



LESSON 1:

Lists to Live by: Developing a Self-Improvement Plan

OVERVIEW

Franklin placed great value on self-improvement. He believed that integrity and moral responsibility were the backbone of a successful life and a strong community. Reading and reflection led him to formulate his own list of 13 personal virtues, which he then attempted to master, one by one, noting his progress each day in a chart. Students learn about Franklin's lifelong ambition to improve himself and then identify character traits they deem important to their lives.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand that Franklin's desire to lead a virtuous life was entwined with his desire to serve his community.
- Gain insights into Franklin's definition of a "virtuous" life and assess their own concept of virtuousness.
- Develop their own plan for self-improvement.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two class periods.

MATERIALS

- Excerpt from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, pertaining to his 13 virtues for achieving moral perfection ("It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection...I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination.") available at www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext94/bfaut11.txt
OR *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay, pp. 1383–1388.
- "Reading Review Questions" handout
- "Developing a Game Plan for Self-Improvement" handout
- Poster board and markers

McREL STANDARDS

Civics

Standard 27. Understands how certain character traits enhance citizens' ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities

Life Skills/Self-Regulation

Standard 1. Sets and manages goals

Standard 2. Performs self appraisal

Standard 5. Maintains a healthy self-concept

Language Arts

Standard 10. Understands the characteristics and components of the media

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Reading

In advance of the lesson students read the excerpt from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Ask students to complete the “Reading Review Questions” handout as they are reading the excerpt.

2. Discussion

Engage the students in a discussion structured around these and similar questions:

- Did Franklin know himself?
- What did Franklin define as his good qualities?
- What did Franklin define as his bad qualities?
- What did Franklin aspire to be?
- What did Franklin consider to be the most important virtue?
- What is the connection between personal virtues and the ability to make positive contributions to society?

Teacher may record responses on the blackboard or overhead projector.

3. Homework: Develop a Game Plan

Using the “Developing a Game Plan for Self-Improvement” handout, ask students to think about and list their own virtues, vices, and aspirations. The last box is a game plan for achieving the aspirations. For example, a student may aspire to promptness. The student could then develop a game plan for being on time for school. Such a game plan might include packing one’s backpack the night before and setting the alarm 15 minutes earlier each morning.

4. Review the homework with the students. Ask students to consider the value of having developed such a plan.

5. Sell the Concept

Explain to students that while Franklin sold the concept of self-improvement through his autobiography, their assignment is to create a commercial to market the idea of developing a self-improvement plan to other kids their age. Divide the students into small groups, and ask each group to present their idea for their commercial on a “storyboard.” For the storyboard, they can use one or more poster boards to sketch out each scene in the commercial with any accompanying dialogue. The groups should also turn in narrative descriptions of their commercials. As they create their commercials, students should keep the answers to the following questions in mind:

- What is the purpose of the commercial?
- Who is the audience for the commercial?
- Why is my product appealing to my audience?

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their homework, their participation in class discussions and group work, and their storyboards.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Students can use home or school video resources to create their commercials. On a scheduled “screening day,” the commercials can be shared with the class.
- Students choose one game plan to put into effect and then chart its progress for two weeks. At the end of the two-week period, students will write a brief summary reflecting on the effectiveness of their plans, and share their experiences with the class.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Fradin, Dennis Brindell. *Who Was Ben Franklin?* (NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 2002).

Reading Review Questions

DIRECTIONS: Read Franklin’s advice and opinions in his autobiography, and then do what Franklin would have done: make a list.

List four qualities that Franklin did not like in himself [vices]. Include a brief definition of the vice based on Franklin’s description in the text.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

List four qualities that Franklin admired [virtues]. Again, define those qualities based on Franklin’s description in the text.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

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Developing a Game Plan for Self-Improvement

DIRECTIONS: Think about Benjamin Franklin’s essay on 13 virtues and the discussion in class today. Think about things that you are good at and things that you like about yourself; list these under virtues. Then think of things that you would like to change about yourself; list these under vices. Thirdly, think about how you would really like to be and list these under aspirations. Finally, identify one or two of your aspirations and develop a plan for reaching that goal.

For example, if one of your “vices” is waiting until the last minute to finish your homework, and you aspire to be more organized and spend more time on your studies, then you might develop a plan in which you set aside a certain time period each day for completing your assignments.

1. VIRTUES	2. VICES
3. ASPIRATIONS	4. PLAN