

Unspeakable Violence: Reading and Writing about the Tulsa Race Massacre

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Abstract

Social studies teachers in the United States are at ground zero of the culture wars, particularly concerning teaching issues of racial discrimination in U.S. history. Mostly motivated by political gain for elected office, conversations about slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws are being shut down in K-12 schools throughout the nation. Despite these political efforts, it is imperative that teachers address the role race and racism has played in U.S. history. This article highlights a literacy-based project addressing the Tulsa Race Massacre. The project includes a read-aloud and an analysis of *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*, analyzing primary sources, and a structured writing task. The project was implemented in a sixth grade U.S. history class at a free public charter school in a mid-size Southern city.

Key Words: Tulsa Race Massacre, trade books, sandwich writing, inquiry, literacy

The past two years have seen a great deal of Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) rhetoric, which incorrectly identifies DEI as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Republicans have introduced Anti-CRT legislation in over 30 states targeting K-12 social studies, setting restrictions on conversations about social justice issues, systemic racism, White privilege, sexual discrimination, and LGBTQ+ issues that do not align with their values, biases, and beliefs. According to those arguing for Anti-CRT messages, teachers are indoctrinating students by introducing social justice issues (Alfonseca, 2022; Kreiss et al., 2021). We argue social studies teachers can utilize inquiry-based activities for students to analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources as outlined in the C3 Framework by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) to reach their own conclusions about issues of systemic racism in America's past (NCSS, 2013). It is important to realize that exploring issues connected to racial discrimination in America's past is not indoctrination but instead fulfilling the requirements social studies teachers have to examine topics in U.S. history that appear within their state standards.

A key step of the Inquiry Arc in the C3 Framework is communicating ideas to others. Although social studies teachers have a variety of writing formats from which they can utilize in their lessons, they all rest on the students' ability to synthesize information, make a claim, and support that claim with evidence. In this article, we share the "Sandwich Writing" approach and

a student position paper assignment to explore how students can articulate systemic racism that can be seen with the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Historical Overview

The end of the U.S. Civil War and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution created opportunities for African Americans to actualize the principles of American democracy (Foner, 2019; Gates, 2019). Black citizens voted in record numbers, electing a number of African American men to state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. Notable Reconstruction-era Black Congressmen included Robert Smalls and John Roy Lynch. These Congressmen advocated for free public education, an end to debtor's prison, and public assistance to the elderly (Billingsley, 2007; Dray, 2008; Miller, 1995). Additionally, the Freedmen's Bureau helped African Americans throughout the South establish lives for themselves during Reconstruction (Guelzo, 2012; Logan, 1997). It is evident that some progress toward creating a biracial democracy for all U.S. citizens was happening during the Reconstruction era. Unfortunately, it was not to last.

In the aftermath of Reconstruction, Southern whites employed public policies such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and Jim Crow segregation laws to disenfranchise Black Americans (Woodward, 1951). This resulted in millions of African Americans migrating to areas outside the South. Tulsa, Oklahoma, whose oil industry promised economic opportunity, became a popular destination for Black migration. Settling in Tulsa's segregated Greenwood District, the African American community created a prosperous enclave. There were nearly 200 Black-owned businesses in the Greenwood District. These businesses included a movie theatre, restaurants, a pool hall, several department stores, and even a furrier. The economic successes of the Greenwood District earned it the nickname of Black Wall Street (Brophy, 2002; Hirsch, 2002).

On May 30, 1921, the Greenwood District's prosperity came to a sudden and violent end. Historical evidence suggests that Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old African American male, accidentally stepped on the foot of Sarah Page, a 17-year-old White female, during an elevator ride. *The Tulsa Tribune* published a story implying that this minor accident was actually an assault of a White woman by a Black man. Accusations of African American men attacking White women were often the pretense used to justify acts of vigilantism that often resulted in the lynching of Black men. This newspaper story coupled with Tulsa's White population's simmering resentments of African Americans' economic successes led to a White mob invading the Greenwood District. White Tulsans obliterated symbols of African Americans' economic successes. They burned black-owned businesses, the hospital, churches, the junior high school, and homes throughout the Greenwood District. The White mob destroyed over 1,000 buildings in the Greenwood District and killed more than 300 African Americans in the May 30th attack (Ellsworth, 1982; Eulinberg, 2021).

The Tulsa Race Massacre fits within the themes and events of a time known as the Nadir, or lowest point, of race relations in the United States. From 1890 to 1940, the United States experienced an overwhelming degradation of race relations. Many Whites saw attempts by African Americans to better their lives as a threat and took calculated steps through unlawful acts

of violence to destroy African Americans' wealth, as evidenced by the 1873 Colfax Massacre, 1898 Wilmington Massacre, the Elaine Massacre, and the Tulsa Race Massacre to name a few (Anderson, 2017; Keith, 2008; Lancaster, 2018; Madigan, 2001; Zucchini, 2020). White rage over the changes to the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of the United States by African Americans resulted in barbaric acts of violence and the wanton destruction of African American communities (Loewen, 2018).

Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre

We used the 2022 NCSS Notable Trade Book *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Carole Boston Weatherford (author) and Floyd Cooper (illustrator) as the anchor text set for the lesson sequence described in the next sections (Weatherford & Cooper, 2021). In *Unspeakable*, Floyd Cooper uses realistic artwork to capture life in the Greenwood District prior to, during, and after the Tulsa Race Massacre. The picture book depicts the vibrant economy and culture within the Greenwood District before the massacre and the destruction caused by this tragedy. The author closes with the importance of remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre as an historical event showing the triumphs of African Americans in the Greenwood District and the role racial discrimination played in tearing down symbols of economic successes in Black Wall Street.

Tulsa Race Massacre Lesson Sequence

This lesson sequence exploring the Tulsa Race Massacre will take about five lessons to implement. The lesson sequence centers on the following compelling question: “How can American citizens in the present take civic action to raise awareness of the systemic racism that caused the Tulsa Race Massacre?” It is also based on the following supporting questions.

1. What successes did the African American community in the Greenwood District accomplish prior to the Tulsa Race Massacre?
2. What events led to the destruction of the Greenwood District in the Tulsa Race Massacre?
3. What were the effects of the Tulsa Race Massacre on the city's African American population?
4. How has the Greenwood community in contemporary U.S. society worked to remember the tragedy of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

This lesson sequence addressed two pathway targets in the C3 Framework: D2.His.14.6-8, “Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.”; and D4.2.6-8, “Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequences, examples and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation.” We implemented this project focusing on the Tulsa Race Massacre during February 2022 with sixth grade students in an urban middle school within a mid-sized Southern city.

Reading about the Tulsa Race Massacre

Prior to reading *Unspeakable*, we projected the cover of National Geographic's June 2021 issue focusing on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Created by artist Kadir Nelson, the vivid

cover provides a visual summary of the massacre, <https://nationalgeographicpartners.com/2021/05/national-geographic-releases-june-magazine-issue-reckoning-with-the-past-examining-race-relations-in-the-united-states/>. We initially covered the bottom half of the image and asked students to make observations about what they saw in the top half of the cover. Then, we asked students to make inferences about the people depicted in the image. The same process was used to analyze the bottom half of the cover. The image analysis served as an anticipatory task prior to reading *Unspeakable*.

We used the provided graphic organizer (**Appendix A**) as a way for students to record information from the trade book during the initial read aloud of *Unspeakable*. We paused at different points during the read aloud to ask students questions found in the second column of the graphic organizer. Students provided the evidence to support their answers in the third column. They took turns reading in the initial class read aloud of *Unspeakable*. We paused at three points during the read aloud. The first stopping point was for students to answer the questions in “On the Way to Tulsa, OK” and “A Segregated City.” The second stop addressed the questions in “Black Wall Street,” “A Prosperous Time,” and “White Displeasure.” At the third stopping point, students answered the questions from “The Spark that Ignited a Massacre” and “Invading the Greenwood District.” At the end of the trade book, we provided time for students to answer the questions for “The Aftermath of a Massacre” and “Remember the Tulsa Race Massacre.” This activity allowed the students to become aware of the ways African Americans’ actions in the Greenwood District led to economic prosperity for the community. They also observed the racist actions taken by White Tulsans to destroy all symbols of African Americans’ wealth.

After finishing the class read aloud, we distributed two primary sources for students to analyze in pairs. The first primary source, a photograph showing the destruction of the Greenwood District due to the Tulsa Race Massacre (**Appendix B**). The second primary source, a short newspaper story that appeared in the *Tulsa Tribune*, is provided in **Appendix C**. This is the newspaper story that enflamed the passions of Whites in Tulsa after Dick Rowland’s encounter with Sarah Page. Students also watch a short video clip from a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, Viola Fletcher, in which she shared her experiences of this tragedy. This video clip can be found at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tKSDYcvw9A>. After the student pairs examined the photograph, read the short newspaper story, and watched the short video clip, the students completed the analysis prompts (**Appendix D**). These prompts offered students experience with deconstructing the content of primary sources while also allowing them to corroborate similar arguments found in multiple sources (Nokes, 2019). Students grappled with how simmering resentments of whites boiled over in response to the newspaper reporting by the *Tulsa Tribune* and the negative impact that this tragedy had on the African American community in the Greenwood District. Students shared their responses to the prompts in a class discussion that allowed them to add to their own arguments based on peers’ comments.

Following the primary source analysis, we conducted a second close reading of *Unspeakable* focusing on impactful quotes and imagery from the picture book with the following analysis prompts.

1. How does the artist use images to show the economic successes of the Greenwood District? Use evidence to support your arguments. **For this question, use the two-page spread about Black Wall Street.**
2. Why were whites in Tulsa threatened by African Americans' economic successes in the Greenwood District? **For this question, use the two-page spread about why members of Tulsa's white population were not pleased with the economic successes of the Greenwood District.**
3. How were African Americans negatively impacted by the Tulsa Race Massacre? Use evidence to support your arguments. **For this question, use the two-page spread about how African Americans were negatively impacted by the Tulsa Race Massacre.**

By completing an initial reading of *Unspeakable*, these sixth graders gained background knowledge about the Tulsa Race Massacre and could thus discuss aspects of the trade book connected to these prompts during the second reading in more depth. These prompts encouraged students to examine why the author used certain words in the narrative, and why the artist utilized particular imagery to convey the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Students also observed how African Americans gained a level of economic parity with Whites in Tulsa and how White Tulsans' actions were designed to destroy this economic equity (Kendi, 2019).

Writing About the Tulsa Race Massacre

The next step tasked students with summarizing the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. To accomplish this, we utilized the Sandwich Writing template (**Appendix E**) as an incremental approach to writing their summaries.

Students initially defined the term "evidence" and provided an example of a time they used evidence to support a claim. Using the space in the middle of the first page, students identified their writing topic and the main ideas within the three sections of their sandwich template. For this assessment, these three parts could be labeled "Before the Violence in Greenwood," "Sparking the Violence in Greenwood," and the "Effect of the Violence in Greenwood." Students used the template (**Appendix F**) to craft a rough draft of their summary. They included details gathered from the *Unspeakable* graphic organizer, the primary source analysis, and the second reading of the picture book within their summary drafts. The process was critical since over 90% of these students could not write a complete sentence at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year.

Upon completing their drafts, students critically examined their drafts looking for how their summary statements were supported with details gathered from the lessons. This review process can be self-reflective, or students can exchange papers. Students used highlighters to make the connections among their statements in each layer of the sandwich with the information they included as supporting details within their summaries.

To revise the three sections of the summary, students utilized the “Adding Details and Evidence” form (**Appendix G**). Using the information gathered from the critical review of their rough draft, students determined where revisions were needed. They recorded additional details and evidence to enhance their drafts, making their summaries more robust and thorough. These editing steps were especially important for these students since most were struggling writers. The final stage of the Sandwich Writing process is creating a final draft (**Appendix H**). Students included information they provided on the “Additional Details and Evidence” page to flesh out their summaries, writing their final draft on the provided form. The steps in this sandwich writing activity reflect the disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills argued for in the C3 Framework as students replicated the heuristics employed by historians to research an event and communicate their findings through evidence-based arguments (Monte-Sano, 2012; VanSledright, 2013). We intentionally designed this project with primary and secondary sources about the Tulsa Race Massacre to avoid any complaints from students’ guardians, administrators, and the children about attempts on our parts to indoctrinate the students. Students used authentic evidence about the Tulsa Race Massacre and communicated their interpretations about the causes, outcomes, and significance of this event.

The steps discussed to this point were implemented with these sixth graders. We have provided two students’ writing examples (**Appendix I and J**). Both convey a largely accurate summary with the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. These essays are especially encouraging since the overwhelming majority of these students could not write a complete sentence at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year. The sandwich writing activity provided students with scaffolding and learning supports for them to become more proficient writers.

All of the steps in the lesson sequence prepare students to take civic action in contemporary U.S. society. Due to time constraints, we were not able to implement the last step of having these sixth grade students take civic action in the present. However, we would advise middle school social studies teachers wanting to implement our project to also have their students use their gathered evidence to write a position statement to their school system on why the Tulsa Race Massacre should be taught in the U.S. history curriculum. Students’ position statements could discuss why it is important to discuss events like the Tulsa Race Massacre and how it is an historical example of systemic racism that led to violence. Such writing activities offer students a way to articulate why in contemporary U.S. society issues of systemic racism need to be discussed to begin healing as a nation by acknowledging mistakes in the past and addressing corollary issues in the present (King, 2022; King et al., 2018; Levine & Levinson, 2013).

Final Thoughts

The featured primary sources and *Unspeakable* provided the students a vehicle to research an historical event that shows the triumphs of African Americans in Black Wall Street and the tragic impact of racial discrimination that led to the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Sandwich Writing approach discussed has much potential. By using the well-known architecture of a sandwich, the students were able to systematically engage in the writing process from identifying

main ideas, to crafting a rough draft, revising the draft with additional information, and producing a final draft for submission as seen in the two student examples. Social studies teachers need to develop similar learning experiences that allow their students to research and honestly discuss issues of racial discrimination throughout U.S. history. It is these honest discussions that help to heal the wounds from the past that racial discrimination caused and address modern corollaries where racial discrimination still exists in U.S. society.

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Resources for the Tulsa Race Massacre

Websites:

- Oklahoma Historical Society- The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture- <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU013>
- PBS- Tulsa Race Massacre: 100 Years Later- <https://www.pbs.org/video/tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later-ygtwbn/>
- Tulsa Historical Society and Museums- 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre- <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/>
- CNN- Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street- <https://www.cnn.com/shows/dreamland-cnn-films>

Books for Adolescents:

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Appendix A

Graphic Organizer for *Unspeakable*

<i>Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre</i> by Carole Boston Weatherford and Floyd Cooper		
Parts of the Story	Question to Consider	What is your Evidence?
On the Way to Tulsa, OK	Why did African Americans settle in Tulsa, OK?	
A Segregated City	Why did African Americans live in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, OK?	
Black Wall Street	Why did the Greenwood District earn the moniker of “Black Wall Street?”	
A Prosperous Time	What factors caused the Greenwood District to be prosperous?	
White Displeasure	Why were white Tulsans resentful of African Americans’ economic successes in the Greenwood District?	
The Spark that Ignited a Massacre	What were the events that led to the violence in Tulsa on May 31, 1921?	
Invading the Greenwood District	Why did white Tulsans invade the Greenwood District? What happened during the attack?	
The Aftermath of a Massacre	What were the effects of the violent attack on the Greenwood District by white Tulsans?	
Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre	Why do you think a formal investigation of the Tulsa Race Massacre was delayed for decades?	

Appendix B

Photograph of the Destruction after the Tulsa Race Massacre



Photograph taken by the American Red Cross in 1921.

Appendix C

Tulsa Tribune Article

Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator

A negro delivery boy who gave his name to the police as "Diamond Dick" but who has been identified as Dick Rowland, was arrested on South Greenwood avenue this morning by Officers Carmichael and Pack, charged with attempting to assault the 17-year-old white elevator girl in the Drexel building early yesterday.

He will be tried in municipal court this afternoon on a state charge.

The girl said she noticed the negro a few minutes before the attempted assault looking up and down the hallway on the third floor of the Drexel building as if to see if there was anyone in sight but thought nothing of it at the time.

A few minutes later he entered the elevator she claimed, and attacked her, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes. Her screams brought a clerk from Renberg's store to her assistance and the negro fled. He was captured and identified this morning both by the girl and clerk, police say.

Rowland denied that he tried to harm the girl, but admitted he put his hand on her arm in the elevator when she was alone.

Tenants of the Drexel building said the girl is an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college.

"Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator," Tulsa Tribune (Tulsa, OK), June 1, 1921, State Edition.

Appendix D

1. How does the newspaper story describe the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland? Use evidence from the newspaper story to support your arguments.
2. What opinion does the newspaper story try to convey to the reader about the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland? What evidence from the newspaper story helps you reach this conclusion?
3. How is the destruction of the Greenwood District conveyed in the photograph? Use evidence from the photograph to support your arguments.
4. How did Ms. Fletcher's testimony discuss the impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre on her and African Americans as a whole in the Greenwood District? What evidence from the clip helps you reach this conclusion?
5. How could the language of the newspaper story about the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland help lead to the destruction of the Greenwood District depicted in the photograph, picture book, and discussed in Ms. Fletcher's testimony? Use evidence from the newspaper story, photograph, video clip, and picture book about the Tulsa Race Massacre to support your arguments.

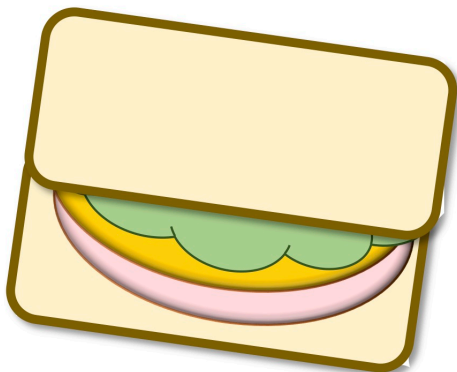
Appendix E

Name: _____

Sandwich Writing

What does the word "evidence" mean?

How have you used evidence in your previous work this year? Write an example here.



What is the topic of your writing assignment?

What are the three main parts of your writing assignment?

Top Piece of Bread:

Filling:

Bottom Piece of Bread:

Time to Write! The purpose of a rough draft is to get all our main ideas and thoughts on paper. Once we have a draft, it is time to re-read, edit, and add details. Use the provided "Rough Draft" Handout on the next page to write your draft.

Editing the Rough Draft. Use two different color highlighters to mark your draft. Use one color to indicate each main idea and the other color to indicate the evidence provided to support the ideas.

Once you have determined which main ideas need more supporting evidence, it is time to gather information. Use the "Adding Details and Evidence" handout found on page three to record the additional information you need to improve your draft.

Appendix F

Sandwich Writing Rough Draft

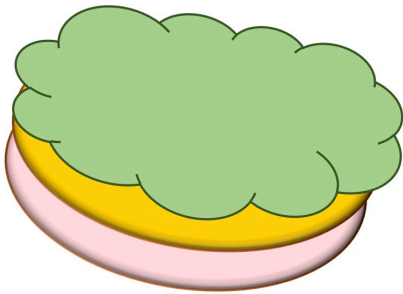
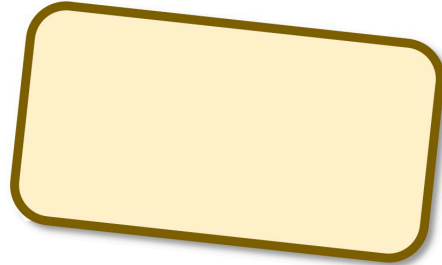
A large, empty rectangular box with a dashed border, intended for writing a rough draft. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the middle section.

Appendix G

Adding Details and Evidence

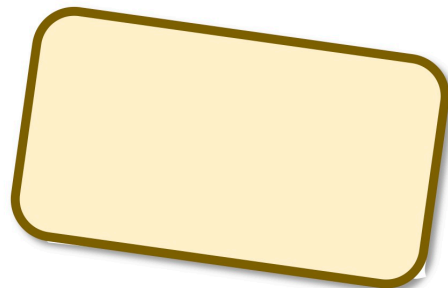
Adding information. Use the boxes below to gather the additional information you need to improve each part of the writing assignment.

Additional Top Bread Evidence:



Additional Filling Evidence:

Additional Bottom Bread Evidence:



Final Draft! Now that you have gathered the additional information you need to improve each section of your document, it is time to write the final draft. Use the "Final Draft" Handout on the next page to complete the assignment.

Appendix H

Name: _____

Sandwich Writing Final Draft

A large, empty rectangular box with a dashed border, intended for the student to write their final draft. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the middle section.

Appendix I
Student Work Sample 1

In the book *Unspeakable* we are introduced to the town of Tulsa where people come for a fresh start or to strike it rich, the town of Tulsa is segregated by neighborhoods with train tracks in between. The black neighborhood of Greenwood is thriving with countless black owned businesses, movie theaters beauty salons a world famous doctor and an amazing school system that might be better than the white school district. We know this because the book says “the community kept thriving.” and we have an illustration of people enjoying themselves on Black Wall Street named after Wall Street in New York for having many successful shops and businesses. After the town is introduced we are presented with our problem, a black shoe shiner is accused of assault on an elevator, we know this because the story says, “ one seventeen-year old elevator operator accusing a nineteen-year old shoe shiner of assault” The shoe shiner (Mr. Rowland) is taken to jail and the news paper tells the white citizens of Tulsa to nab him before he can go to trial, but before they can, a group of armed black men one to protect Mr.Rowland. When the mob couldn’t get to him they stormed into Greenwood destroying all things in their way after all the flames had settled some left and some rebuilt. The way we know this is that the story says “the white mob stormed into Greenwood looting in burning homes and business” and “ Some black Tulsans left and never returned, other stayed and rebuilt” this event would later be known as the Tulsa Race Massacre.

I think that most of us can agree that this was a terrible event in history, thank you for reading good bye.

Appendix J

Student Work Sample 2

In the book unspeakable there was a successful black town in Tulsa, OK called green wood. In green wood there was a one mile stretch of black businesses, Booker T. Washington called the area "Negro wall street of America" the name later became black wall street and the community kept thriving. But in 1921 not everyone was pleased with signs of black wealth, not happy African Americans could achieve just as much if not more than whites. M.S. page accused Mr. Rowland of assault, thirty armed black men came to get him out fearing he would be lynched. The white mobs spread rumors the black community was planning to attack. The white mobs stormed to green wood, looting and burning homes. WWI veterans tried to protect the town. 300 people were killed. 75 years passed before they started a painful investigation. They found out the police and mobs planned it. they built a monument for green wood. That is what happened in unspeakable.

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-10*