

# Walden—A Sense of Place

By Peter Sedlak

(3-4 Week unit)

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12 lessons

Subjects: American Literature, Transcendentalism

Related subjects: history, ecology, environmental studies

Grade Levels: Sophomores/Juniors (honors)

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*"Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" – Wendell Berry*

## Abstract:

This unit takes an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about Henry David Thoreau and *Walden*, in particular. Via journaling and close reading, students will understand Thoreau's ideas on nature and transcendentalism and, in the process, develop a better sense of a special place to them. The unit will focus on the questions: How does place, particularly a natural place, influence our sense of self? What does it mean for us to be civilized humans in nature? You can use this to enhance a more traditional reading of *Walden* or to supplement another unit on writing or thinking.

## Objectives:

- Students will make observations of their own urban environment through journal writings, response writings, observational exercises, and field trips.
- Students will read a variety of literature that emphasize the natural, the built and the human impact on environment.
- Final student writings will include essays and poetry which will be produced into a class book.

## List of Reading Materials:

- Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking"
- Jerome and Bruner's *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*
- Annie Dillard, excerpt from Ch. 2, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
- Cronin's "The Trouble with Wilderness"

## Other possible readings:

Krakaur's *Into the Wild* (outside reading)  
Illustration of A. Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs"  
Harding's "Tragedy of the Commons"

## List of Equipment:

- Class set of loupes
- Jar of pond water and mud
- Assorted leaves, flowers, objects from surrounding school area

## Essential Questions:

- What does it mean to be a civilized human in nature?
- How does place (society, culture, and nature) influence your sense of self?

## In This Unit:

- **Journaling**
- **Thoreau Calendar**
- **Lesson 1: Intro**
- **Lesson 2: Walden (as place)**
- **Lesson 3: Seeing**
- **Lesson 4: “Where I Lived...”**
- **Lesson 5: “What I Lived For...”**
- **Lesson 6: Sounds**
- **Lesson 7: Solitude**
- **Lesson 8: Conclusion**
- **Lesson 9: Empty Lot!**
- **Lesson 10: Walking (part 1)**
- **Lesson 11: Brookline as Place**
- **Lesson 12: Walk and Talk**
- **Lesson 13: Walden (as place)**
- **Attachment 1 Preview essay to Transcendentalism and Thoreau**
- **Attachment 2 In Thoreau’s Words**
- **Attachment 3 Henry Thoreau as a Model for Nature Writing**
- **Attachment 4 Writing paper**
  - Writing Option #1: Problem, Analysis, Solution
  - Writing Option #2: Social Critique Essay (Expose a Problem!)
  - Writing Option #3: Travel Paper
- **Attachment 5 Preparing for Reading Discussions**

## Journaling

*"What are you doing now?" he asked.  
'Do you keep a journal?' So I make my first entry today."*

For this unit (really, for the entire year) you will be journaling extensively. Go out and purchase a separate notebook or journal expressly for this purpose. Thoreau began journaling in 1937 when he met Emerson, and, by the end of his life, his journal was over seven thousand pages! A journal is not a diary, but a place to include your thoughts, meditations, theories, observations, and ideas. The journal will be a place for you to keep responses to the readings, thoughts about life, nature, society, culture, drawings of wildlife, etc. Some assignments will be free for you to choose, while I will direct you for others. Who knows, these thoughts and reflections may lead you towards writing an essay.

Your journal will be graded, but holistically so. My hopes are that your journal will be an authentic, open, and honest reflection of your thoughts; there is nothing more disappointing than a journal that is perfunctory and lacks true heart. As Thoreau said, "Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe."

Some journal prompts:

- "Observations" Introduce students to the nature journal concept (Observe, draw, question). Practice with a few objects from nature (leaves, berries, flowers, etc). Spend 20 minutes journaling. Then discuss what students saw in the objects. (Do a second time later on in the unit with a jar of pond water and mud).
- "How do you spend one day?" Document your activities by the hour, noting: Where you went, what you did, who you spoke to, what you spoke about, etc. Also, keep track of the quality of each hour (interesting, enriching, thoughtful, boring, wasteful, etc). When you are done, write a 1-2 page journal where you evaluate the quality of your day. What is worthwhile? Why? Why not? What were the moments of clarity and achievement? Focus your attention on where the day seemed meaningful. Think about why those moments were meaningful.
- Thoreau said: "The question is not what you look at but what you see." Choose a natural phenomenon to observe, from the sky to a houseplant to a scene outside your house or a scene on a walk, etc. Observe this several times, or for several hours, or even several days. Write down your observations in your journal, as well as any thoughts that you have in reaction to what you see. This is a chance to turn create your own nature writing. How do your thoughts connect to what you see? Can you capture what you see in words? If your physical description evolves into a reflection of a larger issue, so much the better.
- "Do something different." Choose one particular pattern that is a regular part of your life - perhaps the way you walk to school or to a friend's house, the order of your morning or bedtime routine, the way you typically spend Sunday afternoon. . . and do it in a totally new and different way. Turn it upside-down or inside-out; cease doing it completely; begin doing something else that you have never done before. Deliberately alter the pattern of your past behavior in such a way that you are, essentially, walking on untrod ground. Then in your journal, describe the changes you made, but focus most of your journal on the **effect** they had on you. How did it make you feel to break routine? What was easy? Difficult? What did you learn - about your routines? about yourself? by doing this? Did any one of your family or acquaintances question you or criticize you for this change in the pattern?

### **Walden and Other Thoreau Readings**

For each reading you will be assigned to "steward" a passage of the text. This means, you are responsible for explaining to the class what ideas/motifs/symbols are discussed in a passage for the section assigned, present any questions you have, define hard terms, and facilitate part of a discussion, in general. (note: because of the nature of the texts, we may or may not go in chronological order as we discuss.)

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## THOREAU CALENDAR

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
<p>Introduce unit; What do you know about HDT?; Chronology and lecture on HDT ; Discuss quotes. HW: <i>Night Thoreau Spent in Jail (due Day 6)</i>; <i>Thoreau's words</i></p>	<p>Close read Thoreau passages on Walden Pond.  HW: Read <i>Night Thoreau...</i>; Read <i>Pilgrim at Tinker Creek</i> excerpt</p>	<p>Read Annie Dillard's "Seeing" Using loupes, observe leaves, berry and plant. Write in journal. Discuss what you observe, make analogies. Look at some of Thoreau's journals. HW: finish <i>Night Thoreau...</i> ; journal</p>	<p>Discuss: what is transcendentalism? Read excerpt from "Where I Lived" discuss  HW: Read rest of "Where I lived" --master 1 page!; read "Henry Thoreau as a Model for Nature Writing"</p>
Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
<p>Discuss "Where I Lived..." Present ideas/summaries.  HW: Journal assignment: "How do you spend a day"  HW: Read "Sounds"; journal</p>	<p>Discuss and present on "Sounds"  HW: Read "Solitude"; journal</p>	<p>Quiz on <i>Night Thoreau...</i> Discuss "Solitude"  HW: Read "Conclusion"; journal</p>	<p>Compare Thoreau in play to Thoreau in <i>Walden</i>. Why Thoreau left Walden  HW: Journal.</p>
Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12
<p>Field trip to empty lot!  HW: Journal "natural phenomenon" ; Read "Walking" (1<sup>st</sup> half)</p>	<p>Discuss "Walking"  HW: Finish "Walking"; Journal</p>	<p>Comparison maps of Brookline.  HW: Special place map; Journal</p>	<p>Walk and Talk to Res. Discuss special maps; Brookline nature What is Wild? What is Wilderness?  HW: Cronin piece</p>
DAY 13			
<p>Discuss Cronin.  Introduce final experiment; HW: start essay.</p>			

## Lesson 1: Intro

(50 minutes)

Goals: acquaint students with Thoreau (the myth and real man)

\*\*The night before starting the unit, give our introductory activity for students to do.\*\* (Attachment 1)

1. Overview of unit and objectives. (5 min)
2. Lecture on Thoreau's life. (What do students know already?) Give out "Chronology of Thoreau's life." (15 min)
3. Slide show or small group brainstorming: students brainstorm about the state of the world in the early to mid 1800's. What do they think Concord, MA was like? What was the rest of the country like? Who was president? What was the state of the wilderness? How much of the country had been settled? What was the status of slavery? What was happening to the American Indians? What wars were being fought? What kind of technology existed? What roles did men and women fulfill in society? This is free thinking, so at this point accuracy is irrelevant. The idea is to create a picture of the time and to give students a framework to research the period. (10 minutes)
4. Whole class discussion: The lists are compiled into one and the whole class discusses it. Items that are known to be true or accurate are highlighted. Fill in gaps. (10 min)
5. Introduce outside reading: *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* (due on day 5).
6. Homework: Start *The Night Thoreau...* and complete the "In Thoreau's words" sheet (Attachment 2)

## Lesson 2: Walden (as place)

1. Discuss quotes from sheet.

2. A discussion on closely reading 2 passages about Walden Pond. (perhaps looks for others)

"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." ("The Ponds")

"When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And now tonight my flute has waked the echoes over that very water. The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture, and even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is seen in these bean leaves, corn blades, and potato vines." ("Bean Field")

1. Close reading questions: Mark up the passages above. Pay attention to diction, syntax, metaphor, etc. Also consider these questions: What qualities does he depict as important in his description? What elements of nature does he emphasize? Speculate why? How does Thoreau describe his relationship with Walden Pond and the woods? What is the tone he uses? What does he want the reader to feel? How is Thoreau's sense of place revealed in the passages? How does a sense of place affect the concept we have of our individual identity? How is it reflected in the works of art we produce? (35 min)
2. Discuss the classroom group's sense of place, the sense of place engendered by the school, and the student's own personal sense of place. (15 min)
3. Homework: Read *The Night Thoreau...* ; and read excerpt from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

## Lesson 3: Seeing

(50 minutes)

Objective: Students will hone and develop observation skills with objects and text.

1. Observe some objects (leaves, berries, flowers, etc). Draw, use a loupe, make analogies? (15 min)
2. Discuss observations. When did you begin to "see" the object differently? (10 min)
3. Discuss *Pilgrim* excerpt. What does the penny represent? Why choose a penny? What is she telling us about "seeing"? (10 min)
4. Look at some passages from Thoreau's journal. Discuss Katahdin (15 min)

5. Homework: observe an object from around your house (could be a sound) and journal about it; Read *Night Thoreau...*

#### Lesson 4: "Where I Lived..."

(50 minutes)

Objective: Familiarize students with Thoreau's language; practice close reading skills, acquaint students with Thoreau's main thesis in the chapter.

Discussion and close reading of passage ("I went to the woods because...Simplify. Simplify.") (5 min)

1. I would read this passage to students, so they can get a feel for Thoreau's voice.
2. Next, students read and mark up the passage, noting key phrases, words, syntax, metaphors, etc. Also, student should generate questions that can be asked about the text. Then students write a 1-3 sentence summary of their mark-up. (20 minutes)
3. After the note taking, a class discussion. Possible discussion points: What is Thoreau's purpose in going to Walden? How do you think he plans to accomplish this? How can we live deliberately today? What does it mean for you to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life?" (15 min)
4. Give definitions and examples of some helpful terms: paradox, understatement, irony and metaphor (10 min)
5. Homework: Read "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"; read "Henry Thoreau as a Model for Nature Writing" (**Attachment 3**)

#### Lesson 5: "What I Lived For..."

(50 minutes)

Objective: Students will practice synthesizing skills and generate questions and thoughts on Walden.

1. Students will present their assigned page of the text. (Some passages worthy of discussion are below. The main objective is to get students to reflect on the text. ) One student will present first, based on a strong reaction to the text, and then other may chime in with questions or comments. Try to touch on every page of the chapter, but this is impossible. Whoever does not contribute today, must tomorrow.
2. With 10 minutes of class left, ask students to begin writing in their journal. Ask them to react to a quote (You can pick one of have them pick one)
3. Homework: Read "Solitude" "How do you spend a day" journal assignment.

#### Other passages to discuss:

- o "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat? — better if a country seat." (59)
- o "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." (60)
- o "But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail." (61)
- o "The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experience of two years into one. As I have said, I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up." (62)
- o "For the first week, whenever I looked out on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle. The very dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the day than usual, as on the sides of mountains." (63)
- o "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did... All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere." (64-5)
- o "To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?" (65)
- o "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you." (67)
- o "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for *work*, we haven't any of any consequence." (67)

- “For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life — I wrote this some years ago — that were worth the postage.” (68)
- “Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments...children...discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure.” (69)
- “Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry — determined to make a day of it.” (70)
- “I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.” (71)

## Lesson 6: Sounds

1. Activity: Very similar to previous day's discussion. But begin with looking over last night's journal entries and asking students to add, revise, or elaborate on entry.
2. Then presentations, discussion.
3. Homework: Read “Solitude”; Finish *Night Thoreau*...

## Lesson 7: Solitude

1. Quiz on *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*.
2. Activity: Very similar to previous day's discussion. But begin with looking over last night's journal entries and asking students to add, revise, or elaborate on entry.
3. Then presentations, discussion.
4. Homework: Read “Conclusion”; Journal about “natural phenomenon”

## Lesson 8: Conclusion

1. Discussion on play. Contrast the Thoreau from the play with the one you've been reading about in *Walden*. Small groups brainstorm and make comparison points.
2. Discussion on “Conclusion” and leaving Walden Pond.
3. Homework: Journal open topic (?)

## Quotes:

- “The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent. Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing, and the doctors prescribe for diseases of the skin merely. One hastens to southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to shoot one's self.” (212)
- “Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no *self-respect*, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay.” (213)
- “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open.” (214)
- “I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.” (215)
- “The purity men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not like the azure ether beyond.” (216)
- “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” (216)
- “However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is... Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.” (218)
- “Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work.” (219)
- “The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets.” (221)

## Lesson 9: Empty Lot!

Objective: to introduce the students to the idea of stewardship; practice journaling and observation;

1. Students will "adopt" an empty lot, one that they can observe freely and frequently. This could be an empty lot of grass, dirt, an abandoned parking lot, etc. Any accessible space. As a class go to this lot (if you can), and have students journal based on the following prompts, in this order: 1) Give a basic description of your empty lot. What does it look like? What kind of vegetation, terrain, purpose? Any hills? Pools? Etc.; 2) Spend time drawing some of the plant life there; speculate why THIS particular plant life is here? (Look up the plants later on); 3) Describe the lot only in colors. Be specific, use analogies and similes when necessary. Use at least ten colors; 4) Imagine you're a small child on the lot. Why are you there? What do you see? Hear? What scares you? What interests you?; 5) Imagine your lot as it might have been 100 years ago. Who/what was there? What is terrain? Vegetation?; 6) Predict what your lot will look like in 100 years. Why?
2. Homework: find a theme or big idea from your notes from the empty lot, then write a more formal entry about the empty lot. Be ready to read yours in class. Read "Walking" (1<sup>st</sup> half)

### ALTERNATIVE IDEA (similar concept)

Tell students: "We will go out to the far end of Cypress Field where you should find a spot, well away from others, to sit (you should be stationary) for 25 minutes without ANY distractions (phone, book, music, etc.) When we come back inside, you will have some time to take notes and capture initial reactions and thoughts. What were the first moments like? What did you think about? How did the time pass? Could more time spent like this be beneficial – why or why not? Then, you should take these notes home and craft them into a cohesive, insightful reaction paper of 1-2 pages.

## Lesson 10: Walking (part 1)

Discuss "Walking."

1. Read some journals from the empty lot. Reflect on yesterday's trip.
2. Opening discussion: Why do people go to wilderness areas? What wilderness sites have you visited? What did you do there? What were your impressions? Thoreau said, "Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness." Why do we value and protect wild places? In what way is wildness a "tonic"?
3. Some questions:
  - o What kind of "walking" is Thoreau promoting? Why does he think it is important? What does such walking require of the walker? What effect does it have? How is it related to the notions of "West" and "Wild"? How is it related to the common life of villages and cities?
  - o What is the nature of the freedom that Thoreau champions in the essay? How is it related to walking, the West, and wild. To common village life and to civilization? Is he really calling for "absolute freedom and wildness" (first paragraph)? Do you want such freedom? What would happen to society if we all pursued that freedom?
  - o Thoreau makes several comments that could be considered ecological, relating to natural resource management. What does he say about these issues?
  - o How does Thoreau critique his contemporary culture? Look for various critiques, both social and ecological. Do you think his critique is valid? Why or why not? Do you see any contradictions between his critique and other passages in the essay? Do you think his critique could be applied to today's world?
  - o Thoreau speaks of the need for nature and wildness – both for individuals and for society. What need does he see for it and why does he hold that view? Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Continue reading "Walking." Finish essay for Homework.

### Lesson 11: Brookline as Place

Objective: students will develop greater sense of place through mapping a special place and comparing several maps and stories about Brookline, using 3 maps (topographical, socio-economic, historic, etc)

1. Get a few large maps of the neighborhood/town/city where your students live (topographical, socio-economic, street map)
2. For the first 15 minutes, ask your students to find their favorite place on one of the maps and to journal about it. Next, have a discussion where students share stories about their favorite places. (Use “Post-Its” to mark these places on the map. Explore the ideas of home-place, sense of place, etc.)
3. Show them the other maps. What are the differences between the maps and the information they carry? What does seeing the various maps show you about Brookline? Does it change perceptions? Of what is there abundance? What is missing? What does the town seem to rely most on? What do you notice about the matrix of the Brookline community?
4. Homework: In your journal, draw of map(s) of a special place to you. Mark important things (objects, events, etc) in larger detail, and non-important things in smaller detail. In your journal then explain your map and the significance this place holds for you. Is the place different now? How?

### Lesson 12: Walk and Talk

1. Walk and talk to and around the Brookline Reservoir (Rain or Shine!)
2. Discuss maps and special places. Note nature. How different than on map. Also, what is wild? What is wilderness?
3. Homework: Read Cronin, “The Trouble with Wilderness”.

### Lesson 13: Walden (as place)

1. Discuss Cronin piece. Socratic seminar on passages.
2. Explain Thoreau paper topic. (**Attachment 3**)

**Please type (or write neatly) a 2-page formal journal that addresses these three questions:**

- What in your life do you consider meaningless? What seems like little more than a bother or a distraction to you? What frustrates you and makes you feel like you're wasting time?
- What makes you feel fulfilled? In what activities, places and/or people do you find meaning?
- Describe, in as much detail as you can, a moment when you touched the "marrow" (the very rich center) of your life. If you can't recall any such moment, try to imagine where/when such a moment could occur for you.

This journal will be collected and graded **Pass/Fail**. Also we will use it as an introduction to Thoreau and Transcendentalism. Syntax and organization will not be evaluated. Go for sincerity and depth.

## In Thoreau's Words (Attachment 2)

**Be able to paraphrase what Thoreau means by each of the following. Then consider whether you agree with what he says, and how it applies to your own life.**

1. Our life is frittered away by detail. . . .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 thumbnail. . . . Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.
2. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.
3. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts.
4. There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness.
5. Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.
6. He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and a philanthropist.
7. I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land.
8. It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders.

## Henry Thoreau as a Model for Nature Writing

(Attachment 3)

Thoreau's journal became his most important tool and technique for writing

By Ron Harton of [www.naturewriting.com](http://www.naturewriting.com)

Nature writing is born out of love, respect, and awe. It finds its subject during days of close observation of the natural world. It finds its voice in the relationship with nature developed during those days. Henry David Thoreau is considered by many people to be the first nature writer, and Thoreau provides a wonderful model to us today for our own nature writing.

[2] Nature writing begins with observation, and records what the writer has seen and seen again. It may begin with a casual, serendipitous occurrence, but it moves far beyond the casual to record details noticeable only by those who have looked deeply. Nature writing is concerned with what scientists have discovered, but the focus always returns to the personal observations of the writer. The writer is part of the natural world and draws the reader into that world, too.

[3] Nature writing is about the writer as well as about nature. Nature writing is exploratory and reflective. The nature writer probes deep within and discovers how nature affects personal life. Nature writing seeks to learn not just about nature; it seeks to learn from nature. The nature writer approaches nature as a student approaches a respected and admired teacher, in order to learn and communicate the wisdom of life found in nature.

[4] Nature writing is relational. It is about the connections and relationships that form our world. Nature writing binds people to the natural world with words of understanding, respect, admiration, and love. These words may be formed in any literary type or style. The languages and forms of nature writing are many and varied, but each seeks to share what the writer has felt and known in times of living with nature.

### Nature Writing Essential: Keep a Journal

[5] The journal was Thoreau's basic tool and technique for nature writing. It is the single most important element in Thoreau's life as a writer. Thoreau's published writing grew out of the direct observations of nature that he recorded in his journal. He made his first journal entry in 1837 and continued until just two months before his death in May of 1862. In his journal, which now fills fourteen printed volumes, he wrote descriptions of the plants and animals he saw everyday around his home and in his travels.

In the Journal: Observations of Nature

[6] For example, here's part of Thoreau's journal entry for June 2, 1860:

*"A catbird has her nest in our grove. We cast out strips of white cotton cloth all of which she picked up and used. I saw a bird flying across the street with so long a strip of cloth, or the like, the other day, and so slowly that at first I thought it was a little boy's kite with a long tail."*

[7] In his journal Thoreau writes about all aspects of nature—the blazing colors of the fall leaves and the dead, dry grass by the side of the road; cliffs that he climbed while hiking and fungus in front of his cabin; a river flowing under a bridge to the sea, and brooks draining into a meadow. He brought all of nature into his awareness through his writing in his journal. As he writes on March 13, 1842:

*"For seen with the eye of the poet, as God sees them, all things are alive and beautiful."*

In the Journal: Personal Thoughts

[8] Thoreau's journals are not just observations. In his journal he also includes his own hopes, emotions, and beliefs. On December 21, 1841, three and a half years before he went to live at Walden Pond on Independence Day of 1845, he wrote, *"I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds."*

[9] He writes of politics, and God, and social customs. He has strong opinions about how life should be lived—simply and close to the earth—and he states them strongly. Thoreau is most famous for combining human life and the natural world in his journals. This is the essence of his nature writing. The style he created as he expressed the interrelationships of all things is probably why scholars call him the "first nature writer." He reflects on what he has observed and draws out the interdependence—the interbeing—inherent in the experience. He adds to the observations his own philosophical ideas.

In the Journal: Articulate Relationships

[10] Listen to his words written on June 6, 1857:

*"This is June, the month of grass and leaves...Already the Aspens are trembling again, and a new summer is offered me. I feel a little fluttered in my thoughts, as if I might be too late. Each season is but an infinitesimal point. It no sooner comes than it is gone...We are conversant with only one point of contact at a time, from which we receive a prompting and impulse and instantly pass to a new season or point of contact. A year is made up of a certain series and number of sensations and thoughts which have their language in nature. Now I am ice, now I am sorrel. Each experience reduces itself to a mood of the mind."*

### Nature Writing Essential: A Positive Spirit

[11] Thoreau was not considered a successful man by society during his own lifetime. His published writings had few readers and little impact in his life. But even if he had published nothing, his journals reveal the richness of his deep down personal success in life. His writings bloom with a positive spirit toward life. That's another important element in nature writing. Thoreau's writing in both his journal and his published work has the three basic elements of nature writing:

insightful personal observation, philosophical reflection, and warm, positive spirit. In his journal of March 18, 1858, Thoreau writes:

*"Each new year is a surprise to us. We find that we had virtually forgotten the note of each bird, and when we hear it again it is remembered like a dream, reminding us of a previous state of existence. How happens it that the associations it awakens are always pleasing, never saddening; reminiscences of our sanest hours? The voice of nature is always encouraging."*

[12] What becomes obvious in the Thoreau's Journals is that he is writing unselfconsciously. He's not writing with an eye to being accepted by others whom he must impress in order to be published. He writes for himself, out of the fullness of the spirit of nature that he feels within himself. He writes not to be accepted, but because he is in the center of the acceptance of nature and his interbeing in it.. That is the spirit of nature writing.

### **Nature Writing Essential: Begin Now**

[13] The first journal entry Thoreau made seems to have been written in response to Emerson's question about what Thoreau was doing now. And Thoreau began writing down what he was seeing, and hearing, feeling, and thinking about the world around him. And his life work as a writer began with this first entry:

*Oct 22nd. "What are you doing now?" he asked, "Do you keep a journal?"— So I make my first entry to-day.*

[14] Emerson's question comes down through the years to us, too. "What are we doing *now*?" What we can do now is record the observations of the nature we see around us now in a journal. I love the title of the book on journal writing by Christina Baldwin: *Life's Companion*. A journal really is a close companion. Out of it may come source material for published writing, or maybe not. Thoreau's journal obviously became his life's companion. It is his path to awareness of nature and of his own self-realization.

## Thoreau Unit

### Writing Option #1: Problem, Analysis, Solution (Attachment 4)

“How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of life?”  
- Thoreau

“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aides,  
but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.” - Thoreau

The American transcendentalists believed that in order to fulfill human potential, one must have an acute awareness of -the beauty and truth of the surrounding natural world. It seems that in our society today, we have become distracted by material objects or technological advancements; an excess of clothing or an obsession with the computer or video have steered us away from the truly important matters of our life.

#### EXPERIMENT

The questions: What is impeding you from living truly? Why do you think this is the cause or the problem? What changes or improvements would you like to see in your life?

1. Design your own “experiment in living” wherein you will try out new ways of thinking and living as Thoreau did when he moved to the woods. Following are some suggestions for living more “deliberately”:
  - Watch TV less; read and write more.
  - Get outside more often; walk, sit quietly in a natural setting, observe your surroundings.
  - Be a steward of a piece of public land. Map it, identify the flora, fauna. Clean the trash, and help protect it.
  - Think and write about individuals whom you admire and write about the attributes that you especially respect.
  - Select a negative habit that you would like to give up (shopping, watching TV, playing video games), or something you have an excess of (shoes, nail polish, sneakers, DVDs, comics, CDs, clothes ), or describe a positive habit that you could develop in its place (reading, writing, exercising, community service).
2. Perform your experiment and record your progress in a journal. Discuss the challenges, temptations, and triumphs that you experience. Be as specific as you can.
3. Write about your “experiment in living” in an essay. Following the format below, explain how you will lived more deliberately, or failed trying.

Conduct your experiment over **one week**, and keep a careful record in your journal entries (seven) showing how you are changing and what you’re observing in yourself.

#### FORMAT

Follow this format for your final reflection essay:

- In the first section, explain what is impeding you from living truly. You might use anecdotes, examples, or description.
- In the second section, analyze why the obsession/problem exists. You might tell the history, causes, ramifications, or consequences. Do not tell more examples of the obsession; rather, show that you have thought about the problem thoroughly, from different angles.
- In the third section, discuss your experiment. Explain what you did and why. What was your hypothesis: how was this going to improve your life?
- In the fourth section, discuss how your experiment went. How did you change? Why did it work? Or why did it not work?

There is nothing more rewarding or exciting for a teacher than to read authentic, thoughtful, and honest expressions from his students. And there is nothing more futile than reading thoughts that are mechanically written or lacking heart.

Thoreau said, “How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live?” Stand up! (then) Write on!

## Thoreau Unit

### Writing Option #2: Social Critique Essay (Expose a Problem!)

This essay is Thoreau-inspired, but not Thoreau centered. In other words, one of Thoreau's notions or principles underlies the essay, but your paper concentrates on the society that surrounds you in Brookline/Boston in 2005. Your focus should be current and local. This essay is a chance for you to use one of Thoreau's maxims to stand back a bit, to step outside your routines, or away from the things you take for granted, and take a more critical look. You should work with a very narrow focus so that you can observe astutely and analyze deeply. Hopefully, you'll discover something new about a habit or issue that you face everyday.

At the **root** of your essay should be one of Thoreau's notions or principles, such as

- "Our life is frittered away by detail.... Simplify"
- "We do not ride the railroad; it rides upon us." [We are slaves to our own inventions.]
- "Society is commonly too cheap."
- "How deep the ruts of conformity and tradition." [How easily we submit to tradition rather than thinking and doing for ourselves.]
- "To a philosopher all *news*, as it is called, is gossip...."
- Others? Approve with me.

The **focus** of your essay, however, should be on the *here and now*; the **topic** should be a *specific issue, trend, habit or gadget/invention* that you think has become problematic and that's in conflict with one of Thoreau's principles. For example, you might be interested in

- Cell phone use
- Computer/Internet use
- E-mail (versus letter writing)
- BHS's 7-blocks-a-day schedule
- College preparation
- SATs, MCAS, and other standardized tests
- Community service and/or Time & Learning
- MTV/VH1
- Gossip magazines (US, Star, In Touch, People)
- Reality TV shows
- Cars/SUV's

**Examine your chosen topic in relation to one of Thoreau's principles/notions.** How far away from Thoreau's concept have we swerved in the modern age? Or, has his notion somehow been corrupted, maybe even pushed to an extreme in this day and age? (For example, do you see some attempts to simplify and/or get closer to nature swerve from Thoreau's original intent? Look at the spread of REI, EMS and other "wilderness" stores.)

See reverse side for more direction. →

#### **TIPS**

Look at the articles taken from *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* as models. Notice how the authors use **lots of specific, concrete examples** to support and develop their points of view. And notice how each author has **narrowed his topic** so that he can study it deeply in the short space of a newspaper/magazine column. (**Go narrow and deep, not wide and shallow!**) *The Globe* article, for example, does not attack advertising in general; it zooms in on the specific trend of upgrading and complicating products to increase sales.

**Please do not propose a solution** to the social problem/conflict/ flaw your paper exposes. (Most likely, a solution offered in a 2-3 page essay winds up simplifying the issue.) **Avoid "should" statements.** Instead, use your senses and your own powers of perception. **Devote your energy to observing, analyzing and understanding the problem.** Observing and analyzing a problem is the first step to solving it.

## RUBRIC

- ✓ **INTRO:** Your essay should begin with a vivid introductory paragraph that defines your topic and clarifies your concern – the problem or conflict involved.
- ✓ **BODY:** Each body paragraph (at least three) should probe a discreet aspect of the problem and should use **concrete details/examples** to analyze that aspect. There should be a clear **progression – not repetition – of thought** from paragraph to paragraph.
- ✓ **CLOSING:** Your conclusion should *not* restate your introductory idea; rather, it should arrive at a **new or deeper understanding of the problem**.
- ✓ **Thoreau Reference:** Your essay should include one specific reference to Thoreau (a quotation is usually the most effective, convincing way).

**Expected Length: 2-4 pages**

### Schedule:

Observation Notes (2 pages), DUE: \_\_\_\_\_

Rough Draft (2-4 pages), DUE: \_\_\_\_\_

Final Draft (2-4 pages), DUE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Thoreau Unit

### Writing Option #3: Travel Paper

Be inspired by one of Thoreau's famous lines in *Walden*: "I have traveled a great deal in Concord." ("Economy," p. 7) Be inspired by Ginsberg's poem, "Bayonne Entering NYC" and by the excerpt we read from Kerouac's *On the Road*. The goal of this next assignment is to exercise three of Thoreau's central principles: solitude; self-determined movement, and traveling deeply rather than widely. Instead of chasing ideals in faraway places, maybe we can discover that "heaven is under our feet...." ("The Pond in Winter," p. 189).

#### **Pre-writing/Exploring – at least 2 pages of notes (DUE: )**

Over the next few days, keep track of your "travels" – your movement in and around Brookline/Boston. Adapt Thoreau and Ginsberg's keen awareness of landscape (be it natural or industrial) to your own travel. Record in a notepad or journal the images, voices, rhythms and thoughts you encounter as you move around:

- While you take the T
- As you make your way to/from school;
- As you roam around a store, a library, the halls of BHS, an elementary school, a play ground;
- As you walk or bike\* or drive\* from Brookline to, say, Harvard Square or some other location;
- As you move from one class period to the next (from, say, Math to Ceramics).

Use all your senses. Don't write in complete sentences; capture vivid fragments that you can "sew" together later. You may choose to travel by car, as Ginsberg does in "Bayonne" or you may choose other modes of travel: biking, walking, rollerblading, the T.... Just remember to bring pen & paper (or a tape recorder) with you.

**\*OBVIOUSLY, if you are operating any sort of vehicle you should either periodically stop to record your observations, or bring with you a small tape recorder. ☺**

#### **First Draft of Travel Piece (DUE ):**

Your draft should be *at least two pages long*. With good, sharp details, this length should be easy to achieve. Try to capture the unique texture of your experience. Ask yourself: What central idea & emotion am I trying to convey to my readers? **Remember, this piece (whether in poem, prose, or prose-poem form) is not just about physical movement; it should also reflect a psychological and/or emotional movement as well.** Why is it important for others (your audience) to experience your journey? What do you want us to understand and feel?

#### **Final Draft (DUE ):**

The final format of your Travel Piece will be determined by the nature of the landscape and emotion/significance you mean to convey. Your final draft will be graded based on the following criteria:

- ✓ Two levels of journey are present in the poem: physical and emotional/psychological
  - ✓ The writer uses vivid details that appeal to the senses to describe the journey. (Notice how Ginsberg "shows" movement through changing images [nouns] rather than by telling about it with verbs. This way, we get a more sensory impression of his travel. Keep your images sharp, local, intimate.
- Continued on reverse side. →**
- ✓ The format and style is intentional and complements the meaning of the poem. The author pays attention to punctuation, spacing, line length, line breaks, tone, and other elements of style to enforce meaning.
  - ✓ Each word and phrase moves the poem forward.

## PREPARING FOR READING DISCUSSIONS (Attachment 5)

\*\*Use the attached study guide questions and footnote pages to navigate through Thoreau's dense prose. The study guide questions will give you "landmarks" for getting through these thick essays so that you can locate the "gems" that make Thoreau famous.

\*\*Be prepared for a quick reading quiz. (If you've used the study guide questions, you should have no problem on the quiz.)

- **Choose a "purple passage" from the section of the reading you've been assigned to focus on.** (You must do *all* the reading, but choose your purple passage from just *the section you've been assigned*). **Then, write a thoughtful, observant paragraph or two in response.**

Sections:

1. "Where I Lived," **59 to 66** (to "...be done.")
2. "Where I Lived," **66** ("I went to the woods...") **to 71**
3. "Sounds," **79 to 86**
4. "Sounds," **87 to 90**
5. "Conclusion," **212 to 214** ("...If he should chance to meet with such.")
6. "Conclusion," **214** (I left the woods...") **to 219** ("...you carrying on the work.")
7. "Conclusion," **219** ("Rather than love...") **to 221.**

### **Directions in More Detail**

**What is a purple passage?** It is a passage that stirs a strong reaction in you and/or one that baffles you and requires that you study it closely in order to fully grasp it.

### **What you must do to prepare your purple passage for class discussion:**

1. Type it out.
2. Map it:
  - Look up unknown words
  - Paraphrase confusing sections (that is, reduce confusing parts to simpler and/or more colloquial terms)
  - Underline parts that you like and/or have strong reactions to and write your thoughts on those parts in the margins. Be as specific and vivid as you can in your notes.
3. Compose a TYPED paragraph or two of response to the passage by applying Thoreau's remarks to your own context – to the circumstances you find yourself in in 2005. Be concrete! Cite details of the way you live, and/or the habits of those around you, in order to argue the relevancy (or irrelevancy) of Thoreau's ideas.