



A Lesson on Benjamin Franklin’s “Project for Moral Perfection” from *The Autobiography* By Laura Gallinari

Course | English Language Arts 11–12

Length | 90 minutes of class time (two 45-minute periods, or alternatively, one 90-minute period). Extension activities are also provided.

Learning Objectives | Students will be able to:

- Summarize and paraphrase main points of a narrative text.
- Characterize tone of a narrative text.
- Assess purpose of a narrative text.
- Develop written arguments about a narrative text, supporting each point with direct textual analysis.
- Evaluate the validity of claims made about a narrative text and synthesize different perspectives.
- Identify connections between textual material and various other frameworks and pursuits (e.g., religion, business, politics, scholarship, citizenship).
- Reflect on their own personal value systems and articulate principles by which they choose to live.

Common Core State Standards Addressed | Reading: Literature, Grades 11–12

- CC.11-12.R.L.1 Key Ideas and Details: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the texts says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- CC.11-12.R.L.2: Key Ideas and Details: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CC.11-12R.L.6 Craft and Structure: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

- CC.11-12.W.1 Text Types and Purposes: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- CC.11-12.SL.1a Comprehension and Collaboration: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thought, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- CC.11-12.SL.1.d Comprehension and Collaboration: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Materials Included | Each student should have a copy of the “Project for Moral Perfection” from *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin. *Optional*: Prompt Sheet, Worksheet (blank chart modeled after Franklin’s “little book”), follow-up reflection questions (for extension activity), and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Two (for extension activity).

Teacher Background Information | This selection is taken from *The Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin. *The Autobiography* was written from 1771 to 1790, and this selection was penned in 1784. Franklin’s dogged commitment to improvement was directed toward both self and society. This excerpt focuses on self-improvement, specifically the pursuit of “moral perfection” through carefully structured and documented practice.

Written in Franklin’s late 70s, this selection recalls a self-improvement campaign undertaken in his younger years. While at the time of writing he asserts that the project has positively impacted his life and is worthy of emulation, he also seems to write with understanding that his initial goal of living “without committing any fault at any time” was unrealistically lofty.

Franklin was raised in a Puritan family, and though his religious outlook was somewhat complicated (and at least at times involved Deism), one can see the influence of Puritan values, along with his zeal for scholarship, entrepreneurship, and citizenship, on his understanding and pursuit of virtue.

Some informed students may bring up Franklin’s purported moral indiscretions, especially during his time in London. Franklin himself acknowledges that he “fell far short” of achieving moral perfection and yet says that through his attempts at the project, he was “a better and happier Man, than [he] otherwise should have been.”

Student Preparation | As homework due on the day of this lesson, students should read and annotate the Franklin text.

Class Activity

Day 1, if using two 45-minute periods:

Warm-Up (5 minutes) | Students should write one-paragraph responses in their notebooks to the following prompt: *Describe a resolution you have made in the past (or a time when you have tried to break a bad habit). Did you stick to the resolution? (Did you break the habit?) What helped you to be successful, or what hindered your efforts? Would you do anything differently next time? If you've never made a resolution or tried to break a bad habit, consider hypothetically a resolution you might want to make, and predict what factors would promote and hinder your success.*

Textual Analysis – Group Work (30 minutes) | Students should be divided into six groups (depending on class size, you can use more or fewer groups). Teacher provides each group with a prompt sheet (see below). Each sheet should have a prompt on top, followed by six, ample blank spaces for responses.

The first group will respond in writing to the prompt. Teacher will keep time. At the end of the allotted time, sheets will be passed in a circular fashion to the next group. The second group must also respond to the prompt but should not simply repeat or endorse what has already been written. Subsequent responses must add, amend, dispute, etc. This rotating process continues until each group has responded to the six prompts. *Suggestion:* Have students rotate the responsibility for recording the group's response on the sheet so that every student writes at least one response. (Short on time? Have each group respond only to 3 or 4 prompts.)

Because each subsequent round involves increased reading of previous responses, time allowed must increase slightly as responses are added. I suggest 4 minutes, 4 minutes, 4.5 minutes, 4.5 minutes, 5 minutes, and 7 minutes. The final group needs more time because they will be responsible for evaluating, summarizing, and presenting the class' responses to that prompt. Groups should summarize the main points made, identify any points of contention, and evaluate the logic and textual support utilized.

Prompts:

1. Would adherence to Franklin's virtues foster good citizenship? Specifically identify which of his virtues are most relevant for citizenship and explain why. Would you add any additional virtues in order to promote good citizenship? Would you remove or revise any of his virtues in order to promote good citizenship? Would these virtues make good human beings? Are there any differences in which virtues would make good citizens, and which good human beings?
2. What connections do you see between Franklin's selected virtues and his Puritan upbringing? Be specific. Which Puritan values seem to be reflected in his choices? Explain. Do any of his virtues seem to be in conflict or tension with Puritan values?

3. Evaluate Franklin's process. *How* will he work to master these 13 virtues? Why focus on one at a time? What is his process for recording his progress, and what is the purpose of this recording? What do his decisions about procedure/process reveal about his understanding of human nature? Would you suggest any changes to his process?

4. Franklin says that he acquired the "appearance" rather than the "reality" of humility. He suggests that it is worthwhile to cultivate the appearance of virtue in such cases, even when there is no sincere internalization of the virtue. Do you agree? Is it beneficial to feign a virtue? In practical terms? In moral terms? Can this practice improve a person? Does it make him/her a hypocrite? What tone does Franklin adopt in discussing his own pride?

5. Do Franklin's virtues appear to have anything in common? If so, what? Can we generalize at all about his 13 selections? Do you see any connections between the different virtues? Do there seem to be any outliers that make surprising additions to the group, or are they all of a similar kind?

6. Franklin initiated this project in his early 20s and writes about it here in his late 70s. Does he seem to have any greater perspective on the project from his later vantage point? To what extent does he deem the project a worthwhile success? Does he still believe in the possibility of achieving moral perfection? What seems to be his purpose in articulating the details of his project?

Presentation of Group Work Results (10 minutes, continued on Day 2) | The final group for each prompt should report to the class on what main points were made and what points of contention arose. The group should evaluate the logic and textual basis of the various responses. Each group should speak for about three minutes. (About three groups should present the first day if you are dividing the lesson into two class periods.) *Suggestion:* While students listen to group presentations, have them take notes in their notebooks or on provided worksheets.

Day 2, if using two 45-minute periods:

Presentation of Group Work Results (10 minutes, continued from Day 1) | Continued: The three remaining groups should present on the second day if you are dividing the lesson into two class periods. Again, consider requiring notes on these presentations.

Class Discussion (30 minutes) | Teacher leads discussion of the groups' findings, revisiting questions from the prompts and adding to them or refining them based on the groups' responses.

Additional questions for group consideration:

- Would society be improved if we each undertook a project like Franklin's?
- What happens in society when we each have our own conceptions of virtue that might not agree with others' conceptions? Are there any virtues that must be agreed upon and adhered to in order to have a healthy society? Are there any virtues that all Americans seem to agree upon?
- Do the same virtues promote moral goodness and material success? Which of Franklin's virtues promote each of these ends?
- Do the same virtues benefit the individual and society? Which of Franklin's virtues benefit the individual? Society?
- What about human nature makes virtue difficult? What makes it appealing? What makes it necessary?

Wrap-Up (5 minutes) | Students should write a response to the following prompt in their notebooks: *What would be your own list of targeted virtues? Offer a brief elaboration after each named virtue, as Franklin does.*

Extension Activities | 1. Using the virtue worksheet and charts provided, attempt your own weeklong practice in virtue. First, select five virtues and offer brief elaborations for each, as Franklin does. You may select among Franklin's virtues or determine your own, but give your own elaborations in either case. Fill these in on your virtue worksheet. Choose one of your five target virtues to be your focus for the week. Like Franklin, each night you will fill out your chart, making marks for each infraction. In addition, each night you will write a paragraph of reflection about your successes and/or failures for the day, your reaction to the challenge, any obstacles you confronted, etc. This should comprise a journal of your experience. At the end of the week, you will answer the reflection questions provided.

2. Read Book 2 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. How does Aristotle define virtue? According to Aristotle, how should we approach attaining virtue? Compare and contrast the Aristotle and Franklin texts with respect to definitions of virtue, methods for its attainment, and obstacles to its attainment.

3. Read a list of aphorisms from Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Paraphrase each aphorism and identify any relevant connections between each aphorism and Franklin's 13 virtues.

4. Have students view one of the six short video clips from our Discussion Guide for "The Project for Moral Perfection" (available at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/self-command). After listening to the conversation, ask them to write a short response to the question at the end of the clip.

Students are also invited to share their responses on our website at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/self-command#4.online_discussion. Interested in showcasing your students' work at What So Proudly We Hail? Email cheryl@whatsoproudlywehail.org.

More Resources | See our Discussion Guide for “The Project for Moral Perfection” with a model conversation between historian Wilfred McClay and WSPWH editors Amy and Leon Kass and Diana Schaub: www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/self-command.

About the Author | *Laura Gallinari has been teaching high school for 13 years and currently teaches American literature and creative writing at Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois.*