Middle Passage
Olaudah Equiano, Enslaved African Man, 1756

Historical Context:
From the early days of the American colonies, forced labor and slavery grew to become a central part of colonial economic and labor systems. Hard labor made tobacco, rice, and sugar plantations profitable. Buying and enslaving the people who supplied this labor ultimately became a lucrative and tragic part of the commerce in the maritime web that connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The Atlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration of people by sea in history. First-person accounts of the Middle Passage are very rare. Olaudah Equiano’s first-person account recalls his terrifying journey as an 11-year-old captive aboard a slave ship from Africa to Barbados in 1756.

Olaudah Equiano wrote an account of the Middle Passage in his 1789 autobiography. Recent scholarship has called into question Equiano’s place of birth and whether his narrative is, in fact, a firsthand account. Whether born in Africa or Carolina, many scholars agree that the basic content of Equiano’s narrative is a significant document that rings true.

Instructions:
Answer the questions on the next page using the accompanying primary sources found at: http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/oral_histories/life_at_sea/equiano.htm. The questions are designed to help you practice working with historical documents. Some of these documents have been edited, but all are authentic. As you analyze the documents, take into account the source of each document and any point of view that may be presented in the document.
Questions:

1. According to the words of Olaudah Equiano and referring to at least one supporting primary sources, state 3 conditions aboard the slave ship that would decrease his chances of surviving the journey.

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2. Based on Olaudah Equiano’s account and one supporting primary source, cite evidence that indicates there were likely people from many African countries on this particular journey. You may use the written transcript to guide you.

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