The Underground Railroad
Thousands of slaves fled for the North, where many were given help along the **Underground Railroad**. It was not a real railroad, but a secret network of people, places, and routes in the North that led slaves to freedom in large cities and Canada.

Reaching the Underground Railroad was a frightening and difficult journey. Some fugitives stowed away on boats, trains or wagons. But most slaves travelled on foot, and usually at night. They often crossed rivers, hiked through mountains, and waded through swamps. They had little to eat except what they found on their way.
The route to freedom for runaway slaves.

Conductors were black people or white people who took slaves from one station to another.

X Station or safe house
The worst danger runaway slaves faced were “bounty hunters” or slave catchers who made a living by tracking runaway slaves and returning them to their owners. Some slaves used clever disguises or tricks to escape the South. One female slave dressed up as a bot for her escape. Another fair-skinned woman and her husband posed as a white gentleman and his servant and fled by train and steamboat. An entire group of runaway slaves slid past slave catchers by pretending to be a funeral procession. Henry Brown made one of the most famous escapes of all. He shipped himself in a box!
John Rankin’s house was one of the famous stops in the Underground Railroad.
Escaped slaves crossing the Rappahannock River in Virginia in August 1862.
These stories of escape have become famous, but most slaves who reached the North were young, single men who escaped by foot. And most slaves who made this dangerous journey escaped from states in the Upper South, such as Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland. Very few fled to the North from plantations in the Deep South.

Reaching the North did not mean reaching freedom. Even in these “free” states where slavery was prohibited, slaves were on the run from slave catchers. But runaway slaves were not alone on the Underground Railroad.
Along the Underground Railroad, most of those helping slaves were free blacks or escaped slaves. But there were also white Northerners who helped fugitives to freedom.

Although most Underground Railroad workers helped in secret, a few become famous. Slave owners offered huge rewards for the capture of Harriet Tubman, as escaped slave who returned to the South 19 times to lead others to freedom. Abolitionists like Levi Coffin and William Still also became famous for hiding and helping fugitive slaves on their way to freedom.
The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made their work even more dangerous. This act required citizens to return any runaway slaves. Anyone helping a fugitive was subject to a $1,000 fine or six months in prison. It also made it easier for slave catchers to pursue runaway slaves in the North.

Because of these dangers, workers on the Underground Railroad were careful to keep escaping slaves hidden. The hid slaves in secret rooms and tunnels, carried them in wagons with hidden bottoms, and even had a system of code words to communicate with each other. A conductor arriving at a station with fugitives might say he was “a friend with friends”.
As many as 100,000 slaves escaped along the Underground Railroad during the 1800s. Despite this only being a tiny percentage of the millions who lived in slavery, the Underground Railroad still had an important impact.

It helped open the eyes of those in the North who had turned away from the issue of slavery. It also enraged Southerners who believed slavery was right.

The Underground Railroad continued until 1865. That year, slavery was abolished in America. The end of slavery signalled the end of the Underground Railroad and a new beginning for the millions of African-Americans who were then free.
Match the following:

- Stations
- Passengers/Baggage
- Conductors
- Station-masters
- Railroad

- The slaves
- Hid slaves in their homes
- Safe houses on route
- People who guided slaves
- The route the escaped slaves took
Helping runaway slaves was illegal and dangerous, so everything had to be done in secret. For example, the conductor William Still received this telegram in Philadelphia: “I have sent via at two o’clock four large and two small hams.” This coded message alerted him of the arrival of four fugitives – two adults and two children. The word “via” signalled they would not arrive on the regular train, as authorities expected, but on the train from Reading. Still was able to meet them at the correct depot and help them escape.
April 3, 1860

Dear Friend:

I hope this finds you and yours enjoying health and happiness. We were saddened to hear that a train in your area had... But I am glad of heart as

I write to inform you that I have sent three... from Richmond that will arrive on Friday.

The next day, a... will collect the parcels and... them to a... in New York. I have received word that a... in New York will pay for the safe delivery of the packages to Rochester.

Please write to inform me when the packages have arrived safe at hand.

Yours most respectfully,

V.A. Mills

V.A. Mills
Here is a list of terms and phrases used on the Underground Railroad. Imagine you are an agent helping runaway slaves and complete a letter to a stationmaster.