



LESSON 2: What Ben Read

OVERVIEW

Born into a large family of Boston artisans, Benjamin Franklin learned early the values of hard work, thrift, integrity, and self-discipline. The Boston of Franklin's youth was steeped in Puritan traditions, and Franklin himself was raised on the religious teachings of ministers Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall. Though Franklin attended school for only two years, he turned to books for reference, self-education, and delight. This lesson introduces students to literature that Franklin read and offers a glimpse at some of the many influences on the young Franklin.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Read and analyze excerpts of literature that Franklin read as a young boy.
- Draw conclusions about the impact of these readings on Franklin's character and values.
- Consider the impact on their own characters of their reading and viewing habits.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two class periods.

MATERIALS

- "Citizen Ben's 7 Great Virtues" by Walter Isaacson, *Time Magazine*, June 7, 2003. Available online at www.time.com/time/2003/franklin/bffranklin.html.
- Cotton Mather. *Bonifacius* ("Essays to Do Good"). Available at http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~phall/1.8_bonifacius.html.
- Samuel Sewall. "The Selling of Joseph." (1700). Available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h301t.html.
- John Locke. "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (a selection). Available at http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke2/locke-t/locke_tolerant.html.
- Plutarch. "Pericles" from *Lives*. Available at www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext96/plivs10.txt.
- Classroom dictionaries

McREL STANDARDS

History/United States History

Standard 4. Understands how political, religious, and social institutions emerged in the English colonies

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Homework

Prior to the class, students read "Citizen Ben's 7 Great Virtues" by Walter Isaacson and write a summary paragraph for each of the seven virtues (four- to six-sentence paragraphs).

2. Review and Discussion

Begin classroom discussion by asking students to describe Benjamin Franklin, the person: what did he believe in, what did he value? A discussion about Franklin's character should ensue. List the character traits and any salient points from the discussion on the board or overhead.

3. Inform students that even as a young boy, Franklin was a very enthusiastic reader, and although he had only two years of formal schooling, books played a significant role in shaping his character.

4. Ask students to consider the books, music, art, and other cultural sources that have influenced their own lives or have shaped the way they think about themselves. List these influences on the blackboard. Encourage students to identify particular instances when reading, listening to, or viewing something has changed their thoughts on a subject. Conclude by telling students that in the next class session, they will be reading excerpts from some of the books that Franklin read as a young boy.

5. Group Work

Distribute the readings for the day:

- *Essays to Do Good* (a selection) by Cotton Mather
- "The Selling of Joseph" by Samuel Sewall
- "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (a selection) by John Locke
- "The Life of Pericles" by Plutarch

6. Divide the class into four groups and assign each group one of the readings. Depending on the size of the class, the time available, and the abilities of students, you may decide to shorten some of the readings. You also may want to require students to conduct some brief research on their author before beginning the reading (see Further Resources).

Members of each group have assigned roles to perform within their group; you may expand, consolidate, or create new roles as needed. The suggested roles are:

- The reader
- The dictionary master (one armed with a dictionary)
- The "big picture" guy (one who listens for the big ideas in the reading)
- The "nudge" (one who asks what the author means by certain words and phrases; limited to ten queries)
- The Ben Franklin representative (one who represents Franklin's perspective)
- The contemporary teen (one who provides a 21st-century perspective or review of the reading)

The group's charge is to read and discuss the literature and then answer this question: Did this writing influence any of Benjamin Franklin's "Seven Great Virtues?"

7. Group Reports

The groups report back to the whole class in two parts:

- Summary of the reading
- Response to the question above

The class takes notes and asks questions about the reports. The teacher should remind students to take notes for data to support a writing assignment.

8. Writing/Homework

Using the articles from the class group activity and the Isaacson reading, students will write an essay responding to the question: How was Franklin influenced by authors he read as a young man?" Allow time for drafting, revising, and editing of essays.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their homework in response to the Isaacson article, participation in class discussion and group work, and the quality of their essays. Essays may be evaluated according to an established rubric.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Ask students to read more writings by John Locke, especially his *Two Treatises on Government*, available at www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/trgov10h.htm. Students write a detailed letter to Locke to tell him how his ideas have influenced American government.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- For more Plutarch: www.e-classics.com
- For more on Locke and the Enlightenment: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>
- For Cotton Mather: www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SAL_BMAT.HTM
- For Samuel Sewall: www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/sewall.html
- Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).