

Fall 2026

Freedom Stories

Africana/English FYWS 1026

Adams Hall 103

Tess Chakkalakal

Adams 318, tchakkal@bowdoin.edu, 721-5150.

Course Meets T/TH, 11:40-1:05

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2-4:30pm, or by appointment

[This year marks a couple of important anniversaries: the 250th anniversary of the Founding of America AND the bicentennial of John Brown Russwurm's (Bowdoin's first black student and founder of *Freedom's Journal*) graduation from Bowdoin. As part of the nation's ongoing efforts to mark the occasion, this course revisits the central role freedom has played in the nation's and the college's founding]

Freedom is a word that has been elevated throughout American history to near-theological status, and has been twinned, for most of that same history, with slavery. This course explores the ways in which the idea of American freedom as articulated in the nation's founding document, The Declaration of Independence, and reimaged by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation intersect with literary documents, from the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and Walt Whitman, essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson to the twentieth-century fiction of Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar to the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The readings of the class are designed to meet four related goals:

- To expose you to a variety of writers, styles, and ideas that constitute America
- To improve your close and careful reading and analysis of written texts
- To develop an eloquent speaking voice, able to speak about complex topics in a clear and articulate way with your peers
- To broaden your understanding of the ideas, values, and principles associated with the political, historical, and geographic entity known as the United States of America

As a First-Year Writing seminar this course will focus on helping you to improve your writing skills and develop your writing "voice."

- You will be required to write 4 short papers and meet with me one-one-one to develop your key points and outline at least 1 week before the assignment is due
- All students will have the opportunity to share their written work with their peers to discuss clarity and ideas
- You will have the opportunity to revise and resubmit 2 of your 4 papers for a new grade

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: Oral participation in class discussion (10% of final grade), four short response papers (3-pages each, total 30% of final grade), one oral presentation (10% of final grade), and one longer, research essay (this will involve composing an outline, completing a draft for peer-review, and completing a revised draft for submission comprising 5-6 pages, you will be graded on each component of the research process for a total of 40% of your final grade). This final essay will be peer-reviewed by another student before submission. I will assign partners for the peer-review process. You will be asked to do research for the final paper in which you consult external sources. I will provide detailed descriptions for the structure, format and objectives of response papers and long essays.

Students are strongly encouraged to meet with me individually to discuss comments on papers in person.

In Class Oral Presentations:

Everyone taking the class will be responsible for an oral presentation, 9-11 minutes in length (the time-limit will be enforced). The presentation should focus on one of the readings and will be delivered in conjunction with our discussion of it. The presentations need not be polished "lectures," but should present the class with a particular argument, angle or take on the meaning of the text in question. Since the texts we will be reading are open to divergent interpretations, the presentation should provide a rigorous defense of the interpretation being presented.

Evaluation:

A presentation receives a grade of A if the student presents the information in a clear and persuasive way within the time allotted. The objective of the exercise is to incite a dialogue among fellow students. The presentation should show a superb level of engagement with the text by explaining your own original ideas, arguments, and analysis, and by making analytical connections to other course material and explaining why these connections are significant.

I will provide a written response (with a letter grade) explaining whether or not the objectives of the presentation were adequately met. If you have any questions or concerns about this component of the course please see me during my office hours.

Texts:

Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence"

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig*

Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," Gettysburg Address

Charles W. Chesnutt *The House Behind the Cedars*

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

William Wells Brown, *The Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*

William and Ellen Crafts, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Martin Luther King, Jr, "I have a Dream"

John Brown Russwurm,

Schedule of Classes

Introduction: "The Five Greatest Words in the Declaration" by Gordon S. Wood (Jan. 22, 2026)

TUESDAY 9/1

<https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2026/03/the-five-greatest-words-in-the-declaration/>

THURSDAY 9/3 Thomas Jefferson
Declaration of Independence, official
version
And Jefferson's Draft
[https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ru
ffdrft.html](https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ru
ffdrft.html)
[https://www.archives.gov/founding-
docs/declaration-transcript](https://www.archives.gov/founding-
docs/declaration-transcript)

TUESDAY 9/8 Thomas Jefferson
Notes on the state of Virginia,
Query 14

THURSDAY 9/10 **CLASS MEETS IN ART MUSEUM**
Phyllis Wheatley, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George
Whitefield," "America," "On the Death of Mr. Snider
Murder'd by Richardson," "To The King's Most Excellent
Majesty," "To the Rt. Hon. Earl of Dartmouth," and "To
His Excellency General Washington" [hand-out]

TUESDAY 9/15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"
[hand-out]

THURSDAY 9/17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self- Reliance,"

TUESDAY 9/22 Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave
is the 4th of July?" [hand-out]
• Discuss form and content of Oral
Presentations

THURSDAY 9/24 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the
Life of Frederick Douglass*, Preface-
Ch. 5 [purchase book]

Oral Presentation:

**First Response Essay Due in Class. You will exchange draft
with a peer for editing and revision in class.**

TUESDAY 9/29 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the
Life of Frederick Douglass*, Ch. 6-End

Oral Presentation:

Submit Revised Response paper

THURSDAY 10/1 William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*, Preface - Ch. 6

Oral Presentation:

TUESDAY 10/6

complete Brown Narrative

Also read:
Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address" and "The Emancipation Proclamation" [hand-out]

Oral Presentation:

Two-page summary paper due in Class

FALL VACATION

THURSDAY 10/15

Whitman, *Song of Myself* (sections 1-26)
[purchase book]

Oral Presentation:

TUESDAY 10/20

Whitman, *Song of Myself* (sections 27-52)

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 10/22

Crafts, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* [purchase book]

Oral Presentation:

TUESDAY 10/27

Wilson, *Our Nig* [purchase book]

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 10/29

Wilson, *Our Nig*

Oral Presentation:

TUESDAY 11/3

Chesnutt, *House Behind the Cedars*
[purchase book]

Ch. 1-10

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 11/5

Chesnutt, *House Behind the Cedars*
Ch. 11-End

Oral Presentation:

Response Paper Due
(3 pages)

TUESDAY 11/10

Dunbar, *Sport of the Gods* [purchase
book]
Ch. 1-10

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 11/12

Outlining Exercise - FINDING YOUR
WRITER VOICE

Special guest writer: Hannah Pittard, author *If you Love it
Let it Kill You*

TUESDAY 11/17

Dunbar, *Sport of the Gods*

Ch. 11-End

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 11/19

Write Intro in Class Exercise

Thanksgiving Break

TUESDAY 12/1

Countee Cullen, "Heritage"
Epigraph only of *Passing*

[Nella Larsen,

THURSDAY 12/3

Nella Larsen, *Passing* pt. I
[purchase book]

Oral Presentation:

TUESDAY 12/8

Nella Larsen, *Passing* pt. II-III

Oral Presentation:

THURSDAY 12/10

On John Brown Russwurm, (library reading hand-out) Guest speaker: Prof. Derrick Spires, The University of Delaware and author of [*The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)

Final Writing Assignment Due: TBD, submit to me in person in my office by noon on December 16 (5-6 pages)