Freedom Summer

The Violent Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy

Bruce Watson

Adapted by Rebecca Stefoff

A Teaching Guide

Created by Catherine A. Franklin, Ed.D
A TRIANGLE SQUARE BOOK FOR YOUNG READERS
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Freedom Summer for Young People
by Bruce Watson and Rebecca Stefoff

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PURPOSE

This multi-disciplinary teaching guide provides a variety of classroom approaches to further develop the reader’s understanding of historical, social, and cultural themes within Freedom Summer for Young People. These approaches include suggestions for preparing the classroom environment, pre-reading strategies, end-of-book discussion questions, explorations, long-term project-based work, and extended study.

SUMMARY

Freedom Summer for Young People is a fascinating account of young Americans from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds working together to confront and reform societal and political inequities. In the summer of 1964, college-aged volunteers and community organizers fanned out through Mississippi, despite considerable danger and limited resources, to teach in Freedom Schools, organize voter registration campaigns, and create a new political party. Freedom Summer for Young People masterfully weaves personal narratives, historical and cultural context, and primary documents to recount this defining moment in civil rights history.

Structured in a narrative non-fiction format, Freedom Summer for Young People can be used in a variety of ways in middle school and high school classrooms. It can serve as a classroom text in the social studies, a reference source for research into U.S. history—particularly about the civil rights era—and as a collection of primary documents related to a social movement. Major social studies themes as identified by the National Council for the Social Studies (https://www.socialstudies.org) include power, authority and governance, civic ideals and practices, individuals, groups and institutions, and time, continuity, and change.
1. Preparing the Classroom

When used strategically, the classroom environment can serve to teach the class about the historical context of *Freedom Summer for Young People*. In the days leading up to the introduction of this text, create a one-hundred-year time line (1864–1964) on a classroom wall (or a nearby hallway). This time line could showcase historical acts of resistance, organization, and activism (e.g., “Juneteenth” Emancipation Day [1865], Atlanta Washerwomen’s Strike [1881], Silent March Down Fifth Avenue [1917], Launch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters [1925], Montgomery, Alabama, Bus Boycott [1955], Dockum Drug Store Sit-In [1958], Freedom Riders [1961], March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom [1963]). It could also include federal action toward social and racial equality (e.g., Amendments 13, 14, 15, 19, 24), judicial decisions (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954), and legislative action (e.g., Civil Rights Act, 1964). The time line could also take note of the emergence of racist societies (e.g., Ku Klux Klan), racist practices (e.g., Jim Crow laws), and actions (e.g., murder of Emmett Till). The Zinn Education Project (https://www.zinnedproject.org) is a valuable resource, as it explores time periods through a social justice prism. As the class begins to study Freedom Summer, students could add to this time line and include events highlighted in their readings. Selected images from *Freedom Summer for Young People* could be posted on this time line.

2. Triggering Student Collaboration and Prior Understandings

**Understanding the Genre.** *Freedom Summer for Young People* can be classified in many ways. It is non-fiction, as it is based on actual events that took place in the summer of 1964. It is focused on the past, so it can be classified as a historical text. It is largely written in chronological order integrating both narratives and primary source artifacts. It is geared for young people, so it is considered appropriate for readers in middle school and beyond. Finally, it is an informational text as it is fact-based and deals with the world around us. Before the class begins to read this text, consider holding a discussion about the value of knowing history through the perspective of social
movements, oral history, and civic action. How is learning history different when it is studied from the inclusive perspective of everyday people and firsthand accounts compared to the perspective of secondary sources and textbook accounts? What do the students know about the civil rights era?

**Brainstorming Major Concepts.** As a way for students to work collaboratively, place the following terms around the room: “Deep South,” “1960s,” “Past Is Never Dead,” “Civil Rights,” “Democracy,” “Systemic Racism,” “Prejudice,” “Voter Suppression,” “Outsiders in Rural America,” “Courage.” Underneath each term, place a large piece of poster paper. Working in pairs and using a marker, students have one minute to brainstorm ideas/questions/drawings/responses related to the poster’s label. They must write something on each poster they encounter, even if it is to respond to a comment left by the previous students on that poster. After one minute, all teams travel to another poster and engage in a new brainstorming session about the new term. Students should work quickly and cooperatively without making judgments. They should write notes on the posters about what they know and don’t know, and respond to previous entries or pose questions about the term. Depending upon time constraints and student energy levels, each pair could visit four to five posters in total. Later, these posters could be discussed in a class session. This serves as an informal, collective mechanism to understand the connections that students have with these concepts. Periodically, these posters could then be updated based on their reading of*Freedom Summer.*

### 3. Pre-Reading Strategies

**Text Features.** As a way to become familiar with the text, have students take time to explore how the book is organized: book cover and title, table of contents, chapter titles, subheadings, visual images, captions, sidebars (shaded sections), notes, further reading, index. The following questions might help spur further explorations: How do “text features” help the reader to understand the story? What are the various types of primary source documents that are included in this text? Examine the full title of this text, *Freedom Summer for Young People: The Violent Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy.* What meaning do you make from this title? Have students closely analyze the image on the cover. What do they notice about the children? The environment? Based on the title and this image, what could this book be about? If there is time, students in small groups might want to discuss some of the other images within the text.
4. Multiple Entry Points

**Civic Action.** Engage students in a discussion about civic action in today’s world. What is it? Who does it? Why? How does civic action protect and sustain democracy? How is Black Lives Matter creating an impact in our society? Globally?

**Narrative.** Interspersed throughout *Freedom Summer for Young People* are narratives of four young people: three are white volunteers of the Mississippi Summer Project (Chris Williams, Fred Winn, Fran O’Brien) and one (Muriel Tillinghast) is a black volunteer of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Have students track these individual stories through the text to get a personal sense of the Freedom Summer experience.

**Chronology.** *Freedom Summer for Young People* weaves historical context within its narrative. As a way for students to keep organized as they read the text, have them create a graphic organizer (e.g., chart, time line) so they can take note of major details (dates, pivotal events, notable individuals) within each chapter. For additional background, have students explore the time lines at the SNCC Gateway website: https://snccdigital.org.

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**Civil Rights Organizations.** This text introduces the reader to various civil rights organizations, including Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Consider introducing these organizations at the start of this unit of study.

**Geography.** In 1964 over one thousand summer volunteers traveled to small towns all over Mississippi to help with voter registration and other civic deeds (e.g., teaching literacy). Explore the digital map at the SNCC Gateway website: https://snccdigital.org/map. As an alternative idea, post a road map of Mississippi in the classroom and flag sites on the map when students encounter a new place name in the text.

**Notable quotes.** On a classroom wall or hallway have students post quotes from the text. Include quotes from those who were SNCC organizers, Freedom Summer volunteers, and people who were impacted by this project.
The following questions can be explored in various settings (full class, small group, triad). Consider assigning individuals different roles in these discussions, such as clarifier, note taker, timekeeper, presenter, and facilitator. As an alternative setting hold a fishbowl discussion, where six students discuss a question and the rest of the class listens in. At some point, “pause” the fishbowl discussion, and allow the onlookers to comment on the discussion (e.g., posing questions, sharing alternative views, reacting to a previous comment). Release the “pause” and allow the fishbowl group to then continue and conclude their discussion.

1. The organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) prepared materials and workshop sessions to help orient the Freedom Summer volunteers for their time in Mississippi. Revisit the documents included in the text, including “Memo to Accepted Applicants,” “Security Handbook,” and “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi.” To what extent were the volunteers prepared for their summer experience? What unusual circumstances did they need to prepare for that were particular to 1964 and/or the Deep South?

2. SNCC organizers and Freedom Summer volunteers built schools and community centers, taught classes, organized voter registration, and engaged in forming the Freedom Democratic Party. Were they successful? Explore the work of Muriel Tillinghast, Fran O’Brien, Fred Winn, and Chris Williams. What patterns do you notice about the challenges and dangers they faced?

3. The Freedom Summer Project attracted a large number of mostly white, middle-class college students. Leaders felt that this project could draw national attention to Mississippi and that the federal government would work to protect these volunteers. How did the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner dismantle that perception? There were other civil rights activists who had been killed. Why did this tragedy capture national attention? What events in current times have triggered national focus?
4. Freedom Summer relied on African American families in towns and cities around Mississippi to shelter the organizers and volunteers. Discuss their motivations for agreeing to allow activists to stay with them. How did this decision potentially place their own homes, family members, and community in danger?

5. What were some of the ways that members of the Klan and the White Citizens Council attempted to sabotage Freedom Summer? Were their strategies successful?

6. Volunteer Gloria Clark reflected upon her summer experience by noting, “Mississippi changed everything for anyone who was there.” Explore this statement through various vantage points.

7. To what extent does our country still wrestle with the ideals of equality, democracy, and justice? Why are individual and collective civic action (e.g., voter registration, casting a ballot, teaching, sit-ins, marches, boycotts) important strategies for bringing public attention to systemic injustice (e.g., racism, economic inequality, police brutality)? Why does public attention matter in a democracy? How does knowing our nation’s history inform us about current times?

8. Freedom Summer included the White Community Project, an educational initiative aimed at poor whites designed to raise their consciousness about economic inequality. Ira Landess, one of the volunteers, met with a local young man, Gary Brooks, who had “taken up the dangerous habit of asking questions.” Why was asking questions in McComb, Mississippi, a dangerous habit? How can questions disrupt the status quo?

9. How was music an integral part of Freedom Summer? How can music speak truth to power? Share the songs mentioned in the text, including “We Shall Overcome,” “Oh, Freedom,” “Freedom Train,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “We’ll Never Turn Back,” and “Get on Board, Children.”

10. What was the legacy of Freedom Summer? Did it spark change or did it disenfranchise the local people? Reread the subtitle of this text: The Violent Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy. To what extent does the subtitle reflect the mixed impact of this initiative?

11. The preamble to the U.S. Constitution (1789) begins with: “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union. . . .” How did Freedom Summer expand the meaning of “We” and work to create a “more perfect union”? 
EXPLORATIONS

*Freedom Summer for Young People* provides a ready opportunity to delve deeper into the civil rights era of the 1960s. The following provides specific lines of inquiry.

**Language.** Freedom Summer volunteers and SNCC organizers were called different names by different people. Were they community activists or rabblerousers? Have students create a list of names that their allies might have called them. Create another list of names that their adversaries might have used. Discuss the power and impact of language, subjective experience, and name-calling. How can a leader’s use of language influence people for the better and/or for the worse? What is the distinction between rhetoric and propaganda?

**Research.** One of the projects of Freedom Summer was the creation of a new political party called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Have students explore how its structure and platform compared to the established Democratic Party in Mississippi. Which was more representative of the people of Mississippi? Why did President Johnson feel threatened when this new political party arrived at the Democratic National Convention?

**Primary Artifacts.** *Freedom Summer for Young People* includes a variety of primary documents (e.g., photographs, narratives, memos) related to the summer of 1964. Have students write a narrative about a Freedom Summer experience as a volunteer, local citizen, or SNCC organizer and integrate one of these documents into the story. For additional material, go to the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website at https://www.crmvet.org.

**Oral History.** The Library of Congress contains an extensive collection of oral histories from the civil rights era. Two individuals from this collection experienced Freedom Summer directly, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons and Freddie Green Biddle. Listen to their interviews and/or read the transcripts to understand how that summer changed their lives. Go to https://www.loc.gov and search “Civil Rights History Project.” Click on “Collection Items” at the top and scroll down to locate these two interviews.

**Legacy of Freedom Summer.** Students could delve into the impact of Freedom Summer by exploring SNCC and how it evolved, examining the role this project had on the lives of individuals, researching how it helped to trigger other social justice movements (e.g., the women’s movement, Black Power, or another one of their choosing).
PHOTO ESSAY. Have students envision themselves as volunteers or organizers for Freedom Summer. Students could use primary documents from the text or from other related resources. After gathering key artifacts, students could construct a photo essay of their civil rights experience. They could present their essay and images in a gallery presentation (either digitally or in person). The online exhibition Voices of Civil Rights includes short narratives of twenty individuals who had personal connections with the civil rights era; go to https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civilrights/exhibit.html. Select the online exhibition.

ROLE-PLAYING. Have students learn history and conduct research while preparing to engage in role-play experiences connected to Freedom Summer 1964. Go to the Zinn Education Project at https://www.zinnedproject.org > Teaching Materials > People’s Movements. Scroll down to “Sharecroppers Challenge U.S. Apartheid: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party” and to “Teaching SNCC: The Organization at the Heart of the Civil Rights Revolution.”

CREATE A FREEDOM DAY. Have students investigate the events that took place on Freedom Days in the 1960s. Then have the class decide what this nation needs to be free from today (e.g., economic inequality, crime, underfunded schools, racial injustice, policy brutality . . .). Using the Declaration of Independence as a template, have them create their own declaration. A student organizing committee could then set the agenda for the day: singing protest songs, having a teach-in, engaging in a silent march with placards, deciding upon a plan of action to move forward (e.g., petition to local officials).

THE ARTS. Invite students to explore how writers and artists made sense of this era. Have them explore the works of such poets and writers as Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Julius Lester, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Richard Wright; the protest songs of Nina Simone, Pete Seeger; the dramas of August Wilson; the artworks of Faith Ringgold, Jasper Johns, Jacob Lawrence; the performances of Marian Anderson, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier; the photographs of Matt Herron, Maria Varela, to name just a few.

PERSPECTIVE TAKING. Students could “step into the shoes” of someone planning to join the Summer Freedom Project of 1964. Have the students write a letter to their parents/guardians explaining their motivations for going to Mississippi. Consider extending this
project further by having students write back from the perspective of a concerned parent/guardian. As an alternative approach, arrange students in pairs and have them role-play a conversation (either face to face or by “phone”) between an aspiring activist and their parent/guardian about this summer project. At the end of these experiences, engage the students in a debriefing session. How did it feel to take on another perspective? To what extent did this experience help you to understand the complexities involved in participating in Freedom Summer?

**Investigate.** While the civil rights era was a social movement, there were many individuals who played key roles. *Freedom Summer for Young People* takes note of many, including Ella Baker, Stokely Carmichael, Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Foreman, Albert Heffner, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Edwin King, Rev. James Lawson, John Lewis, Allard Lowenstein, Thurgood Marshall, James Meredith, Bob Moses, Rosa Parks, Hazel Bannon Smith, and Malcolm X, to name just a few. Students could conduct research on a particular individual and “teach” the class about him/her. This could be done through various venues (e.g., enactment, creating a dossier of key documents related to that individual, constructing a PowerPoint).

**Photography.** Have students take photographs (or curate images) of civic action happening in the news or in their neighborhood. Create a caption for each image. This could then lead to a gallery show (in physical or digital form) so that all could view the work.

**Conducting Oral History.** Have students interview a local community activist in their neighborhood. How did this individual become involved with their particular cause? What are their challenges? Where do they see progress?

**Time Line.** Invite students to conduct research on pivotal events related to civil rights that preceded or followed Freedom Summer 1964. Explore the time line at the Library of Congress at [https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/](https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/). Go to “Sections” near the top and click on various parts of this time line.
Public Service Announcements. Have students conduct research on a timely issue of societal concern. Their research could then lead them to develop public service announcements designed to inform the public about the pertinent issue and recommended actions they can take. This could include such topics as civic action (e.g., voter registration, vote by mail, get out the vote), mental health (e.g., anti-bullying), physical health (e.g., getting exercise, healthy nutrition). Teaching Tolerance (https://www.tolerance.org) has additional classroom ideas. Click on “Topics” > activism.

Stay Informed. Have students explore the work of organizations fighting for social justice, including the Southern Poverty Law Center (www.splc.org), the Equal Justice Initiative (https://eji.org), The Marshall Project (themarshallproject.org), and socio-political movements such as Black Lives Matter (blacklivesmatter.org).

Referenced websites

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