close attention to how their argument unfolds and coheres. They will end their essays with a compelling conclusion, linking their analysis back to their thesis one more time (cf. the rubric provided in Appendix C for evaluating Argumentative Essays).

If time permits, students could perform peer edits or revise their essays a subsequent class session.

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 D 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: Marian Anderson Performing at the Lincoln Memorial

The Mall during Marian Anderson’s Concert at the Lincoln Memorial
### Appendix C: Rubric for Evaluating 6th Grade Argumentative Writing

Standards W.6.1, 4-6, & L.6.1 & 2 of the CCSS ask students to meet the following criteria when writing arguments:

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<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence and Support</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer use credible sources to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence, demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text? (W.6.1.b)</td>
<td>No reasons or evidence</td>
<td>Unclear or insufficient reasons and evidence</td>
<td>Sufficient reasons and evidence</td>
<td>Ample reasons and evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coherence and Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly? (W.6.1.a)</td>
<td>Little or no organization</td>
<td>Some organization established</td>
<td>Offers sufficient organization</td>
<td>Offers purposeful organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify relationships among claims and reasons? (W.6.1.c)</td>
<td>Little or no cohesion</td>
<td>Some cohesion</td>
<td>Sufficient cohesion</td>
<td>Outstanding sense of cohesion</td>
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<td>Does the writer provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument presented? (W.6.1.e)</td>
<td>No recognizable conclusion</td>
<td>Underdeveloped or ineffective conclusion</td>
<td>Well-developed conclusion</td>
<td>Compelling conclusion</td>
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<td><strong>Clarity and Conventions</strong></td>
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<td>Does the writer establish and maintain a formal style? (W.6.1.d)</td>
<td>Lacks formal style</td>
<td>Some awareness of formal style</td>
<td>Sufficient awareness of formal style</td>
<td>Consistent awareness of formal style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage? (L.6.1)</td>
<td>Numerous errors</td>
<td>Several errors</td>
<td>Some errors</td>
<td>Few if any errors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the writer demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling? (L.6.2)</td>
<td>Numerous errors</td>
<td>Several errors</td>
<td>Some errors</td>
<td>Few if any errors</td>
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As appropriate, consider the following criteria as well:

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<tr>
<td>With some guidance and support from peers and adults, did the writer develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach? (W.6.5)</td>
<td>No visible revisions between drafts</td>
<td>Shows some improvements between drafts</td>
<td>Offers real improvement between drafts</td>
<td>Presents substantial improvements between drafts</td>
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<td>Did the writer edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., <em>MLA Handbook</em>, <em>Turabian’s Manual for Writers</em>)? (W.6.4)</td>
<td>No obvious use of manual</td>
<td>Some evidence of use</td>
<td>Ample evidence of use</td>
<td>Purposeful use of style manual</td>
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<td>Did the writer use technology to produce, publish, and collaborate with others about writing? (W.6.6)</td>
<td>No recognizable use of technology</td>
<td>Some evidence of technology use</td>
<td>Sufficient use of technology</td>
<td>Outstanding use of technology</td>
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Appendix D: 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 Marion 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.