



Literacy and Intervention

SAMPLE LESSON

Claims to Fame[®]

Short Biographies Develop Comprehension and Writing Skills

Grades 2–5



Book 3

What does it mean when we say a person is brave?

Courtesy of The University of Chicago



Ida B. Wells

1862—1931

It took great courage to speak out against **lynching**. One of the first and strongest opponents of lynch mobs was a woman, Ida B. Wells.

When Wells was born in July 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, her parents were slaves. Just six months later President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves. Wells's parents taught her that African Americans had the right to live and work where they wanted.

She was just fourteen when her parents died in a yellow-fever **epidemic**. To support herself and her five brothers and sisters, Wells took a job teaching school for twenty-five dollars a week.

Later, she moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where she taught in one of the city's African-American schools. In this growing Southern city, Wells saw how unfairly African Americans were treated, and she experienced discrimination herself.

She decided to fight to change things in Memphis. While she continued teaching, she began writing articles about race and politics in the South for the African-American newspapers in Memphis. She also bought a part interest in one African-American newspaper, the *Free Speech*.

Her articles, which she signed with the name Iola, were so good that they were regularly reprinted in African-American newspapers in other parts of the country. By 1892, she was earning enough money to buy a larger share in the paper.

Then three African-American men, who were Wells's friends, were lynched in Memphis, but no one was arrested and no one was punished. So Wells began investigating and **publicizing** facts about lynching. This was a subject people were afraid to discuss. She knew that her friends had been lynched because their grocery store was taking business from a grocery store owned by a white man. Wells realized that lynching served a clear purpose. It gave people an excuse to frighten African Americans, especially those who were gaining wealth and property.

For the next two months, Wells traveled throughout the South to collect as many facts as she could about other lynchings. She asked both whites and African Americans to tell her the details in each case. This was very dangerous work because the people who had carried out the lynchings did not want anyone asking questions. More than once, Wells thought she would be attacked by the people she talked with.

When she returned to Memphis, Wells wrote a story for the front page of the *Free Speech*; she gave many facts about other lynchings. Then she left for a meeting in New York. As soon as she arrived in the North, she learned that a mob of angry white men had smashed the printing press and ruined the furniture at the newspaper office. The men left a warning for the owners of the paper—if they started publishing again, they would be killed. When the white men discovered that Wells was the author of the article, they said she would be killed on sight.

Wells decided not to return to the South. She stayed in New York and began writing news articles for the *New York Age*. One of her first articles was a large front-page story giving the dates, the locations, and the names of the victims of several dozen lynchings. Then Wells traveled to many major cities in the North, making speeches about the evil of lynching and organizing groups to fight it.

In 1895, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, a Chicago lawyer and newspaper editor. In the same year, she published *A Red Record*. This was the first detailed report on lynching ever to be printed. After her marriage, Wells gave up some of her traveling so that she could spend time raising her six children. But she worked until the end of her life to improve the lives of African Americans. In a time when very few people spoke out against lynching, Ida B. Wells had the courage to take a stand.

• • • HELPFUL VOCABULARY • • •

lynch: to kill someone, especially by hanging and without a trial; usually done by a group of people

publicize: to bring to the attention of the public

epidemic: an outbreak of a disease that makes many people in one area ill at the same time

THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE READ

1. Where was Wells born?

2. What important lesson did her parents teach her?

3. When she was fourteen, how did her life change?

4. Why did Wells start writing articles for the newspapers in Memphis?

5. What caused Wells to begin looking into lynching?

6. Why do you think no one would talk about lynching?

7. Why was Wells such a great reporter and newspaper publisher?

8. Who are some other African Americans who fought for people's rights?

WORKING WITH WORDS

A **prefix** is a letter or group of letters that we place at the beginning of a word or word root to change the meaning. The prefix *un-* means “not” or “opposite.”

Example: *unfair*. Ida Wells quickly realized that African Americans often received *unfair* treatment.

List three words and then make new words by adding the prefix *un-*.

pack

unpack

The prefix *re-* means “back” or “again.” List three words and then make new words by adding the prefix *re-*.

pay

repay

Look at the words in bold print. Then look at the pairs of words below them. The words in bold explain the relationship between the pair of words that follows. Can you write three more pairs of words for each grouping?

opposites

whole to part

first—last

cup—handle

locations

part to whole

Holly Springs—Mississippi

page—newspaper

An **idiom** is a group of words that have a special meaning. If you do not know the special meaning, you will not understand what a person is saying. In fact, it may sound very silly. For example, “It was raining cats and dogs.” Read the explanations of the following idioms. Then write your own sentence using the idiom.

The idiom “a chip off the old block” means that a child looks or acts like one of his or her parents. When Ida B. Wells started to fight for a better life for all African Americans, many people said she was a chip off the old block.

The idiom “butterflies in the stomach” means a strange feeling caused by fear or nervousness. Look again at the story. Ida B. Wells must have had butterflies in her stomach when she started to investigate the lynchings of her friends.

WRITING SKILLS

Write a paragraph about a time when you or someone you know did something that was brave. Be sure that your paragraph has a topic sentence, which gives the main idea of the paragraph, and a concluding sentence, which lets the reader know that you have finished your discussion.

First, write down some key ideas. When you have finished your paragraph, proofread your writing. Check it for correct spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

Key ideas:

Paragraph

Poster