



# Simplify! Simplify!

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Unit: Henry as Citizen

Topic: Living simply

## Thoreau Quotation

“I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all incumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run.”

—Letter to H.G.O. Blake, March 27, 1848

## Background

Thoreau lived his life as simply as possible. He wanted to be able to work as little as was required—just enough to be able to afford the necessities—so he could spend his time doing what he really loved, which was to write and spend time in Nature. He was very critical of a society that encouraged us to own more things than was necessary and to spend much of our lives working. The two years, two months, and two days Thoreau spent in a small house (often referred to as his cabin) at Walden Pond is probably the most famous experiment in living simply, with just the bare essentials.

## Objectives

1. To examine the degree to which things are “needs” in our lives or “nice” to have.
2. To contemplate a world where we only had those things that we needed.
3. To understand how much more we use than what we need and identify some of the impacts of using so much.

## Method

Students will fill out worksheets to estimate what they think they need to get by and then compare that to all that they own and, finally, what they actually use. Students will tally the number of items for each worksheet and discuss the differences. They will also consider how the items they use impact their lives and the environment.

## Time Required

60 minutes total (split evenly between two days)

## Materials

- “What Do I Need to Get By?” worksheet (see additional resources)
- “What Do I Own and Use in a Day?” worksheet (see additional resources)

## Procedure

1. Explain how and why Thoreau believed in living simply (see Background and Quotation). Ask the students to define a need (items necessary to get by) vs. a want (items that are nice to have, but not necessary). Ask the students if they think they own only what they need or do they also own things that are “nice” to have? Explain that they will be doing an exercise to find out more.
2. Hand out the “What Do I Need to Get By?” worksheet and ask them to fill it out (instructions are on the top). Upon completion discuss what bare minimum they would need to make it through a day (listing items out on the board so people can see what others needed also). Discuss how some people may need more than others. Ask them to go over the worksheet again and consider if they need everything listed and if not, cross it off and add anything they might have overlooked the first time. Collect these worksheets for use after they have completed the next step.
3. Hand out the “What Do I Own and Use in a Day?” worksheet (instructions on are on the top) and have them complete it over the next 24 hours.
4. When they return after the 24 hours with their completed “What Do I Own and Use in a Day?” worksheet, hand back their completed “What Do I Need to Get By?” worksheets. Have them compare the differences between what they estimated they need to get by, how much in each category they actually own and how much in each category they actually used in a 24-hour period.

## Reflect and Explain

- Discuss the differences in the amount they said they need to get by and the amount they actually own and use every day. Were they surprised or not by the differences in what they can get by on and what they actually own and/or use? Would they add or subtract items from their list of what they need to get by?
- Add up the items of the entire class and discuss how much they use as a whole class. Ask them to think about how much that means the whole school uses. For older students, what that does that mean for the community and even the country? How does our use of all these things impact our lives and the environment? Are there things we use because they are convenient, but possibly don’t actually *need*?
- What are the pros to living a simplified life as Henry promoted? What are the cons?

- Henry’s house had only “a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a clipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp” (Walden, 1906, p. 72). Ask the students to define the unfamiliar words (looking-glass, andirons, kettle, clipper, wash-bowl, japanned lamp). If Henry was living today, would he be able to live as simply as he did?
- What if you were to, like Henry, simplify your life and get rid of most of those things that are wants and live with *mostly* only things that are needs? (We acknowledge that even Thoreau owned some objects that were wants, not needs.)

### Extensions

1. Have the students research another country and determine what people in that country need in order to live. Which needs are similar to ours? Which needs are different than ours? Have them think about different types of clothes, food, shelter, money and amount needed to buy things, transportation, electricity, tools, furniture, and entertainment. Do they think the average person in this country lives more simply, the same, or less simply than they do?
2. Ask the students to simplify their lives by identifying at least one item from the list that they used every day and not using that item for a week. Have them journal about what it was like to live without that one thing for a week. Will they start using it again now that the week is over or will they continue to simplify their life without it? Was it easy or hard to live without the item for a week? Did they use something else in its place? Would they want to try this experiment again with other items? For a longer period of time?
3. Have the students review their “What Do I Own and Use in a Day?” lists and identify those items that are disposable/consumed every day (i.e., single serve plastic bottles, food, etc.), those that last an intermediate amount of time (clothes, shoes, etc.), and those that last a long time (furniture). Ask them to think about ways they can reduce the items that are disposable. Have them think about ways they can use the intermediate and long-term items longer (or can they? They might outgrow their clothes even if it’s still ok to wear. So what might they do with their clothes?). Are there disposable items on their lists that students could completely stop using?

### Vocabulary

**need (“get by” items)** - something you have to have to survive, something you can't do without, i.e. food, shelter, water, clothes.

**Transcendentalist** - a person that believes that all people have knowledge about themselves and the world around them that “transcends” or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel. This knowledge comes through intuition and imagination not through logic or

the senses. *Please note* that transcendentalism is not a religious belief but is a way of understanding life relationships.

want (“nice” things to have) - something you would like to have. It is not absolutely necessary, but it would be a good thing to have. For example, music, entertainment, designer clothes, special food/treat.

## Common Core Standards

### English Language Anchor Standards (all grades)

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)  
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4](#)  
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6](#)  
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1](#)  
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3](#)  
Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4](#)  
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6](#)  
Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

## Additional Resources

“What Do I Need to Get By?” worksheet (next page)

“What Do I Use in a Day?” worksheet (print double sided)



## What Do I Need to Get By?

Without thinking too much about your current possessions, fill out the following table by providing information about the bare minimum you think you could live with in the given categories. Provide numbers, as well as descriptions when helpful. For example, if you think you would need different types of shirts, how many would you need of each type?

Category	What is the bare minimum you think you could live with? (you can say “none” if you think there is something here you don’t need)
<b>Clothing</b> (shirts, pairs of pants, pairs of shoes and socks, coats, etc.)	
<b>Transportation</b> (bike, car, scooter, etc.)	
<b>Books</b> (How many? Any specific books or types of books?)	
<b>Furniture</b>	

<b>Food</b> (in an average day)	
<b>Tools</b> (anything that helps you to accomplish a task, including kitchen utensils, writing instruments, etc.)	
<b>Entertainment/Games</b>	
<b>Other</b> (items that don't fit in the above categories)	

## What Do I Own and Use in a Day?

Now that you've done some quick thinking about what you think you need to get by, take this worksheet home and fill in each blank with how much you own and then how much . Provide a total number of items for each category.

<b>Category</b>	<b>What/how much do you own in each category?</b> (You can say "none" if there is a category in which you don't own anything.)	<b>What do you actually use in a day?</b> (You can say "none" if there is a category in which you don't use anything in the 24-hour period.)
<b>Clothing</b> (Write down how many of each type of clothing you own (first column) or wear (second column), i.e. 20 shirts in first column and 2 shirts in second column, 10 pants in first column and 1 pants in second column, 5 coats in first column and 0 coats in second column, etc.)		
<b>Transportation</b> (What belongs to your family and what belongs to you personally? Do you use any public transportation?)		
<b>Books</b> (List how many books you own in the first column and how many you read or look at in the second column.)		

<p><b>Furniture</b> (Write down how many of each type of furniture is in your home in the first column and what you use in a day in the second column.)</p>		
<p><b>Food</b> (Log what is in your house in the first column and what you eat for one day in the second column.)</p>		
<p><b>Tools</b> (Log what you own in the first column and what you use in one day in the second column.)</p>		
<p><b>Entertainment/Games</b> (List what you own in the first column and what you use in a day in the second column.)</p>		
<p><b>Other</b> (items that don't fit in the above categories)</p>		