



# Personal Morals vs. Political Moves

## Thomas Jefferson's Complex Views on Freedom & Slavery

*Document Based Essay  
for Middle School Students*

### **Directions:**

The following question is based on 10 excerpts from documents written by Thomas Jefferson. This question is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents by reading & analyzing them, to create an argument based on your analysis, and finally to effectively choose & use those documents as evidence to support your argument.

### **Historical Background:**

To most Americans, Thomas Jefferson is most well known for writing the Declaration of Independence. In the Declaration, Jefferson's most famous phrase is: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Although this phrase is admired by Americans and nations around the world, it also becomes the source of much controversy – because Jefferson himself owned 600 slaves throughout his lifetime.

### **Your Task:**

Your task is to read & analyze ten (10) primary source documents that relate to Thomas Jefferson's personal moral beliefs about slavery, as well as the political movements that he made throughout his life related to slavery. Once you have read & analyzed all 10 documents, you must choose & use 6 documents as evidence to answer this question: **Because he wrote that “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, is Thomas Jefferson a hypocrite for owning slaves?**

## Document Based Essay Setup & Checklist:

### **1. Introductory Paragraph (5 – 7 sentences)**

- **Attention Grabber.**
  - Set the Scene, Ask a Question, Use a Quote or Anecdote
- **Background information about the time period**
- **Finish paragraph with a clear argument that establishes the purpose of the essay.**  
\* "Therefore, Thomas Jefferson was / was not a hypocrite for owning slaves because of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, & \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **CHECK LIST**

##### **Paragraph #1: Introduction**

Attention Grabber \_\_\_\_\_  
Background Info \_\_\_\_\_  
Argument \_\_\_\_\_

### **2. Body Paragraph**

- **Point:** put it in your topic sentence
- **Proof #1:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS
- **Proof #2:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS

#### **Paragraph #2:**

2 Clear Points \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Pieces of Evidence \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Examples of Analysis \_\_\_\_\_

### **3. Body Paragraph**

- **Point:** put it in your topic sentence
- **Proof #1:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS
- **Proof #2:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS

#### **Paragraph #3:**

2 Clear Points \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Pieces of Evidence \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Examples of Analysis \_\_\_\_\_

### **4. Body Paragraph**

- **Point:** put it in your topic sentence
- **Proof #1:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS
- **Proof #2:** explain & cite (Document #)
- **Analysis:** relate to argument in YOUR WORDS

#### **Paragraph #4:**

2 Clear Points \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Pieces of Evidence \_\_\_\_\_  
2 Examples of Analysis \_\_\_\_\_

### **5. Conclusion**

- Reconnect to your Attention Grabber
- Remind your reader of your important points
- Re-introduce your thesis as your final point

#### **Paragraph #5: Conclusion**

Reconnect to Attention Grabber \_\_\_\_\_  
Reminder of your points \_\_\_\_\_  
Reword thesis to conclude \_\_\_\_\_

## Document 1

**Source:** Advertisement placed in the *Virginia Gazette* Newspaper by Thomas Jefferson. September 14, 1769.

**Info:** In 1764, when he was 21, Jefferson had inherited land & slave property from his father Peter Jefferson, who had died in 1757.



**R**UN away from the subscriber in Albemarle, a Mulatto slave called *Sandy*, about 35 years of age, his stature is rather low, inclining to corpulence, and his complexion light; he is a shoemaker by trade, in which he uses his left hand principally, can do coarse carpenters work, and is something of a horse jockey; he is greatly addicted to drink, and when drunk is insolent and disorderly, in his conversation he swears much, and in his behaviour is artful and knavish. He took with him a white horse, much scarred with traces, of which it is expected he will endeavour to dispose; he also carried his shoemakers tools, and will probably endeavour to get employment that way. Whoever conveys the said slave to me, in *Albemarle*, shall have 40 s. reward, if taken up within the county, 4 l. if elsewhere within the colony, and 10 l. if in any other colony, from  
**THOMAS JEFFERSON.**

### Transcribed version of the advertisement

RUN away from the subscriber in Albemarle, a Mulatto slave called *Sandy*, about 35 years of age, his stature is rather low, inclining to corpulence, and his complexion light; he is a shoemaker by trade, in which he uses his left hand principally, can do coarse carpenters work, and is something of a horse jockey; he is greatly addicted to drink, and when drunk is insolent and disorderly, in his conversation he swears much, and in his behaviour is artful and knavish. He took with him a white horse, much scarred with traces, of which it is expected he will endeavour to dispose; he also carried his shoemakers tools, and will probably endeavour to get employment that way. Whoever conveys the said slave to me, in *Albemarle*, shall have 40 s. reward, if taken up within the county, 4 l. if elsewhere within the colony, and 10 l. if in any other colony, from **THOMAS JEFFERSON.**

## **Document 1: Analysis Questions**

**Source:** Advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* Newspaper,  
September 14, 1769

1. Why did Thomas Jefferson put this advertisement in the newspaper?

---

---

---

---

---

2. How does Jefferson describe Sandy in this advertisement? Does it sound like Jefferson is describing Sandy in a positive or negative way? Why?

---

---

---

---

---

3. Based on this advertisement, Jefferson's tone, description of Sandy, and the reward offered, what do you think are Jefferson's views about slavery? Does this make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## **Document 2**

- Source:** Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1781-1785.  
Query XIV, "Laws," Manuscript page 83.
- Info:** In 1780, Jefferson began writing *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this work, his only full-length book, Jefferson describes many aspects of life, politics, and society his home state in the 1780s.

...Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained...will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of one of the other race....Comparing them [blacks] by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior...and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous...

### **Analysis Questions**

1. How does Jefferson describe black people in Virginia? How does he compare whites and blacks? Similarly or differently? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

---

2. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

---

## Document 3

**Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Chastellux. Paris, France. June 7, 1785

**Info:** From 1784-1789, Jefferson served as the United States' Minister to France to represent U.S. interests in France.

...I believe the Indian then to be in body & mind equal to the white man. I have supposed the black man, in his present state, might not be so. But it would be hazardous to affirm that, equally cultivated for a few generations, he would not become so.

### Analysis Questions

1. How does Jefferson compare Indians (Native Americans) to whites? How does he compare blacks to Indians & whites? Give specific examples to fully explain Jefferson's comparisons between Indians, blacks, and whites.

---

---

---

2. What does Jefferson mean when he says "equally cultivated for a few generations, he [a black person] would not become so [equal in mind]?" What does this tell you about what Jefferson believes blacks are capable of in the future?

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

## Document 4

**Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe  
Paris, France. June 17, 1785

**Info:** From 1784-1789, Jefferson served as the United States' Minister to France to represent U.S. interests in France.

...I fear the terms in which I speak of slavery and of our constitution may produce an irritation which will revolt the minds of our countrymen...and thus do more harm than good.

### Analysis Questions

1. What does Jefferson think will happen if he speaks about slavery in politics?

---

---

---

2. Why does Jefferson believe that his comments about slavery will “do more harm than good?” Explain your answer & give specific reasons & details.

---

---

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

---

## Document 5

**Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Brissot de Warville  
Paris, France. February 11, 1788

**Info:** From 1784-1789, Jefferson served as the United States' Minister to France to represent U.S. interests in France.

...you know that nobody [more than Jefferson] wishes more ardently to see an abolition not only of the trade but of the condition of slavery: and certainly nobody will be more willing to encounter every sacrifice for that object.

### Analysis Questions

1. What does it mean when Jefferson says he wishes “to see an abolition not only of the [slave] trade but of the condition of slavery?” Explain your answer.

---

---

---

2. Why do you think that Jefferson is calling for the abolition of slavery in 1788 while he is in France? Explain your answer & give specific reasons & details.

---

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

---

## **Document 6**

**Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Edward Bancroft  
Paris, France. January 26, 1788

**Info:** From 1784-1789, Jefferson served as a Commissioner and U.S.  
Minister to France to represent U.S. interests in France.

As far as I can judge from the experiments which have been made, to give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children.

### **Analysis Questions**

1. Why does Jefferson say that giving liberty to slaves would be “like abandoning children?” Explain your answer with specific details. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. What does this tell you about how he may feel about his own personal slaves? What kind of person in your life today does this make Jefferson sound like? Explain your answer with specific details. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Document 7

**Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, who managed the Monticello plantation while Jefferson served as President of the United States

January 23, 1801

**Info:** Jefferson ran for President in 1800, but because the election was tied, the House of Representatives did not choose a President until mid February, 1801.

...I forgot to ask the favor of you to speak to Lilly as to the treatment of the nailers [slaves working in the nail-making shop]. It would destroy their value in my estimation to degrade them in their own eyes by the whip. This therefore must not be resorted to but in extremities. As they will be again under my government, I would choose they should retain the stimulus of character...

### Analysis Questions

1. Does Jefferson instruct Randolph to have the slaves whipped? What does Jefferson believe whipping slaves will do to them? Explain with details.

---

---

---

2. What is “the stimulus of character” & why does Jefferson want his slaves not to lose it? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details. \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

## Document 8

- Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles Monticello. August 25, 1814
- Info:** From 1809-1826, Jefferson retired from public life to his plantation, Monticello, but continued to write letters to numerous friends, family, and political colleagues.

...Mine on the subject of the slavery of negroes have long since been in possession of the public, and time has only served to give them stronger root. The love of justice & the love of country plead equally the cause of these [enslaved] people, and it is a mortal reproach to us that they should have pleaded so long in vain, and should have produced not a single effort, nay I fear not much serious willingness to relieve them & ourselves from our present condition of moral and political reprobation....Yet the hour of emancipation is advancing, in the march of time. It will come.

### Analysis Questions

1. What does Jefferson mean when he says “The love of justice & the love of country plead equally the cause of these [enslaved] people? Explain in detail.

---

---

---

2. Does Jefferson see any hope for freeing slaves in soon after 1814? Farther into the future? What does he say to lead you to your answer? Explain.

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

## Document 9

**Source:** Passage from Thomas Jefferson's Draft Autobiography  
February 8, 1821

**Info:** From 1809-1826, Jefferson retired from public life to his plantation, Monticello, but continued to write letters to numerous friends, family, and political colleagues.

...Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people [enslaved Africans] are to be free. Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government.

### Analysis Questions

1. Does Jefferson believe that enslaved Africans will gain their freedom at some point? Why or why not? Explain your answer with specific details.

---

---

---

2. Why do you think Jefferson believes that the “two races [black & white], equally free, cannot live in the same government?” Explain your answer with specific details.

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

---

## Document 10

- Source:** Excerpt from a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks  
Monticello. February 4, 1824
- Info:** From 1809-1826, Jefferson retired from public life to his plantation, Monticello, but continued to write letters to numerous friends, family, and political colleagues.

...There are in the United States a million and a half of people of color in slavery. To send off the whole of these at once, nobody conceives practicable for us, or expedient for them. Let us take twenty-five years for its accomplishment, within which time they will be doubled. Their estimated value as property, in the first place...at an average of two hundred dollars each, young and old, would amount to six hundred millions of dollars, which must be paid or lost by somebody....

### Analysis Questions

1. What does Jefferson see as the major problem with freeing all of the enslaved Africans at once? What does he suggest? Explain with specific details.

---

---

---

2. Why do you think plantation owners like Jefferson did not readily support the freeing of all enslaved people? What would it do to the lifestyle & economies of the southern plantation states? Explain your answer with specific details.

---

---

---

3. Does this passage make Jefferson sound like a hypocrite based on what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not? Explain with specific details.

---

---