From the 1520s through the 1860s, approximately 12.5 million Africans were taken captive from their homes and villages, sold into slavery and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean; about 10.7 million survived the horrific route known as The Middle Passage. Of these, about 400,000 enslaved individuals were taken to mainland North America – and to the United States of America.

ROOTS is a composite narrative that explores the lives of enslaved individuals through the story of Kunta Kinte and his family. As the narrator Alex Haley reminds viewers, his story can be seen as one among the millions of stories of Africans forced into slavery. ROOTS is a deeply moving and powerful story about Kunta and his family’s struggle, their determination and resilience, and their will to survive and ensure that their family carried on for generations.

ROOTS contains some very intense scenes depicting the violence endured by people who were enslaved. Enslaved individuals were often subjected to physical brutality, mental abuse and sexual violence, and families were often ripped apart from one another, sold and treated as commodities by their owners. The ripple effects of this treatment impact our history from 1520 to today. These guidelines are designed to help facilitate conversations about slavery and the experiences of slaves, before and after watching ROOTS.

MEMORIAL DAY
BEFORE WATCHING

PREPARE. Before watching ROOTS, you can review background information about the history of slavery at roots.History.com and other sources. Some background reading can help prepare you for some of the intense content covered in ROOTS.

DISCUSS. You may want to discuss what you know about slavery and how you feel about it before watching with your friends, family, church group, etc. Remember that it is important to learn about difficult topics like the history of slavery and the lives of enslaved people because they give us insights into human experience and shed light on the legacy of this history. By exploring the past, we can acknowledge our shared human history and move forward.

LEARN MORE. Despite the extreme violence of slavery, enslaved individuals themselves never lost their humanity. Today, we can take inspiration from their stories, and can be inspired to learn more about lives of people held in bondage and the many ways they survived despite incredible hardship.

DURING AND AFTER WATCHING

SHARE. Share your feelings about what you saw in ROOTS, and discuss and share your insights with others. Remember that these issues are complex and as ROOTS shows, the causes and effects of slavery are varied, and still unfolding around us. But it can be very powerful to think about how the past shaped the lives of millions of people and may continue to play a role in our world today. What came after slavery — from the Civil War, to Reconstruction, to Jim Crow, to today? How might we collectively heal and process this history?

REFLECT. It can be very helpful and cathartic to write down your feelings about the history of slavery and the cruelty slaves experienced. These writings could be journal entries, letters, or just notes to yourself. You can share these with others if you feel comfortable doing so, or you can save them for later to reflect on in the future. You might consider writing a letter to a family member or friend about what you learned from watching ROOTS, or sharing via blogs and social media.

ENGAGE. Engage others in conversation after watching an episode of ROOTS, individually or in a group setting. Talking with others can help you process some of the intense content in ROOTS. Discussion questions and guidelines below can help you get started.
BASIC GROUND RULES FOR THE CONVERSATION

1. When watching ROOTS and after watching, it is hard to know how you will react to this story and how others around you may too. You may have a host of emotions ranging from sadness, anger, disgust, guilt, shame, etc. Remember to keep open to your own emotions and the emotions of others, and to treat everyone with respect when they discuss their views or feelings.

2. When you are discussing slavery and race, listen first. It’s important to hear all views — that is the basis for conversation.

3. Don’t expect perfection. Few people have the perfect words to describe how we feel about issues as painful as slavery and racism. Encourage participants to be sensitive to all views.

4. Empathy is key. Slavery and race-based bias has left a lasting legacy of pain with many individuals and communities. While we may not fully understand it, we should know it exists and extend empathy toward those who are hurting.

5. Don’t just call people out; call them in. Try to build bridges for future conversations, relationships and actions. Try to leave the conversation with participants feeling more connected than when they started.

FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS ON SLAVERY AND RACISM

1. Start with history. Use the resources at roots.History.com and others to make sure participants are grounded in the basic facts, dates and reality of slavery and freedom in the United States.

2. Beginning the conversation is the first step. To do this, participants should feel safe to share their thoughts in an open and constructive dialogue. If you are having a classroom or group discussion, a host or facilitator can guide the conversation by welcoming participants, presenting guidelines, introducing the topic, moving the dialogue forward and encouraging open conversation.

3. Acknowledge that talking about slavery can be difficult, but that it is important to learn about the past, consider how what is seen in ROOTS might still impact people today, consider how slavery played a role in the development of America, and consider the important ways people have maintained dignity and fought for equality over time.

4. If you or someone in the discussion have connections to the history of slavery, talk about those connections and what they mean in your life. If not, talk about why it is important to hear these stories. You can also share your thoughts about what identity and family mean to you.

5. Facilitators should come prepared, should not be judgmental, should not allow disrespect, and should help guide the conversation in a productive way.
GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions did you feel while watching *ROOTS*? Why do you think it is important to tell this story?

2. *ROOTS* depicts the violence at the heart of the slave system. In what ways do you think the legacy of slavery exists in our world today? Why is it important to explore this history?

3. What are some of the key themes and messages of *ROOTS*? What inspired you most about the story?

4. *ROOTS* opens up some very intense subject matter including the violence whites enacted on enslaved people. What spaces, if any, exist in our society for healing wounds of race-based violence? What roles can museums, music, art, and conversation play in healing.

5. How do you think the *ROOTS* story can be relatable to anyone regardless of their background?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/REFLECTIONS

NIGHT 1

1. What shocked or moved you most while watching? Why do you think it is important to learn about what enslaved individuals experienced and the violence they endured?

2. Did you know about The Middle Passage before watching this episode? Did the Middle Passage scenes in ROOTS add to or change your understanding of this history?

3. How did Kunta attempt to hold onto his history and humanity after he was sold into slavery? Why do you think his identity was so important to him?

4. How do you think slave owners justified selling family members and tearing apart families?

5. What are some of the ways enslaved people survived and built community?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/REFLECTIONS

NIGHT 2

1. Kunta does everything in his power to escape slavery. Despite their resistance, most slaves were unable to escape slavery. What are some of the ways slaves resisted the terms of enslavement?

2. Belle helps Kunta heal. How would you describe her character in the series and why was she so important to Kunta? How did enslaved people help each other survive brutality?

3. Kunta is determined to teach Kizzy about Mandinka traditions. Why do you think this was so important?

4. Kizzy talks about reading as her way of being a warrior. Why was reading and gathering information so important for slaves? What does this tell us about the importance of education?

5. In this episode we see the onset of the abolition movement. What were some of the arguments against slavery? What arguments or beliefs justified slavery, and how did enslaved people contradict these arguments through their own assertions of humanity?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/REFLECTIONS

NIGHT 3

1. What did you learn in this episode that was new or surprising to you?

2. Tom Lea subjects Kizzy to sexual violence throughout her life. This is extremely difficult to watch. Reflect on this and think about how Kizzy managed to cope.

3. Chicken George wants to be close to Tom Lea throughout his life. What faults did he see in Tom Lea, and why do you think he wanted to please him despite Tom Lea’s faults?

4. In this episode we learn about Nat Turner’s rebellion. What was the reaction to this event? How do you think it influenced treatment of slaves and free blacks broadly?

5. How did women experience slavery different than men?

6. What emotions did you feel at the end of this episode?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/REFLECTIONS

NIGHT 4

1. George and Cyrus fight with Union forces during the Civil War. Why do you think so many former slaves decided to fight, even though the outcome of the war was unclear?

2. After the Civil War ended, what challenges did freed slaves face?

3. Why do you think it is important to learn the ROOTS story?

4. How can a better knowledge of history shape how we see ourselves, and how can this knowledge shape our future for the better?

5. What spaces, if any, are there to heal from the history of slavery? What roles can music, art, and conversation play in healing?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SUGGESTED READINGS

The list below are just a few among many books and other readings about the history of slavery.
Do you have a reading you’d like to suggest or share? Tweet about it using #Roots.


OFFICIAL ROOTS WEBSITE

http://roots.History.com