



# Think Before You Buy

Unit: *Henry as Citizen*

Topic: *Consumerism, critical thinking*

## Thoreau Quotation

“I bought me a spy-glass some weeks since. I buy but few things and those not till long after I began to want them so that when I do get them I am prepared to make a perfect use of them and extract their whole sweet.”

—*Journal*, April 10, 1854

## Background

Thoreau promoted—and practiced—living deliberately. Living deliberately means to think very carefully and critically about all of your actions, accounting for the impact they might have on you, society, and the natural world. This also means to consider whether a particular action is necessary after deliberating on it. An example of Thoreau’s deliberate living was in how he approached the purchase and accumulation of goods (see quote above regarding his purchase of the spy-glass).

## Objectives

1. Understand the difference between a need and a want.
2. Identify their wants and if/how those wants are met.
3. Understand what living deliberately means.

## Method

Students will keep a journal of “wants” for two weeks. At the conclusion of the two weeks, they will make observations about their patterns of wanting and/or purchasing goods.

## Time Required

One 30-minute period and one 45-minute period (75 minutes total, but split between two class periods)

## Materials

- Journals or notebooks
- Board or paper for tallying

## Procedure

1. To introduce this lesson, have the students do an in-class free write or journaling exercise. Ask them to think about the last time they *really* wanted to buy something (or, depending on their age and the degree to which they have control over spending, wanted someone else to buy something for them). What was the item they wanted so badly? Why did they have such a strong desire to own that thing? Did they end up getting it? If they *did* end up getting it, ask them to reflect on questions a., b., and c. If they *did not* get it, ask them to reflect on questions d., e., and f.:
  - a. Who bought it? How did you get the money needed to buy it? Did it seem like a lot of money to spend?
  - b. How did you feel once you got it?
  - c. How would your life have changed if you didn't get the thing you wanted?
  - d. Do you still want that thing? If you don't want it, did something new replace the original want or are you content/happy with what you have?
  - e. Is your life easier/better or harder/worse because you did not get the item?
  - f. How would your life have changed if you did get the thing you wanted?
2. Have the students write down their wants every day for the next two weeks and include: the day and time of day they first saw each thing they want, if they got what they wanted or not, when they got what they wanted (include a day and time), and how they felt about getting or not getting the item (this can be just a few words or more of journal entry depending on what you want). Wants could be electronics, entertainment, an experience, clothes, food (only those that are not necessary for survival), etc.

## Reflect and Explain

- Have them review their journal of wants and see if they can see any pattern to their wants. Do they want a sweet/savory treat every day at the same time? Do they want things more before or after watching TV/video games/being on the computer? Do they want a lot of things or just a few? Big or small items? Expensive or inexpensive items? What were their feelings when they got something they wanted? How do they feel about the things they didn't get?
- Ask them to find one item they really wanted during the two weeks that they got and reflect on/write about how they feel about that item now. Are they still happy, excited (positive) or are they bored, uninterested (neutral or don't care) about the item? Now have them find an item they really wanted but did not get and reflect on how they feel about not getting that item. Do they still want the item? Do they think they would own fewer items if they waited to see if they really wanted it? What would they do with the money that they saved from not purchasing something? Would there be other benefits besides having more money if they were more thoughtful in their purchases?
- List categories (entertainment, electronics, food, clothes, etc.) on the board and ask each student to count the number of wants they had in each of the categories and record those on the board. Compare and contrast how their individual wants are the same and different as other students. To connect to math standards you may ask them to make a graph of the different categories (this can be made into fractions and percentages for older students) and see how their wants in each category

quantitatively or qualitatively compares to their peers or how the different categories compare to one another.

## Extensions

1. Have each student pick an item that they wanted during the two weeks and research the real cost of the item. Then ask them how many hours they would have to work to purchase that item? (You may need to tell them or have them research the wages for the area or to use minimum wage, since this is a realistic wage for where they will start out in the workforce.) If they chose not buy the item, what would they do with the time they (or their parents) did not have to work to make the money for the purchase? Have them consider the trade-offs they/their family would be making for the purchase. Is the purchase worth working more and giving up other things in their life? Or would they still choose to purchase the item? If so, do they think they would extract the “whole sweet” of it?
2. Have the students pick an item that they really want but have not received yet. Ask them to write about how they will be “prepared to make perfect use of them and extract their whole sweet.”
3. Ask them to “live deliberately” for a day or a week and to keep a journal about the choices they faced that day(s) and how they decided their actions. Here choices could expand to include choices in how they treat others.

## Vocabulary

**need** - something you *have* to have to survive, something you can't do without, i.e. food to not be hungry, shelter, water, clothes.

**want** - 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.

**live deliberately** - to think very carefully and critically about all of your actions, accounting for the impact they might have on you, society, and the natural world. To take an action only after careful consideration of how necessary it is to your life and understanding its impact on the world and those around you.

## Common Core Standards

### English Language Anchor Standards (all grades)

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3](#)  
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10](#)  
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

- 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.5  
Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
- 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.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.

### Math Practice Standards (all grades)

- CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP1 Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
- CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP2 Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
- CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP6 Attend to precision.

### Grade 3 Content Standards

- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.3.MD.B.3  
Draw a scaled picture graph and a scaled bar graph to represent a data set with several categories. Solve one- and two-step "how many more" and "how many less" problems using information presented in scaled bar graphs. For example, draw a bar graph in which each square in the bar graph might represent 5 pets.

### Grade 4 Content Standards

- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.4.MD.B.4  
Make a line plot to display a data set of measurements in fractions of a unit ( $1/2$ ,  $1/4$ ,  $1/8$ ). Solve problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions by using information presented in line plots. For example, from a line plot find and interpret the difference in length between the longest and shortest specimens in an insect collection.

## Grade 5 Content Standards

- [CCSS.Math.Content.5.NF.A.2](#)  
Solve word problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions referring to the same whole, including cases of unlike denominators, e.g., by using visual fraction models or equations to represent the problem. Use benchmark fractions and number sense of fractions to estimate mentally and assess the reasonableness of answers. For example, recognize an incorrect result  $2/5 + 1/2 = 3/7$ , by observing that  $3/7 < 1/2$ .