

## **An Introduction to Henry David Thoreau and Journaling for Elementary Students**

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### **Overview**

Students will be introduced to Henry David Thoreau through excerpts from his writings as well as historical fiction. Students will begin journaling their daily life and eventually will begin to journal their experiences with the natural world.

### **Works Cited**

- Dawes, Claiborne, and J. Stephen Moyle. *A Different Drummer: Thoreau and Will's Independence Day*. Carlisle, MA: Discovery Enterprises, 1998.
- Johnson, D. B., and James Naughton. *Henry Builds a Cabin*. Norwalk, CT: Weston Woods Studios, 2003.
- Sanford, Sally Allis, and Ilse Plume. *Henry and the Huckleberries: A Visit with Mr. Thoreau at Walden Pond: Based on a True Story*. Westport, CT: Prospecta, 2017.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer*. New Haven Yale University Press, 2004.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walking*. Carlisle, Massachusetts, Applewood Books, 1992.

### **Activity 1**

Give each student a journal. Eventually, they will create their own covers. Ask students to write about everything they do for four days from Monday through Thursday. This can include activities at school, meals, and leisure time.

## Activity 2

Take students outside of the classroom and have them spread themselves out on the blacktop or the field. Ask them to write about everything they see, hear, touch, and taste in a 5-10 minute period. Remind them that this will be done in complete silence. When they are done, they may share their experiences with their peers.

Next, read the following quote to the class as you project it on the board:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” (p. 88)

Ask students to think about this quote and to discuss it with their table partners. Ask for volunteers to share what they think Thoreau meant. Then, ask students what they think are the “essentials” of life. As the class discusses, make a list. Then, ask students to reflect on what they have written in their journals this week and make a list of those things that they think are non-essentials. Post both lists.

**Read Aloud:** Read *Henry Builds a Cabin* to the class.

## Activity 3

**Read Aloud:** Read *Henry and the Huckleberries* to the class. Then share the PowerPoint of Images in Walden. Explain to the students that Thoreau was a careful observer of nature. In his journals he sometimes drew pictures of what he saw. Pass out the pictures from the PowerPoint as well as natural objects such as shells, plants, and pieces of tree branches. Ask the students to draw what they see.

**Assignment 1:** Ask students to take their journal home over the weekend. They will need to find a natural setting such as a yard, a park, a beach, or anywhere that they can enjoy natural surroundings. Ask them to use their senses to write about their experience. This should be done in silence for a period of 5-20 minutes. Remind them about their experience on the blacktop or field. Remind students that they can draw pictures as well as write.

**Assignment 2:** Ask students to attempt to avoid any of the non-essentials of life for one week and to write about their experiences in their journal every day. At the end of the week ask students to discuss their experiences with their table partners and then open it up for a whole class discussion.

What did they experience?  
How did it feel?

Ask students to continue journaling.

**Read Aloud:** *A Different Drummer – Thoreau and Will's Independence Day* to the class.

## Excerpts from the Writings of Henry David Thoreau

### From *Walking*

“I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least, ---and it is commonly more than that, ---sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.” (pp. 8-9)

“For I believe that climate does thus react on man, -- as there is something in the mountain-air that feeds the spirit and inspires.” (p. 28)

“I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village.” (p. 39)

“I took a walk on Spaulding’s Farm the other afternoon. I saw the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood. Its golden rays straggled into the aisles of the wood as into some noble hall. I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether admirable and shining family had settled there in that part of the land called Concord, unknown to me, -- to whom the sun was servant, -- who had not gone into society in the village, --who had not been called on. I saw their park, their pleasure-ground, beyond through the wood, in Spaulding’s cranberry-meadow.” (pp. 53-54)

“Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more. We might climb a tree, at least. I found my account in climbing a tree once. It was a tall white pine, on the top of a hill; and though I got well pitched, I was well paid for it, for I discovered new mountains in the horizon which I had never seen before, --so much more of the earth and the heavens. I might have walked about the foot of the tree for threescore years and ten, and yet I certainly should never have seen them. But, above all, I discovered around me, --it was near the end of June, --on the ends of the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward. I carried straightaway to the village the topmost spire, and showed it to stranger jurymen who walked the streets, --for it was court-week, --and to farmers and lumber dealers and wood-choppers and hunters, and not one had ever seen the like before, but they wondered as at a star dropped down.” (pp. 56-57)

## **From *Walden***

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” (p. 88)

“Still we live meanly, like ants...Our life is frittered away by detail An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail.” (pp.88-89)

“The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods...The surrounding hills rise abruptly from the water to the height of forty to eighty feet, though on the south-east and east they attain to about one hundred and one hundred and fifty feet respectively, within a quarter and a third of a mile. They are exclusively woodland. All our Concord water have two colors at least, one viewed at a distance, and another, more proper, close at hand. The first depends more on the light, and follows the sky. In clear weather, in summer they appear blue at a little distance, especially if agitated, and at a great distance all appear alike. In stormy weather they are sometimes of a dark slate color. The sea, however, is said to be blue one day and green another without any perceptible change in the atmosphere. I have seen our river, when, the landscape being covered with snow, both water and ice were almost as green as grass. Some consider blue “to be the color of pure water, whether liquid or solid.” But, looking directly down into our waters from a boat, they are seen to be of very different colors. Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color the the sky, but near at hand it is of yellowish ting next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond.” (pp. 170-171)

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. ...I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.” P. 86)

“The shore is composed of a belt of smooth rounded white stones like paving stones, excepting one or two short sand beaches, and is so steep that in many places a single leap will carry you into water over your head.;;;Some think it bottomless. It is nowhere muddy, and a casual observer would say that there were no weeds at all in it; and of noticeable plants, except in the little meadows recently overflowed.” P. 173)

“You can even detect a waterbug (Gyrinus) ceaselessly progressing over the smooth surface a quarter of a mile off; for they furrow the water slightly, making a conspicuous ripple bounded by two diverging lines, but the skaters glide over it without rippling it perceptibly.” (p. 181)

“One November afternoon, in the calm at the end of a rain storm of several days’ duration, when the sky was still completely overcast and the air was full of mist, I observed that the pond was remarkably smooth, so that it was difficult to distinguish its surface; though it no longer reflected the bright tints of October, but the somber November colors of the surrounding hills.” (p. 183)

“When I first paddled a boat on Walden, it was completely surrounded by thick and lofty pine and oak woods, and in some of its coves grape vines had run over the trees net the water and formed bowers under which a boat could pass. The hills which form its shores are so steep, and the woods on them were then so high, that, as you looked down from the west end, it had the appearance of an amphitheatre for some kind of sylvan spectacle. I have spent many an hour, when I was younger, floating over its surface as the zephyr willed, having paddled my boat to the middle, and lying on my back across the seats, in a summer forenoon, dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the sand, and I arose to see what shore my fates had impelled me to; days when idleness was the most attractive and productive industry. Many a forenoon have I stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valued part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days, and spent them lavishly; nor do I regret that I did not waste more of them in the workshop or the teacher’s desk.” (p. 185)

“As it grew darker, I was startled by the honking of geese flying low over the woods, like weary travelers getting in late from southern lakes, and indulging at last in unrestrained complaint and mutual consolation. Standing at my door, I could hear the rush of their wings; when, driving toward my house, they suddenly spied my light, and with hushed clamor wheeled and settled in the pond. So I came in, and shut the door, and passed my first spring night in the woods.” (p. 301)

“Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness...” (p. 306)