

Writing a blog or a journal entry about Thoreau

Write one blog or journal entry, at least 150 words long (If you do this in your journal, type it before handing it in). This is worth 30 points. Entries that do not follow the three guidelines below will get no credit:

1. Write in paragraph form. Each paragraph should state an idea (topic sentence) and then expand on that idea (development). One good paragraph is enough, though you may use more.
2. Misspelled words are not acceptable. If you don't know how to spell a word, look it up. If you are writing on a blog, spell check before publishing.
3. Run-on sentences and sentence fragments are unacceptable.

Start with some advice from Thoreau:

"Simplify, simplify!" said Thoreau. When you get an assignment, start off by simplifying it.

1. **Read and if necessary re-read the assignment carefully** to determine what the teacher wants you to do. It simplifies your task quite a bit to ignore everything else and just concentrate on the assigned task.
2. **Think actively.** Get a pencil and a piece of paper and write down a list of everything you can come up with to solve the assignment. Then look for things that connect with each other, rather than widely different ideas that will force you to make difficult connections. Go easy on yourself. Don't start writing until you've jotted down lots of details you can use and a plan has evolved in your mind.
3. **Stick to a simple plan.** Find one idea and research that — or find several simple ideas, research each and pick the one that is easiest for you. Ignore the rest.

1. You can summarize a point that Thoreau is making, using a mixture of paraphrases and quotes. Here, the main point is that Walden is full of practical advice:

Walden contains a surprising amount of practical advice. To begin, Thoreau encourages parents to let their children hunt and fish, so that they can learn about nature in the most effortless and pleasant way possible. He urges clean housekeeping through descriptions of his own simple methods and, negatively, through the humorous picture of the slovenly Mrs. Field, “with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere”. He indirectly suggested that Field himself mend his ways and work less so that he would need less food; in addition,

Thoreau might not have minded if Field could have known his thoughts on chastity and hence brought into his boggy environment fewer cone-headed infants than the swarm which he obviously could not provide for.

Publication Information: Book Title: Barron's Simplified Approach to Thoreau's Walden. Contributors: Robert L. Gale - author. Publisher: Barron's Educational Series. Place of Publication: Woodbury, NY. Publication Year: 1965. Page Number: I.

Below, the main idea is that Thoreau advocated simplifying our lives so we could pay attention to what is important in life:

To get the most from life, Thoreau advocated reducing our needs and consequently the time necessarily spent providing for them. In his passion for simplicity, he even campaigned for reversing the Biblical formula, that is, to have a six-day Sabbath and toilsomely sweat only on the seventh day each week. Yet it should be added at once that, far from disliking work, Thoreau relished it when it was meaningful. He took his own sweet time when he built his house by the pond, because he wanted to savor each stage of the process: "I made no haste in my work, but rather made the most of it". He took pride in any honorable work he agreed to perform, and advises us to do the same, "so . . . that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction". He also rejoiced in his ability to perform commendably at a great variety of occupations and as a result feared the inevitable advent of labor specialization. It should be added that Thoreau did not do his minimum of toil so that he could loll in the mild sunshine for hours and days on end, nor does he advise us to reduce our needs to this ignoble and slothful end. "Who knows what beautiful and winged life . . . may unexpectedly come forth?". Only productive leisure can warm such a life into being. A less slothful retirement than Thoreau's to Walden can hardly be imagined. His example there should be object-lesson enough for those who deplore the coming of automation as the dread creator of too much free time.

Publication Information: Book Title: Barron's Simplified Approach to Thoreau's Walden. Contributors: Robert L. Gale - author. Publisher: Barron's Educational Series. Place of Publication: Woodbury, NY. Publication Year: 1965.

2. You can focus on some aspect of the form—the way the writer uses language:

Thoreau's sentences. . .are often unusually long. It takes very little search to find one half a page in length, and more than one runs on for a full page and more. But again so carefully constructed are they that the average reader has no difficulty with their syntax and is hardly aware of their complexity. Let me take just one serpentine example:

I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring materials, and without gingerbread work, which shall still consist of only one room, a vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafters and purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over one's head,—useful to keep off rain and snow, where the king and queen posts stand out to receive your homage, when you have done reverence to the prostrate Saturn of an older dynasty on stepping over the sill; a cavernous house, wherein you must reach up a torch upon a pole to see the roof;

where some may live in the fireplace, some in the recess of a window, and some on settles, some at one end of the hall, some at another, and some aloft on rafters with the spiders, if they choose; a house which you have got into when you have opened the outside door, and the ceremony is over; where the weary traveler may wash, and eat, and converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the essentials of a house, and nothing for housekeeping; where you can see all the treasures of the house at one view, and everything hangs upon its peg that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor, chamber, storehouse, and garret; where you can see so necessary a thing as a barrel or a ladder, so convenient a thing as a cupboard, and hear the pot boil, and pay your respects to the fire that cooks your dinner, and the oven that bakes our bread, and the necessary furniture and utensils are the chief ornaments; where the washing is not put out, nor the fire, nor the mistress, and perhaps you are sometimes requested to move from off the trap-door, when the cook would descend into the cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath without stamping.

Three hundred and fifty-one words-and yet I doubt if any attentive student has any difficulty with its meaning. I do not, however, want to give the impression that all of Thoreau's sentences are grammatical leviathans. There are sentences in Walden only five words in length. One extreme is as frequent as the other and the majority are of more moderate length. Thoreau understood fully the necessity of variety in sentence structure and length. The point is that he could handle the sentence well no matter what its length.

Publication Information: Book Title: Walden Revisited: A Centennial Tribute to Henry David Thoreau. Contributors: George F. Whicher - author. Publisher: Packard. Place of Publication: Chicago. Publication Year: 1945.

In the following paragraph, the writer gathered examples of the vivid sensory details Thoreau used to bring his descriptions to life:

The most important characteristic of Thoreau's word choice is its vividness. Emerson once said of Thoreau, "In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality" (Journal, IX, 522). Thoreau's words are primarily sensory. He makes you hear, see, taste, feel, and smell what he is writing about. He is particularly noted for his brilliant description of the world of nature around him. Take for example this account of the pickerel caught in Walden Pond:

When I see them lying on the ice, or in the well which the fisherman cuts in the ice, making a little hole to admit the water, I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods, foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets. They are not green like the pines, nor gray like the stones, nor blue like the sky; but they have, to my eyes, if possible, yet rarer colors, like flowers and

precious stones, as if they were the pearls, the animalized nuclei or crystals of the Walden water.

Note also his descriptions of people, for example that of Mrs. Field:

She too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day; with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere.

Even the abstract he is able to express in concrete terms:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

It has been said of Thoreau that he was the first American to write a modern prose. One need only place Walden alongside the work of his contemporaries to recognize how much most prose of a century ago has dated and yet how modern, how up-to-date is his style. There is little wonder that such authors as Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, E. B. White, Robert Frost, Marcel Proust, and even Henry Miller have paid their tributes to Thoreau's style.

Publication Information: Book Title: Walden Revisited: A Centennial Tribute to Henry David Thoreau. Contributors: George F. Whicher - author. Publisher: Packard. Place of Publication: Chicago. Publication Year: 1945. Page Number: 3.

3. You can relate personal experiences and personal beliefs to the reading:

I remember clearly the day when I first picked up a copy of Walden at the age of 15. My friend told me that it was too difficult, but I was already exploring the woods, walking 2.5 miles each day to save a dime, and dreaming of living in a cabin some day, so Thoreau spoke directly to me. Although we have our differences both in degree and kind, I have never met another person as much like me as Thoreau. His insights were powerful in helping me improve my life, and Thoreau gave me permission to lead the life I wanted to live. My father, before he died, saw me as a failure, much as Emerson viewed Thoreau, but my father never saw the magical world that I have lived in, a world that is richer than anything money could ever buy. I always felt sorry for him. If you wish to live a boring and conventional life, devoting your days to working for someone else, your nights to watching TV, your weekends to cutting grass, and your cash to purchasing one consumer product after another, Thoreau is not for you. If you wish to experience life, then you will find that Thoreauvian insight can free up your time, energy, and possibilities.

4. You can draw on other things you have read and know to extend your reading of the text:

I think Mohandas Gandhi, more than any other political leader, followed the truths that Thoreau discovered (Gandhi was also strongly influenced by Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin, whose views were similar to Thoreau's). Gandhiji had his party adopt the spinning wheel as its emblem because he saw local initiative and self-sufficiency as the solution to the problems of India, and he continually educated people to reform their own lives. He practiced everything he advocated, personally cleaning up human wastes, for example. His battle for justice was that of an individual. He would publicly break an unjust law, such as the law against making salt, and then ask the judge to give him the most severe penalty possible, telling the judge that when he was free that he would immediately break that same law again. On one occasion, he asked every worker in India to stay home for one day. The British told their workers that anyone who did not come in to work would be fired. That day, not a single worker in India showed up to work! That little man in a dhoti could float the British Empire like a chip. Unfortunately, Gandhi could not prevent his own party from abandoning his principles after his death.

5. You can draw conclusions, and form your ideas about what meaning the text has. The following writer expresses his belief about what it means to be a follower of Thoreau--a "Thoreauvian":

First, I think a Thoreauvian is a person who is self-reliant, self-actualizing, and self-sufficient. As children, we were none of these things, and many people remain children all of their lives. Being self-reliant does not mean getting your own car and your own apartment; that just swaps you from one dependency to another; it means making your own decisions about who you are and what you want to do with your life. Being self-actualizing means that you don't sit around waiting for someone (such as the US Army) to do something to you but that you actively seek your own direction and purpose. And being self-sufficient means that you learn how to do things for yourself. It's impossible to learn how to do everything, and it would be foolish to try to do so, but it's rewarding and economical to solve many of life's problems on your own.

Second, a Thoreauvian does not live to acquire money, a big house, fine cars, expensive foods and wines, etc. because these things are not valuable. A Thoreauvian finds true wealth in personal experience, the beauty of Nature, the quest for knowledge, self-exploration and discovery, plain foods, and simple healthy transportation, such as walking, cycling, and skating.

Finally, I would expect a Thoreauvian to be tolerant towards people of other cultures, religions, beliefs, and behaviors because a Thoreauvian recognizes that there is more than one pathway to the truth. On the other hand, a Thoreauvian would not agree with the nonsensical notion that any way of thinking or doing is just as good as any another. (Each of these points in these three paragraphs can be supported by direct quotes from Thoreau.)

<http://www.kenkifer.com/Thoreau/conclus.htm>

6. You can ponder particular passages, relating them to yourself and people around you:

Thoreau rightly points out that most of us spend much of our time sleep-walking through life. We know he's right because when we hear the accusation we immediately know it is true. Luckily, this accusation also serves as a wake-up call:

The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. 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?

What would it take to awaken us?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.

We are all capable of elevating our life if we consciously try, but until we make that conscious effort we will continue to sleep walk through life.