

Sample Answers Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case Study
Plessy v. Ferguson | 1896 | Page Three – Student Activity Sheet

1. What is the essential question of this case?

Is Louisiana's law requiring racial segregation on its trains an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment?

2. Using the evidence you found during your reading, summarize the background of this case in three complete sentences.

In 1890, Louisiana passed a law called the Separate Car Act, a law that said railroad companies must provide separate but equal train cars for whites and blacks. A group of black citizens who raised money to reverse the law worked together with the East Louisiana Railroad Company, which sought to end the Act mainly because of business and money reasons.

3. What are the constitutional principles related to the case? List the principles and summarize the meaning below.

13th Amendment	SECTION. 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction. SECTION. 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
14th Amendment	SECTION. 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

4. How did the Court answer the essential question? What was the reason for their decision?

In a 7-1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ferguson. Justice Brown agreed that the 14th amendment intended to establish absolute equality for the races before the law. He identified the purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment as “enforce[ing] the absolute equality of the two races before the law,” but then argued that “it could not have been intended to abolish [end] distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social...equality.” According to the Court, the Fourteenth Amendment was only concerned with legal equality, the idea that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law.

5. What was the impact of this case on society?

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision greatly impacted society. The idea of “separate but equal” led to racial segregation and states began creating “separate but equal” spaces in public places.

6. Why is this case considered a landmark?

It established the constitutionality of racial segregation.