

Periodization

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. It does not assume prior knowledge, therefore it could work for different year groups. Likewise, the seminar could fit into specialist modules assessing slavery in the Atlantic world at Levels 5 and 6, but also broader historiographical or methodological modules where the focus is less on ‘content’ and relates more to thinking on frameworks, theories and methods.

Context and aim

This seminar takes as its topic the Atlantic slave trade. It uses the Voyages database and secondary literature to explore the complexities associated with periodization when analysing slavery in the Atlantic world. It asks students to consider methodological issues when studying traumatic historical events and to appreciate how periodization works with other historical frameworks.

Before class, students should read two articles on slavery and watch a timelapse map documenting the movement of 30,664 ships carrying enslaved people across the Atlantic, beginning in 1515 and ending in 1866. They will rewatch the timelapse map in the seminar, with a series of questions for students to reflect on in groups. This visualization, where each dot represents an individual voyage, showcases the variety of European nations involved in the trade, the regions of Africa where enslaved people were taken from, and their point of disembarking. The size of each dot represents the number of enslaved people on the ship, and the colour connects to the ship’s national flag.

The aim of this session is to get students to grasp the magnitude of the Atlantic slave trade across time and space, and to grapple with how best to analyse an abstract representation of an immensely violent process via quantitative history and digital representations. The seminar will help students appreciate how large frameworks of periodization or place, such as the era of Atlantic slavery, are necessary for situating world historical events. Students will also learn that these frameworks can also be broken down to address regional distinctions, changes over time, and the ways competing interpretive models might help to reconceptualize historical events within this same time period.

Preparation

This activity would benefit from a content warning so students are aware of the nature of the task/topic. Students should prepare for the seminar by engaging with the following materials in the order in which they are listed:

Read:

- P. Gabrielle Foreman et al., 'Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help'. Community sourced document. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYs1X-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/mobilebasic> (accessed 31 July 2025).
- Trevor Burnard, 'The Atlantic Slave Trade', in Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (eds), *The Routledge History of Slavery* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 80–99.
- Jennifer L. Morgan, 'Periodization Problems: Race and Gender in the History of the Early Republic', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36:2 (2016), pp. 351–7.

Watch:

Timelapse map on *Slave Voyages*: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timelapse> (accessed 31 July 2025).

Description of activity

Part 1: Preliminary discussion on reading [10 minutes]

Students should discuss in pairs their thoughts on the preliminary reading, taking the following questions as prompts:

- How does Trevor Burnard attempt to conceptualize Atlantic slavery? How does he apply (implicitly or explicitly) chronological labels? Does he consider alternative historical frameworks, whether geographical or conceptual, as a way of approaching Atlantic slavery?
- What problems does Jennifer Morgan identify when attempting to consider slavery and gender in the Atlantic world through a chronological and, indeed, national (US) framework?
- What did you know about Atlantic slavery prior to the reading/viewing the timelapse map? Did anything surprise you that requires clarification?

The preliminary discussions are done in pairs to allow students to build up confidence in a snowball model before moving onto larger group, and eventually whole cohort, activities.

Part 2: Watch the timelapse map [5 minutes]

Students should watch the timelapse map again with these questions in mind:

- How did the slave trade change over time?
- Are there any patterns or trends you can see in the timelapse map?
- How, if at all, might you attempt to split the era of Atlantic slavery into different periods?

Here the instructor might offer prompts, for example, to consider issues of national dominance of the trade, regional distribution (both from West Africa and in the Americas), ebbs and flows, and to connect this to any existing knowledge about major changes that took place in the Americas in this same period. Students might know, for example, about various abolition acts, revolutions in the United States, France, Haiti or in the Iberian Atlantic.

Part 3: Small-group discussion [10 minutes for discussion, 15 minutes to report back]

In groups of four, students should discuss their preliminary response to the map and the questions above and then attempt to establish at least one model of periodization to better understand the Atlantic slave trade.

If students struggle with this exercise, the instructor might ask them to focus on the following topics:

- An ‘Iberian Atlantic’, a Dutch ‘Golden Age’? Who are the leading European forces in the earlier period of the trade (1515–1650s)

and what might this tell us about power dynamics within Europe, West Africa, and in the colonization of the Americas? How do these dynamics gel with students' prior knowledge of Atlantic slavery?

- An 'Age of Revolutions'? In the Atlantic world, the period c. 1760–1825 is often understood within the framework of an 'age of revolutions'. Students can be steered to look at the traffic to the British North American colonies (modern-day US) and Saint-Domingue/Haiti during this period, and to consider how the dynamics of the slave trade were both shaped by, and in turn shaped, these revolutionary moments.
- An 'Age of Abolition'? Many popular understandings of Atlantic slavery in the UK and the United States treat the period from 1807 onwards as an age of abolition. Students can be steered to look at the traffic to the United States and the Caribbean in the 1790s up to 1807, to note how slavers intensified their efforts to purchase enslaved people before the trade closed. They might then focus on Brazil and Cuba to think beyond the Anglocentric model and to identify the longevity of slavery in the Atlantic world and its consequences.

Conclusion: Large-group discussion [10 minutes]

This concluding part of the seminar encourages students to reflect on the issues they faced when engaging with this dataset and to acknowledge the complexities of applying spatial and chronological frameworks in studying Atlantic slavery. They can reflect on their own experiences with periodization, whether in personal study or in modules taken elsewhere, and consider how they might now approach these periods in light of this session. These are big topics, and there is no expectation that students will resolve these issues to their own satisfaction by the end of the session. The purpose is rather to encourage them to think about how historians must apply labels and organize their work chronologically and spatially to make any sense of it, while also recognizing that these distinctions must be understood as – if not arbitrary – then at least as constructions that should be critically examined.