



### LESSON 4:

## *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

### OVERVIEW

Although he never finished writing it, Franklin's *Autobiography* is the most widely published memoir in history and has never gone out of print. In his autobiography, which he started as a letter to his son, Franklin offers the story of his life as an archetypal journey from rags to riches. The *Autobiography* remains inspiring today: it documents Franklin's many achievements; it details his struggles with personal improvement; it explains his belief in personal virtue; and it exemplifies his commitment to self-questioning.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about Franklin's core accomplishments, principles, and philosophies through a central primary source document, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.
- Read and interpret the *Autobiography*'s major themes.
- Write an analytical essay about the *Autobiography* in the form of an introduction to the book.

### TIME

This lesson and activity require two to three or more class periods, with additional time allotted for at-home reading and writing.

### MATERIALS

- *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. An online version of the book is available at <http://eserver.org/books/franklin/>
- "Benjamin Franklin Timeline of Events" handout

### McREL STANDARDS

#### History/Historical Understanding

Standard 2. Understands the historical perspective

#### Language Arts

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

Standard 2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

Standard 3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions

Standard 6. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

### LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to read the *Autobiography* as homework. You may want to assign the reading in manageable chunks that can then be discussed during class time. Refer students to the attached "Benjamin Franklin Timeline of Events" as a resource to fill in some of the significant facts and dates missing from the *Autobiography*.

#### 2. Writing

Inform students that for their assignment they should imagine that they have been selected to write the introduction to a special 300<sup>th</sup>-anniversary edition of Franklin's *Autobiography*.

The introduction should be somewhere between 3 – 5 pages and should prepare the reader for the book by:

- Describing the book’s central themes
- Providing an overview of Franklin’s major accomplishments
- Discussing Franklin’s perspective on the role of religion, social class, and education in society
- Analyzing Franklin’s impact on the shaping of American character and culture

3. Brainstorming

If you have not done so already, review the above essay requirements and discuss as a class.

4. Outlining (optional)

You may want to ask students to prepare outlines and hand them in for your review.

5. Students draft, revise, edit, and turn in the completed assignments.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students are assessed on the quality of their final writing assignment according to an established rubric.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

Ask students to read and report back to the class on the autobiographies of other famous Americans.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

- A Documentary History, available at [www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin](http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin)
- “Benjamin Franklin: Glimpses of the Man,” available at [www.fi.edu/franklin/](http://www.fi.edu/franklin/)
- Franklin Writings on the Web:
  - On an Early Marriage:  
[www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/bookmarks/franklin/frnktext.html](http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/bookmarks/franklin/frnktext.html)
  - On the Price of Corn and Management of the Corn:  
[www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=145&parent=55](http://www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=145&parent=55)
  - An Address to the Public (Concerning Slavery):  
[www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=146&parent=55](http://www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=146&parent=55)
  - Information to Those Who Would Remove to America (1794):  
[www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=147&parent=55](http://www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=147&parent=55)

## Benjamin Franklin Timeline of Events

- 1706** Born January 17, the ninth of eleven children born to Josiah and Abiah Franklin
- 1714 - 1715** Attends Boston's South Grammar School for two years
- 1716** Works in his father's candle-making shop
- 1718** Begins an apprenticeship in his brother James's printing shop in Boston
- 1722** Begins writing a series of letters under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood"
- 1723** Runs away to Philadelphia, arriving October 6. Finds work in the printing shop of Samuel Keimer and lodging in the home of John Read, the father of his future wife Deborah Read
- 1724** Sails for England on November 5, continuing his training as a printer
- 1726** Returns to Philadelphia and works as clerk, bookkeeper, and shopkeeper for Thomas Denham
- 1727** Forms the Junto, a club for "self-improvement, study, mutual aid, and conviviality"
- 1728** Co-founds printing shop with Hugh Meredith
- 1729** Purchases *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, which over the course of 19 years becomes renowned for its humor, originality, and strong influence on public opinion
- 1730** Joins in common-law marriage with Deborah Read  
Named official printer for Pennsylvania  
Sometime around 1729 or 1730, William Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's son, is born out of wedlock to an unidentified mother
- 1731** Establishes The Library Company of Philadelphia, the first lending library in America  
Launches one of the colonies' first printing franchises in South Carolina
- 1732** Deborah Read Franklin gives birth to a son, Francis Folger Franklin  
Issues the first edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, an instant best-seller that quickly becomes the most popular almanac in the colonies
- 1736** Four-year-old son Francis Folger Franklin dies of smallpox  
Helps found the Union Fire Company, which organizes and trains teams of firemen
- 1737** Begins service as postmaster of Philadelphia, continuing until 1753
- 1740-41** Designs the Pennsylvania Fire-place, now known as the Franklin stove
- 1743** Deborah Read Franklin gives birth to Sarah (Sally) Franklin, the Franklins' only daughter  
Publishes *A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge*, leading to the formation of the American Philosophical Society
- 1748** Retires from the printing business at the age of forty-two

## Benjamin Franklin Timeline of Events (continued)

- 1749** Finds the Academy and College of Philadelphia, later renamed the University of Pennsylvania
- 1750** Designs the lightning rod to divert lightning from buildings during thunderstorms
- 1751** *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, a collection of Franklin's letters about his electrical experiments, published in London  
Co-founds the Pennsylvania Hospital, the colonies' first public hospital  
Founds the Philadelphia Contributionship, the colonies' first property insurance company
- 1752** Performs legendary kite and key experiment, confirming his theory that electricity existed in thunderclouds in the form of lightning
- 1753** Awarded the Royal Society of London's Copley Medal for work in electricity  
Appointed joint deputy postmaster general of North America  
Awarded honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale
- 1754** Drafts the Albany Plan of Union, urging the colonies to form a united defense against threats from the French and their Native American allies  
Publishes in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* the "Join, or Die" cartoon, America's first symbol of the united colonies
- 1756** Awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree from William and Mary College
- 1757** Appointed colonial agent to London. Lives and works in London for the majority of the next eighteen years
- 1758** *A Way to Wealth*, a collection of Franklin's *Poor Richard's* writings is published
- 1759** Awarded an honorary Doctor of Law degree from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland
- 1762** Invents the glass armonica  
Awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Oxford University, England
- 1766** Elected to Royal Society of Sciences
- 1769** Elected president of the American Philosophical Society
- 1771** Begins writing his *Autobiography*
- 1774** Deborah Read Franklin dies
- 1775** Arrives back in Philadelphia  
Elected the Pennsylvania delegate to the Second Continental Congress
- 1776** Serves on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence  
Appointed commissioner to the court of France and arrives in Paris on December 21

## Benjamin Franklin Timeline of Events (continued)

- 1778** Helps negotiate and signs the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between America and France, securing critical support from the French in the form of loans, military supplies, and troops
- 1783** Helps negotiate and signs Treaty of Paris, officially ending the Revolutionary War
- 1785** Moves back to Philadelphia after his years of service in France
- 1787** Elected president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. Serves as delegate to the Constitutional Convention
- 1790** Dies on April 17, 1790, at the age of eighty-four