

# Rethinking Underground Railroad Terminology

## Teacher's Guide



NIAGARA FALLS  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD  
HERITAGE CENTER

The words we use to talk about a topic influence the way we think and feel about the subject. Language reflects the values of the culture that produces it. As values change, so does language.

Significantly, the language used in guiding students' cognitive development shapes their internal dialogue as they assimilate new information. Social psychologist Lev Semanovich Vygotsky argued these internal dialogues influence students' independent cognitive efforts.<sup>1</sup> Thus, an educator's language shapes a student's internal perspectives on the material being studied. Moreover, it conveys to the student an understanding of society's values with respect to the subject matter.

It is important for educators to consider who produced the traditional Underground Railroad lexicon of "slave" and "owner" and to determine whether the values reflected in that vocabulary should be reinforced today.

**"Definitions belong to the  
definers - not the defined."**

**- Toni Morrison, *Beloved***

**This *Teacher's Guide* has been prepared to inform classroom discussions about the historical context and modern legacy of the Underground Railroad.**

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 44.

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Traditional Language	Preferred Language	Usage Example <sup>2</sup>	Significance & Best Practices
<p>African-American businessman [or any other noun]</p>	<p>Businessman [or other noun used without a modifying racial adjective]</p>	<p>Hotel guest Austin Steward escaped from slavery in 1815 to become <del>an African American businessman</del> a businessman, leader of the Wilberforce Colony in Canada, and abolitionist activist in New York State.</p>	<p>Routinely qualifying nouns such as “businessman,” “doctor,” etc. with the adjective “African-American” assumes that “businessmen,” etc. are white. Under this usage, white is the standard, and all others are a deviation, necessitating usage of a racial adjective to refer to all businessmen of color. Unless the context of the sentence would also require the use of the phrase “European-American businessmen,” there is no need to qualify the noun. To determine whether a racial qualifier is necessary, replace “African-American” with “European-American” in the sentence. If the result sounds awkward or unnecessary, remove the racial qualifier. It may be helpful to try this exercise using “man” and “woman.” For example, if you would not say, “He is a man doctor,” do not say, “She is a woman doctor.” Similarly, do not say, “She is an African-American doctor.”</p> <p>To the extent that an individual’s ancestry is relevant to a particular discussion, it is preferable to use racial modifiers only as a last resort. In this example, the reader is told that Austin Steward escaped from slavery. Therefore, it may be assumed that Steward was of African descent. There is no need to qualify him as an “African-American” businessman.</p>

<sup>2</sup> All examples of preferred language are excerpted from the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center’s permanent exhibit, *One More River to Cross*.

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slave	freedom seeker	<del>Slaves</del> Freedom seekers resisted slavery in any way possible.	A “freedom seeker” is an active, sentient individual, whereas a “slave” is an object. Traditional Underground Railroad narratives often minimize the agency of people held in slavery, focusing instead on white abolitionist helpers. In reality, the Underground Railroad was primarily a network of black people moving through places to cross borders where the law forbade ownership of humans. Individuals of African descent were the primary actors in this movement, but their perspectives are often ignored -- their existence reduced to the label “slave” as if that designation is all anyone needs to know about the hopes, dreams, passions, and personalities of the people who traversed the Underground Railroad in an unyielding demand for self-emancipation. By calling them “freedom seekers,” we honor their agency and their humanity.
slave	enslaved	Plantation owning families often traveled with <del>slaves</del> enslaved servants who took care of their personal needs.	Slavery was a condition imposed upon individuals of African descent. The process of enslaving human beings was a choice made by others who used the term “slave” to dehumanize the men, women, and children trapped in the institution of slavery. Referring to the behavior of the enslaver places the focus in the appropriate context.
slave	held in slavery	Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass were among thousands of activists working to free <del>slaves</del> people held in slavery.	Individuals of African descent were enslaved by violent means, against their will. To speak of them being held in slavery describes their legal status in a way that does not dehumanize them.
runaway	freedom seeker	Although most western New Yorkers did not help in the Underground Railroad, they were more likely to ignore <del>runaways</del> freedom seekers than to report them.	The term “runaway” carries a negative connotation. It conjures images of wayward children. Freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad were not running away from a place they belonged; they were running toward a life of self-determination and liberty.

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owner	enslaver	One night in 1821, when New York still allowed slavery, Thomas James quietly left his <del>owner's</del> enslaver's eastern New York State home.	Ownership generally carries a positive connotation, implying wealth and status. During the hundreds of years Europeans and European-Americans participated in the African slave trade, the purchase and sale of human beings was a choice made by white people who called themselves "owners." To use Toni Morrison's quote, the "owner" definition belongs to the definers, not the defined. By contrast, the term "enslaver" refuses to acknowledge a status and instead speaks to the conduct of those who chose to treat people as property.
fugitive	refugee	John Morrison, famed head waiter at the Cataract House, was responsible for the freedom of perhaps hundreds of <del>fugitive slaves</del> refugees from slavery over the years.	While both "fugitive" and "refugee" refer to people who are fleeing, the words have different connotations. "Fugitive" is often used to describe escaped criminals, whereas "refugee" implies a person seeking refuge or asylum. Consider whose perspective is advanced by referring to freedom seekers as "fugitives."