

Project Vox Lesson Plan

What's Wrong with Hypocrisy?

Analyzing Abolitionist Arguments in America and Europe (85 min.)

Grades: 9-12

Suggested Courses: U.S., European, and world history courses (including AP); AP African American Studies; English Language Arts courses (including AP)

Lesson Description

This lesson focuses on abolitionist texts written by Benjamin Banneker in the U.S. and Germaine de Staël in Europe near the turn of the 19th century.

- Banneker was a free Black man and an accomplished, self-taught astronomer and inventor from Baltimore County, Maryland. He wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1791 urging him to eliminate slavery in the U.S.
- Staël was a philosopher, novelist, writer, intellectual, and major political actor in late 18th and early 19th century Europe. She wrote to European leaders in 1814 urging them to end the slave trade.

In this lesson, students will read and examine Banneker and Staël's texts. Both authors claim that their audiences are hypocrites for continuing to support slavery. Students will consider what it means to be a hypocrite, examine the arguments Banneker and Staël make, and arrive at their own ethical position(s) regarding hypocrisy.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

- Investigate arguments Banneker and Staël make about their audience's hypocrisy regarding slavery.
- Evaluate the arguments and explain whether and why they find these arguments convincing.
- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of Banneker and Staël's arguments.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in Banneker and Staël's texts.
- Identify and articulate their own philosophical position on hypocrisy.

Activity Materials

- **Handout 1:** [Benjamin Banneker's Appeal](#)
- **Handout 2:** [Germaine de Staël's Appeal](#)
- [Slides](#)

Standards

CCSS: RH.1, RH.2, RH.4, RH.5, RH.6, RH.8

C3: D3.4, D4.1

North Carolina: I.1.3, 1.4, 1.5; AH.B.1.6, 1.7, 2.2; C&G.1.1, 1.3; WH.C&G.1.3, 1.4; H.1.2, 1.3

Activity Flow

Section 1: Bell-Ringer (20 min)

1. Project [Slide 2](#), which has the following questions. Give students 2-3 minutes to write down their answers:

Do you know people who tell others they **should perform** certain actions, like recycling, but who **do not perform** those actions themselves?

Do you know people who tell others they **should not perform** certain actions, like cheating while in a relationship, but who **do perform** those actions themselves?

List as many examples as you can.

2. Ask a few students to volunteer their answers. You might quickly write some of these answers on the board.
3. Explain that these are examples of hypocrisy. A person who acts in this way is called a hypocrite. Project [Slide 3](#) and share the following information:

A **hypocrite** is someone who claims to have moral standards or beliefs to which their own behavior does not conform. (Source: Oxford Languages)

Note that this definition has two important parts:

- **A person claims to have a moral standard or belief** — meaning they tell others that they believe that a particular action is right or wrong, but
- **they act in a way that conflicts with that standard or belief** — meaning they perform an action they tell others is wrong, or they do not perform an action they tell others is right.

4. Practice using this definition with the examples students generated. Draw the following chart on the board:

Belief	Action

Ask students to help place their examples in the chart, listing the belief that the person in the example holds and the action that conflicts with that belief. Place the first example in the center of the chart. As you continue to add examples, prompt students to place the examples in order from most to least problematic. Keep adding examples until students seem to have a sufficient grasp of these two parts of hypocrisy.

Keep these examples on the board to refer back to at the end of the lesson.

Section 2: Historical Background (10 min)

1. Introduce the texts and their authors by presenting [Slides 4-7](#). Share the following information with each slide:

Slide 4: Two Abolitionist Arguments

- Hypocrisy isn't a new concept. We will be examining two arguments in which authors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries try to fight an injustice — in this case, slavery — by claiming that their audiences are hypocrites.
- The first argument comes from the U.S., where Benjamin Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1791 urging him to abolish slavery. The second comes from Europe, where Germaine de Staël wrote to European leaders in 1814 urging them to abolish the slave trade.

Slide 5: Argument 1: Benjamin Banneker (1791)

- **The Context:** Slavery was practiced, to some extent, in 12 of the 14 states. ([Vermont](#) and [Massachusetts](#) were the exceptions). It received various protections in the Constitution, which had been adopted three years prior.
- **The Writer:** Banneker was a free Black man from Baltimore County, Maryland. He was an accomplished, self-taught astronomer and inventor who correctly predicted the 1789 solar eclipse, against white astronomers who disagreed. In 1791, he served on the team that George Washington appointed to survey Washington, DC. Jefferson was aware of his work on this project. Starting in 1792, Banneker published an annual almanac, and he sent an advance copy to Jefferson along with his letter.
- **The Recipient:** Banneker directed his appeal to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had written the Declaration of Independence 15 years prior. At the time, he was serving as Secretary of State under President George Washington. Over his lifetime, he held over 600 people as slaves.
- **The Ask:** Banneker asked Jefferson to abolish slavery in the newly-formed U.S.

Sources: [The National Archives: Founders Online](#); [White House Historical Association](#); [National Archives: Pieces of History](#)

Slide 6: Argument 2: Germaine de Staël (1814)

- **The Context:** England had already abolished the slave trade, but many other European countries — including France, Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Prussia — still participated.
- **The Writer:** Staël was a philosopher, novelist, writer, intellectual, and major political actor in Europe. She was a correspondent of figures like Marie Antoinette and Napoleon Bonaparte. She helped shape the new government of the French Republic following the French Revolution, and she constituted an important social and political force that challenged Napoleon’s growing power. In 1896, French author Victorine de Chastenay wrote: “There were three great powers struggling against Napoleon for the soul of Europe: England, Russia, and Madame de Staël.” Indeed, she so vexed Napoleon that he eventually exiled her. According to one witness, he declared: “She will never set foot in Paris so long as I live.”
- **The Recipient:** Staël directed her appeal to European leaders. Those leaders were gathered in Paris to negotiate a peace treaty after the fall of Napoleon.
- **The Ask:** Staël urged the leaders to abolish the slave trade.

Source: [Project Vox](#); Kadish, Doris, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, eds. 2009. *Translating Slavery, Volume I: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing, 1780-1830*. Kent: The Kent State University Press.

Slide 7: Guiding Questions

In making their arguments, Banneker and Staël accuse their recipients of being hypocrites for participating in slavery or the slave trade.

As you read their arguments, consider:

- Why do the authors think their recipients are hypocrites?
- Do you agree that the recipients are hypocrites? Why or why not?
- Does the charge of hypocrisy strengthen the authors’ arguments? Why or why not?

Section 3: Primary Text Engagement (30 min)

1. Break students into small groups. Engage in a jigsaw exploration of Banneker and Staël’s arguments. Distribute [Handout 1 \(Banneker\)](#) to half of the groups and [Handout 2 \(Staël\)](#) to the other half of the groups. Provide one copy per student.
2. Provide each group with about 20 minutes to read their handout, discuss the questions, and write down their answers. Use the following guidance to assist students’ work:

Handout 1 (Banneker): Suggested Answers

1. What is Banneker referring to when he mentions “that time in which the Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted...”?

The colonists’ experience under British rule before the American Revolution.

2. Under British rule, Jefferson was not held as a slave or servant. Why does Banneker refer to Jefferson’s experience as a “State of Servitude” or a “State of Slavery”?

Banneker wants to draw Jefferson’s attention to the similarities between Jefferson’s experience and the slavery he is perpetrating. In both cases, people are held under brutal conditions without their consent. Banneker thinks that this experience demonstrated to Jefferson how unjust and horrible slavery is.

3. Banneker quotes a passage from the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote. What moral belief(s) does Jefferson express in this passage? Rewrite them in your own words.

All men (or all people) have the same rights. These rights include the right to live, to freely choose how they want those lives to look, and to seek the things they think will make them happy.

4. Why do you think Banneker quotes Jefferson’s own writing in his letter?

By quoting Jefferson, Banneker makes it clear what Jefferson believes, or, at least, claims to believe. It makes it harder for Jefferson to argue that his beliefs do not, in fact, conflict with holding people as slaves.

5. People are not born equal in some respects, like height or music taste. What kind of equality is Jefferson describing?

Jefferson is describing equality as something everyone has in virtue of being human. He thinks that these rights come from God, and God distributed these rights to all men (or all people), regardless of what other differences we might observe between those people.

6. To what is Banneker referring when he describes “detaining, by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression”?

Banneker is referring to the slavery that Jefferson (and others in the U.S.) perpetrate.

7. Why does Banneker think that this action conflicts with the moral beliefs Jefferson expresses in the Declaration?

Jefferson claims that all men (or all people) have the right to freely choose how to conduct their lives and to pursue things they think will make them happy. But holding people as slaves prevents them from doing either of these things.

8. Why does Banneker think Jefferson is a hypocrite? Fill your answer in the chart below:

Belief: *All men (or all people) have the same rights to freely choose how to live their lives and to seek things they think will make them happy.*

Action: Holding people as slaves, thus preventing them from choosing how to live their lives or seeking things they think will make them happy.

9. Do you agree with Banneker that Jefferson is a hypocrite? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

Handout 2 (Staël): Suggested Answers

1. By asking this question, what does Staël imply about the beliefs Christians hold about cruelty?

Staël implies that Christians believe that cruelty is wrong. She seems to think that holding this belief is central to being, or claiming to be, a Christian.

2. What kind of cruelty does she have in mind?

The slave trade, or slavery more generally.

3. What is Staël trying to say about Christian countries — and their leaders and missionaries — that participate in the slave trade?

These countries, leaders, and missionaries claim that they are Christian, but they are cruel because they participate in the slave trade. In other words, their actions do not match their beliefs. This suggests that they do not really believe that cruelty is wrong. But holding this belief is central to being a Christian. So if they do not hold this belief, they cannot call themselves Christian.

4. What does it mean to “persuade the hearts of those to whom the gospel is to be preached”? To whom do these hearts belong?

To convert people to Christianity. These “hearts” belong to people in Asia and Africa whom European missionaries want to convert.

5. Why does Staël seem to think that abolishing the slave trade will have this effect?

Staël calls this a “humanitarian act,” or an act that will relieve great suffering for people. By relieving this suffering and ending this kind of cruelty, Christian countries will demonstrate their care for people and their genuine belief that cruelty is wrong. The people in Asia and Africa, whom the missionaries want to convert, will be so impressed by the kindness exhibited by Christians that they will be persuaded to convert to Christianity.

6. Why do you think Staël makes this point as part of her argument for abolishing the slave trade?

Staël wants to point out that abolishing the slave trade will actually help Christian countries fulfill their goal of converting people to Christianity.

7. Staël attributes several positive qualities to the countries she addresses. What do these qualities suggest about these countries’ ability to abolish the slave trade?

At the time, the slave trade was a massive, entrenched operation — one that spanned the globe and sustained economies. A country would need to be bold, spirited, and brave in its defense of people's wellbeing to abolish the slave trade. These are the qualities that these countries have exhibited in the past. This suggests that they are fully capable of abolishing the slave trade now.

8. What kind of justice does Staël have in mind?

The justice of abolishing the slave trade.

9. How does this claim support Staël's argument?

If all countries deserve justice, then this includes countries in Africa from which enslaved people were kidnapped. These countries also deserve freedom from forced enslavement. Thus, European countries are doing something unjust by maintaining the slave trade with these countries.

10. Why does Staël think that the leaders of these Christian countries are hypocrites? Fill your answer in the chart below:

Belief: *Cruelty is (always) wrong.*

Action: *Participating in the slave trade, which is cruel.*

11. Do you agree with Staël that the leaders are hypocrites? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

Section 4: Discussion (20 min)

1. After students have completed their handouts, draw another belief-action chart on the board. For each author, ask the students who read that author to share how they filled out the chart. Arrive at a consensus, and write these answers in the chart.
2. Lead the class in discussion about these arguments and responses and their connection to hypocrisy. Ask students to consider the following questions:

- Prompt students to consider the examples they generated at the beginning of the lesson.
 - Note that the actions on this chart are much less serious than slavery. Ask: Is hypocrisy equally bad no matter what? Or does it depend on how bad the action is?
 - You might refer students back to their rankings of how problematic they found the examples. Ask: Do you still think hypocrisy is worse in some of these examples than in others? Why or why not?

- Imagine that Jefferson and the European leaders had not made the claims in the “belief” column but still performed the “action” in the action column. This means they are no longer hypocrites, but they still perform actions that are morally wrong. Does this make them morally better, worse, or the same as when they were hypocrites?
- Banneker and Staël could have made many different arguments against slavery in their letters. Why do you think they focused on the hypocrisy of their audience? Do you think this choice was effective? Why or why not?

Section 5: Exit Ticket (5 min)

1. Instruct students to write down their answers to the following questions ([Slide 8](#)) on slips of paper to return as they exit class:

Is it important for you to avoid hypocrisy? Why or why not?