



Thomas Sowell: Maverick Intellect

Critical Thinking Questions & Assignment Prompts

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

Fact-Check Questions

Where did Thomas Sowell grow up? How did that influence his later beliefs?

How did Thomas Sowell become an economist? What drew him to this field?

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

What drove Sowell to drop out of prestigious Stuyvesant High School? Which experiences put him back on the track that led him to earning a PhD from the University of Chicago?

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

When did Sowell start researching and writing about the development of late-talking children?

What made him decide to tackle a subject far outside his formal training?

Critical Thinking Questions

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

Sowell's ideas about economics, history, and politics are often unpopular with some fellow intellectuals, especially among highly-educated and influential people in American society. Why? What accounts for the hostility that greeted him, especially early in his public career?

Where to your ideas about history – both American history and world history – come from? Where and how did you receive the "story" of history, as best you understand it? Are there shortcomings or faulty assumptions in the telling of that story that distort its meaning? How might Sowell's writing about history and culture help clarify and revise that story?

Thomas Sowell turned 90 in 2020; he was in high school during WWII and began writing for a wider audience in the 1970s. But since about 2016, his lectures and interviews have become very popular with younger audiences on platforms like YouTube. What accounts for this late-in-life surge in the appeal of Sowell's ideas about economics and social policy?



Assignment Prompts

Read Sowell's essay "Black Excellence: the Case of Dunbar High School" (1974) from *National Affairs* and take notes on his main arguments about which qualities made Dunbar High so successful in the decades before integration. What were Dunbar's unique accomplishments before 1954? What does Sowell believe accounts for the school's unique successes? Which developments in public education threatened those successes?

What would be the characteristics of your ideal high school? How would it operate?

Compare and Contrast "Black Excellence" (1974) with "Dunbar High After 100 Years" (2016). What changed about Dunbar High and America education in the 42 years between these two writings? How has Sowell's assessment of Dunbar High, the black experience of public education, and American schooling overall changed? What key differences (or similarities) do you see between Sowell's view in 1974 vs. 2016? (You may draw on his many other essays about Dunbar, including [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), to support your response.)

Read journalist Coleman Hughes's 2020 *City Journal* article on Thomas Sowell, "[The Nonconformist](https://www.city-journal.org/thomas-sowell-race-poverty-culture)." (<https://www.city-journal.org/thomas-sowell-race-poverty-culture>)

Then, choose a specific publication (website, journal, etc.) for an audience that might be interested in Sowell's story, either because the story of his life, his economic ideas, his work as social theorist, or any other reason. **Write** a direct response to Hughes's essay, tailored to your chosen audience, expanding on, modifying, and/or disputing the assessment of Sowell offered by Hughes. Draw on the lesson materials for examples and evidence in this response.

One of Thomas Sowell's books is *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (1987), in which he contrasts the "constrained" vision of society – which emphasizes humanity's limited ability to improve itself and sees individuals as basically selfish – with the "unconstrained" vision, which sees most social problems as solvable and human nature as basically benevolent and cooperative. **Research** these two visions. Which best describes your outlook? How about that of your community? Which view does Sowell favor? **Write** a 1,000+ word statement explaining our answer and describing your own vision of the world.

Think-Pair-Share: First, as individuals (or in small groups), research one of the following topics: *school vouchers*, *affirmative action*, or *universal healthcare*. **Think** about why these policies are supported or opposed and what their consequences, intended or not, might be. What has Thomas Sowell written about these topics? 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. Based on your research, do you find his assessment convincing?

What other perspectives on these topics are held by economists, social theorists, and political leaders? How and why do they reach different conclusions from Sowell?