
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE MAN WHO MAILED HIMSELF TO FREEDOM

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE MAN WHO MAILED HIMSELF TO FREEDOM

In 1849, an enslaved man named Henry Brown escaped from slavery in Virginia using an extraordinary method: he mailed himself to freedom in a wooden box.

Brown was 33 years old and had already endured unimaginable tragedy. His wife and four children had been sold to a slave trader and taken away forever. He would never see them again. Desperate and heartbroken, Brown decided to risk everything on an audacious plan.

With help from a free Black man named James Smith and a white abolitionist named Samuel Smith, Brown commissioned a wooden crate measuring three feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. The box was lined with cloth and equipped with a small container of water and a few biscuits.

On March 29, 1849, Brown climbed inside. The box was nailed shut, marked 'dry goods,' and shipped via Adams Express Company. His destination: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—a free state where slavery was illegal.

The journey took 27 agonizing hours. The box was tossed, dropped, and turned upside down despite being marked 'this side up with care.' At one point, Brown spent hours on his head when workers loaded the crate wrong side up. Blood rushed to his head so severely he feared his veins would burst.

When the box was finally opened in Philadelphia, abolitionists gathered around nervously. Brown emerged, stood up, and promptly fainted. When he recovered, he extended his hand and said, 'How do you do, gentlemen?'

Brown became famous as 'Henry Box Brown.' He toured the North telling his story and became a powerful symbol of enslaved people's desperate desire for freedom. His journey proved that people would risk death rather than remain in bondage.

Brown eventually moved to England, where he performed as an entertainer and lecturer until his death around 1897. His wooden box—a coffin-sized symbol of courage—remains one of history's most remarkable vehicles of escape.

Word Count: 320 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

What were the dimensions of Henry Brown's escape box?

- ☐ A) Six feet long, three feet wide
- ☐ B) Three feet long, two feet wide, two and a half feet deep
- ☐ C) Four feet in all directions
- ☐ D) Two feet long, one foot wide

2

How long did Brown's journey in the box take?

- ☐ A) 8 hours
- ☐ B) 15 hours
- ☐ C) 27 hours
- ☐ D) 3 days

3

What tragedy motivated Brown to attempt such a dangerous escape?

- ☐ A) He was about to be executed
- ☐ B) His wife and children were sold away and he would never see them again
- ☐ C) His owner was moving to another state
- ☐ D) He wanted to become famous

4

What dangerous situation did Brown face during his journey?

- ☐ A) The box caught fire
- ☐ B) He was loaded upside down and nearly suffocated
- ☐ C) The train crashed
- ☐ D) He ran out of food immediately

5

What does Brown's willingness to risk death in a tiny box reveal about the experience of slavery?

- ☐ A) Slavery was not very difficult
- ☐ B) All enslaved people easily escaped
- ☐ C) Slavery was so horrific that people would risk certain death rather than remain enslaved
- ☐ D) Shipping boxes were comfortable

6

Why do you think Brown became a lecturer and performer telling his story after escaping?

- ☐ A) He needed money to survive in a new place
- ☐ B) Sharing his story could help build support for abolition and show the humanity of enslaved people
- ☐ C) He enjoyed being famous
- ☐ D) The government required him to speak

ANSWER KEY

The Man Who Mailed Himself to Freedom

1. B) Three feet long, two feet wide, two and a half feet deep

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'a wooden crate measuring three feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet deep.'

2. C) 27 hours

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The journey took 27 agonizing hours.'

3. B) His wife and children were sold away and he would never see them again

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'His wife and four children had been sold to a slave trader and taken away forever. He would never see them again.'

4. B) He was loaded upside down and nearly suffocated

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage explains: 'Brown spent hours on his head when workers loaded the crate wrong side up. Blood rushed to his head so severely he feared his veins would burst.'

5. C) Slavery was so horrific that people would risk certain death rather than remain enslaved

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage concludes that Brown 'proved that people would risk death rather than remain in bondage.' His extreme risk demonstrates the desperation slavery created.

6. B) Sharing his story could help build support for abolition and show the humanity of enslaved people

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. Brown became 'a powerful symbol' of the desire for freedom. By telling his story, he could humanize enslaved people for Northern audiences and build support for ending slavery—turning personal experience into political action.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Man Who Mailed Himself to Freedom

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Henry Brown risked death in a box rather than remain enslaved. What does this tell us about the experience of slavery?
- Brown became famous by telling his story. How did personal narratives help the abolitionist movement?
- Two men—one Black, one white—helped Brown escape. What risks did each of them take, and why might they have taken them?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Build a scale model of a box 3 feet by 2 feet by 2.5 feet. Sit inside it for 5 minutes (safely) and write about the experience.
- Research the Underground Railroad and create a map showing different escape routes enslaved people used to reach freedom.
- Write a dramatic scene of the moment Brown's box was opened in Philadelphia, from the perspective of one of the abolitionists waiting.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Smithsonian National Museum of African American History