



Walter Williams: Economist of Liberty

Critical Thinking Questions & Assignment Prompts

*These questions can be distributed in any form to students **after** they have been presented with the story of Walter Williams's life, for use as discussion questions, a quiz on lesson content, research questions, or writing assignment prompts.*

Fact-Check Questions

Where did Walter Williams grow up? How did that influence his later beliefs?

How did Walter Williams become an economist? What drew him to this field?

What were Williams's politics as a young man? What changed his mind?

What drove Williams to protest racism and discrimination in the Army? Who opposed him?

Who helped Williams achieve success in life? What vital support did they provide?

When did Williams decide to become a teacher? Why did he love teaching?

Critical Thinking Questions

Look back on your responses to the "Opening Questions" asked before the presentation on Williams's life. Would your answers be any different after learning Williams's story and hearing his perspective? How would your answers be different (or the same), and why?

Why are the economic ideas Williams advocated typically unpopular? Does that make them wrong? What are some ideas that were once deeply unpopular but eventually vindicated?

What's the best advice you've ever been given? Who gave you this advice, and why did you trust them? Why do you think this advice would be important for others to hear?

When is social protest appropriate or necessary? What does it accomplish? What kinds of protest are most likely to get results? Are some types of protest counter-productive? Describe a situation in which you think some kind of protest is a moral imperative.

What events in your life have shaped your beliefs? Has something you learned in class or read independently ever changed your mind about something? Describe a time when your ideas about something were transformed radically, and why you think that happened.



Assignment Prompts

Read Williams's essay "Minimum Wage, Maximum Folly" (2007) from *The Freeman* and take notes on his main arguments opposing minimum wage laws. **Write** an essay explaining your own position on the minimum wage. Why would 650 economists sign a statement declaring the minimum wage "an important tool in fighting poverty"?

Why does Williams so vehemently disagree with such a large number of his fellow economists? What events in Williams's life might have shaped his thinking about the minimum wage and similar measures intended to help low-income people?

Compare and Contrast "Minimum Wage, Maximum Folly" with an essay by a different economist or policy expert *defending* the minimum wage. What is similar or different from Williams about the other author's background, values, and priorities? How did they each arrive at such different conclusions while looking at the same social situations? What is similar or different about the way each writer tries to convince their audience?

Read *Up from the Projects* (2010), Walter Williams's memoir of his life and the development of his thinking. Choose a specific publication (website, journal, etc.) for an audience you believe would be interested in Williams's story, either because the story of his life, his economic ideas, his work as a writer and teacher, or any other reason. **Write** a 1,000-word book review for that publication summarizing the memoir and evaluating its significance.

Who in your life who has helped you the most, or has taught you the most? What did this person do for you that made such a big difference in your life? **Write** a profile of them based on your memory, correspondence you've held on to, or even a personal interview. In this profile, try to convey why and how this person had such a big impact on your life.

Think-Pair-Share: First, as individuals (or in small groups), research one of the following topics: *minimum wage*, *affirmative action*, or *rent control*. **Think** about why these policies are supported or opposed and what their consequences, intended or not, might be. Then, **pair** up with another student (or student group) who researched a *different* topic from the above three. **Share** what you found out about these topics. Why did Walter Williams believe these policies actually harm the very people they are intended to help?

What other perspectives on these topics are held by economists? How and why do they reach different conclusions from Williams?