

Activity 2. Editor's Preface: Responses for Discussion

These statements are made to convince the reader the narrative is a true account. In the class discussion, encourage students to “read between the lines” and infer why Wilson is so compelled to “build the case” for the narrative’s authenticity. (Note: Since Wilson actually penned the narrative, he seems especially motivated to “prove” to readers that Northup's account is true. Wilson also wants readers to see him as objective and unbiased.) Inferences about Wilson's motives are provided in the parentheses after each statement.

“In order ... to present all the facts which have been communicated to him, it has seemed necessary to extend it to its present length.” (Wilson demonstrates that he permits the lengthiness of the book because it was a greater priority for him to include all the important facts. This demonstrates to the readers that he’s going to great lengths to tell the ‘whole truth and nothing but the truth.’)

“Many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence ...”(Wilson demonstrates independent corroboration of Northup’s statements. Corroborating statements with additional evidence is a classic way of proving truth.)

“That he has adhered strictly to the truth the editor, at least, who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his statements, is well satisfied. “(Wilson says that in his personal judgment the narrative is devoid of contradictions and discrepancies, which means it passes the truth tests of consistency and reliability, at least for Wilson.)

“He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular, and has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appeared.” (Again, Wilson attests to the consistency and reliability of the information Northup provided, i.e., he tells the same story over and over again, which indicates he's not a lying because lies are difficult to remember in detail. In addition, Wilson explains that Northup has thoroughly gone through the transcript and served as a fact checker by flagging even the slightest error or inaccuracy. This again shows the lengths that not only Wilson, but also Northup have gone to in order to assure that the truth and nothing but the truth is told in the narrative.)

- “It is believed that the following account of his experience on Bayou Boeuf presents a correct picture of Slavery in all its lights, and shadows, as it now exists in that locality.” (Wilson is being very ‘conservative’ and specific. He's careful not to say that Northup's view of slavery can be generalized to every place in the South, yet he does assert that this is a ‘correct’ picture of slavery in Bayou Boeuf, Louisiana. By being very precise and clear—and by not overstating the case—Wilson presents himself as a reasonable, honest and trustworthy communicator. This is designed to build trust in Wilson and in the work.)
- “Unbiased, as he conceives, by any prepossessions or prejudices, the only object of the editor has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup’s life, as he received it from his lips.”(Wilson claims his objectivity in telling Northup's experiences. He states his only a bias is to relate as truthfully as possible what Northup has told him. It might be useful to ask the students and discuss: Do you think it's possible for an author to be completely objective?)