Grain and Status

Read how work, legal status, and political power differed in the Roman Republic.

9-12.WC.9 "Describe the class system of ancient Rome, including the role of patricians, plebeians, and slaves in Roman society."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Number the first mention of patricians, plebeians, and enslaved people in the order they appear. Underline a role for each group, and circle details that show who held political power.

A Grain Shipment in Rome

1 In the Roman Republic, a shipment of grain could reveal how society was organized. Near the docks, an enslaved worker might haul sacks while a plebeian merchant arranged their sale. A patrician landowner might negotiate with officials about supplies for the city. These people did not belong to three income brackets. Patrician families claimed ancestry among Rome's old ruling families; plebeians were free Romans outside that hereditary group. Enslaved people were treated as property under Roman law, not as a third group of citizens. A person's legal standing shaped which choices were possible, even when two people did similar work.

2 Patricians inherited social prestige and often held land and influential connections. Early in the republic, they dominated major political and religious offices. Over time, plebeians won access to offices and gained tribunes, officials who could defend their interests. Plebeians included farmers, artisans, merchants, and some very rich families, so a wealthy plebeian could have more money than a poor patrician. Free male citizens could vote, though wealth and status affected political influence. Women could be patrician or plebeian by family, but they could not vote or hold elected office. Birth mattered, yet Roman political power did not stay fixed.

3 Enslaved people worked in homes, workshops, fields, and mines; some managed accounts or taught children. They could be bought or sold, and owners controlled their labor and many parts of their lives. Some gained freedom through manumission and became freedpeople, but freedom did not erase every limit on status. A freed person could work and build a household, while former owners might still expect services. Return to the grain shipment: a patrician might use family connections to influence a decision, a plebeian might trade grain or press a tribune for help, and an enslaved worker could be forced to move the sacks without a political voice.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did patrician family background affect a person's place in the republic, especially early in its history?

2. Describe two ways plebeians could participate in Roman society, including one political role or right they gained over time.

3. How did an enslaved worker's legal standing make their role in the grain shipment different from that of a plebeian merchant?

4. Why would it be inaccurate to describe patricians, plebeians, and enslaved people as three income brackets? Use two details from the passage.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine Rome's leaders are debating repairs to a public fountain. Write one paragraph describing how a patrician, a plebeian, and an enslaved person might each be involved, and explain how legal standing affects their power. Include one change in plebeians' political rights over time.

ANSWER KEY

Grain and Status

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.WC.9

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Number the first mention of patricians, plebeians, and enslaved people in the order they appear. Underline a role for each group, and circle details that show who held political power. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did patrician family background affect a person's place in the republic, especially early in its history?	**Patricians belonged to old ruling families. Their inherited prestige and connections helped them dominate major political and religious offices early in the republic.**
2	Describe two ways plebeians could participate in Roman society, including one political role or right they gained over time.	**Plebeians could work as farmers, artisans, or merchants. Over time, they gained access to political offices and tribunes who could defend their interests.**
3	How did an enslaved worker's legal standing make their role in the grain shipment different from that of a plebeian merchant?	**The enslaved worker could be forced to move grain and had no political voice. The plebeian merchant was free to trade grain and could seek a tribune's help.**
4	Why would it be inaccurate to describe patricians, plebeians, and enslaved people as three income brackets? Use two details from the passage.	**Patricians and plebeians were distinguished by family background, and a wealthy plebeian could have more money than a poor patrician. Enslaved people were legally treated as property, not as citizens in a lower income bracket.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A patrician landowner could use family connections to urge officials to repair the fountain. A plebeian craftsperson who needs its water could ask a tribune to raise the issue. Plebeians gained tribunes and access to offices over time, so the craftsperson has a political route that earlier plebeians lacked. An enslaved mason might be made to do the repair work, but an owner controls that person's labor. Unlike free male citizens, the enslaved mason cannot vote on public matters.

Accept other plausible occupations and actions that fit each group's legal standing. Students should distinguish inherited patrician status from wealth and should not suggest that enslaved people could vote.