

## A reading guide from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

Turn to pg. 381 in yellow lit book and read EVERYTHING on that page. I have included a spot for the READER'S NOTEBOOK list of aphorisms in this packet.

Read carefully about Thoreau's background below:

**Thoreau's America:** Henry David Thoreau (born 1817, died 1862) lived during a time in America's history when business and technology were beginning to dominate American life. Thoreau lived nearly all his life in Concord, Massachusetts, a small town about twenty miles west of Boston which showed this shift from an agrarian to an industrial America in ways that made him worry.

**Fun Fact:** Thoreau's family participated in the "quiet desperation" of commerce and industry through the pencil factory owned and managed by his father. Thoreau family pencils, produced behind the family house on Main Street, were generally recognized as America's best pencils, largely because of Henry's research into German pencil-making techniques.

**Thoreau's Life:** Thoreau received his education at the public school in Concord and at the private Concord Academy. Proving to be a better scholar than his more fun-loving and popular elder brother John, he was sent to Harvard. He did well there and, despite having to drop out for several months for financial and health reasons, was graduated in the top half of his class in 1837.

Thoreau's graduation came at an inauspicious time. In 1837 America was experiencing an economic depression and jobs were not plentiful. Furthermore, Thoreau found himself temperamentally **unsuited** for three of the four usual professions open to Harvard graduates: the **ministry, the law, and medicine**. The fourth, teaching, was one he felt comfortable with, since both of his elder siblings, Helen and John, were already teachers. He was hired as the teacher of the Concord public school, but resigned after only two weeks because of a dispute with his superintendent over how to discipline the children. He applied for other teaching jobs as far away as Kentucky but could find none. For a while he and John considered seeking their fortunes in California, but at last he fell back onto working in his father's pencil factory.

In 1838 he decided to start his own school in Concord, eventually asking John to help him. The two brothers worked well together and vacationed together during holidays. In September 1839 they spent a memorable week together on a boating trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. About the same time both brothers became romantically interested in Ellen Sewall, a frequent visitor to Concord from Cape Cod. In the fall of the next year, both brothers—first John and then Henry—proposed marriage to her. But because of her father's objections to the Thoreaus' liberal religious views, Ellen rejected both proposals.

When John endured a lengthy illness in 1841, the school became too much for Henry to handle alone, so he closed it. He returned to work in the pencil factory but was soon invited to work as a live-in handyman in the home of his mentor, neighbor, and friend **Ralph Waldo Emerson**.

**Emerson** was by then already one of the most famous American philosophers and men of letters. Since Thoreau's graduation from Harvard, he had become a protege of his famous neighbor and an informal **student of Emerson's Transcendental ideas**.

Thoreau must have imbibed Transcendental-ism through almost every pore during his two years living with Emerson, though he would modify it to suit his own temperament by granting nature more reality than Emerson did. During this period, the two men shared tragedy as well as philosophy. Within just a few weeks in February 1842, Emerson's young son Waldo died of scarlatina, and Thoreau's brother died an excruciating death from tetanus. John's death affected Thoreau so strongly that he himself developed psychosomatic symptoms of lockjaw.

During his stay with Emerson, Thoreau had ambitions to become a writer and had received help from Emerson in getting some poems and essays published in the Transcendental journal, *The Dial*. But by 1843 he and Emerson decided that it might be good for him to establish contacts with publishers in New York, so Emerson arranged a job for him as tutor to the children of his brother William Emerson on Staten Island. Thoreau, however, quickly found both the teaching situation and the urban environment intolerable and returned again to his parents' home in Concord to work in the pencil factory.

But life in his parents' home held problems for the budding writer. Work in the pencil factory was tedious and tiring, and, since his mother took in boarders, there was little quiet or privacy in the house. **Remembering a summer visit to the retreat cabin of a college friend, Charles Stearns Wheeler, he developed a plan to build such a cabin for himself where he could find privacy to write.**

In 1845 he received permission from Emerson to use a piece of land that Emerson owned on the shore of **Walden Pond**. He bought building supplies and a chicken coop (for the boards), and built himself a small cabin there, moving in on the Fourth of July. His main purposes in moving to the pond were **to write his first book**, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as a tribute to his brother John, and **to conduct an economic experiment to see if it were possible to live by working one day and devoting the other six to more Transcendental concerns**, thus reversing the Yankee habit of working six days and resting one. His nature study and the writing of *Walden* would develop later during his stay at the pond. He began writing *Walden* in 1846 as a lecture in response to the questions of townspeople who were curious about what he was doing out at the pond, but it soon grew into his second book.

Thoreau stayed in the cabin at Walden Pond for **two years**, from July 1845 to September 1847.

Before you start reading, here are some **COMMON misconceptions** about Thoreau:

1. Thoreau was a hermit. (No, he never intended to isolate himself from others. He went into town regularly, dined with family and friends, and received visits from them at the pond.)
2. Thoreau was a frontiersman, like Daniel Boone, living in the wilderness. (No Walden Pond is an easy 25-minute walk from Concord's main street. Even in Thoreau's day, it was a popular picnic and swimming spot, and there were no dangerous wild animals.)
3. Thoreau was essentially a loafer. (No, Thoreau raised beans, did odd jobs, and did surveying to support himself. At the pond he also pursued an active schedule of nature study. When he lived with his parents he paid rent and worked in the pencil factory.)

**Now, are you ready to escape...to simplify? Read these passages from *Walden* to discover HOW!**

## **Your Reader's Notebook....**

Aphorism is defined as "a concise statement of truth; a maxim; an adage."

Jot down aphorisms here along with page number. I added a couple of my favorites.

**pg. 383** I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

**pg. 383** Our life is frittered away by detail. **pg. 384.** Simplify, simplify.

**pg. 390**

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.

**Keep going....**

**from "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" pg. 382**

On pg. 383 line 33, Thoreau gives us his famous statement of his purpose in going to live by the pond. How is it possible "to live what was not life"? Give examples from people you know or have read about.

**Think about it** and MARK the answer in your book with highlighter or pencil:  
**Lines 30-42:** Thoreau's reasons for moving to woods: To live simply and deliberately; to experience the essence of life.

On p. 383 Line 51 Thoreau complains, "Our life is frittered away by detail." What do you think he means by this? Give examples from your life.

In lines 53-54 and lines 62, Thoreau advises us to "Simplify, simplify" (p. 384). How? **What** does he suggest as a remedy? What modern inventions, new in Thoreau's day, does he question the value of?

What inventions new in your day would you question the value of?

A main **theme** of this chapter is **misplaced priorities**: Americans' preference for material rather than spiritual reality. What does Thoreau mean by the following: pg. 384 Line 68-69: "As for work, we haven't any of any consequence"

**Think about it** and MARK the answer in your book with highlighter or pencil:  
**Lines 80-92:** What situation is he exaggerating? The importance that the average person gives to the daily news. Wow, I really wish I could tune all that out for the next three weeks until election day!

**Think about it** and MARK the answer in your book with highlighter or pencil:  
**Lines 97-99 on pg. 384.** What is the point of Thoreau's joke? The offer of "a penny for your thoughts" is never taken literally. However, the penny-post seems to take the expression literally and charges a penny to deliver the worthless thoughts expressed in many letters.

**\*\*Keep looking for aphorisms!**

**Think about it** and MARK in your book with highlighter or pencil: Lines 112-126 on pg. 385-386: What does Thoreau say he wants to spend his time trying to understand? How does he feel he can find some of the answers he seeks? He wants to spend his time figuring out the “secret of things.” He believes he can use his intellect to dig deep into whatever situation he is in to uncover the answers he seeks.

**from “Solitude” (means ALONE!!) pg. 386**

Unfortunately, we don’t get enough of this chapter in this abridged version.

Lines 153-160: According to Thoreau’s comments in this full chapter, loneliness has nothing to do with physical separation from other people. What separates people is spiritual distance.

Reading this brief passage helps the reader see that Thoreau feels part of nature, and he delights in all of his sensations.

**from “The Pond in Winter” pg. 387**

This FULL chapter on the pond must be read symbolically to be fully appreciated. The pond is presented as **an analogy to the human condition**.

Identify the **figurative language** used in lines 172-178. What **comparison** is being made here (see the words parlor, windows, floor)? There is also some personification here!

What does Thoreau learn from digging under the ice of the frozen pond?  
To **SIMPLIFY** this for you: Thoreau learns that LIFE GOES ON beneath the ice! The fish aren’t disturbed by the storms of winter. Thoreau sees this as a model of HEAVENLY BLISS!!

**\*\*Keep looking for aphorisms!**

**from “Spring” pg. 388**

\*\*The coming of winter AND spring affect Thoreau. He seems to find beauty in the details of both seasons. He seems fascinated and comfortable in both seasons.

For this brief chapter, jot down a few examples of IMAGERY that appeal to the senses.

Example:

1. honeycombed ice—looks like the structure built by bees to store honey and house their offspring.

2.

3.

4.

Read the 2nd full paragraph of Spring. Note the **pairs of opposites** that Thoreau contrasts in order to heighten the drama of the coming of spring. Fill in the blanks:

from “storm and winter” to “\_\_\_\_\_”

from “dark and sluggish hours to “\_\_\_\_\_”

contrasts “clouds of winter” to “\_\_\_\_\_ of light”

from “cold gray ice” of the pond to “\_\_\_\_\_ pond...full of \_\_\_\_\_.”

**from “Conclusion” pg. 388**—Hey, aren’t conclusions supposed to be short and sweet? This one is lengthy but powerful.

**Think about it** and MARK in your book with highlighter or pencil: Lines 209-215 on pg. 388: Why does Thoreau leave the woods? He had more \_\_\_\_\_to live! He implies here that continuing to live in the woods could become as empty and routine as living in society.

**\*\*Keep looking for aphorisms!**

**Think about lines 220-223.** What is Thoreau comparing here? How does he want to live his life? He is comparing life to a \_\_\_\_\_ voyage. He does not want to live his life like a passive “passenger” shut up below decks. He prefers to live like a member of the \_\_\_\_\_, out on “the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_” (line 222) and close to nature.

**Mark lines 225-227.** This is a famous Thoreau thesis—Go confidently in the direction of your dreams!

**Mark line 235: “If you have built castles.....should be.”** What does Thoreau mean here?

**Mark lines 239-242,** described in your margin notes as one of the most famous passages in Thoreau’s writing. Look under the O Pioneers poster at THIS framed quote that I have had since I started teaching!! This passage so echoes Emerson’s philosophy (Transcendental philosophy) about being an individual or nonconformist—living your life according to internal incentives rather than bowing to external pressures.

Take a moment to reflect please: How do YOU march to the beat of a different drummer?

Now, let’s get back to a little more analysis...

Read lines 250-275 on pg. 390

**In lines 255-260,** Thoreau draws similarities between poverty and wealth. He says that rich and poor alike can receive the same pleasures and lessons from nature. He also suggests that poverty can be a blessing—that it gives people a certain ability to accept hardship.

**Look at line 264.** “Cultivate poverty like a \_\_\_\_\_, like sage.” Poverty usually has a negative association but here Thoreau suggests that people should cultivate poverty as they would a plant in their garden. He considers poverty an alternative to being trapped in a materialistic world.

After reading these 25 lines (250-275), try answering these 2 questions:

1 What would the world look like if everyone took Thoreau's advice? Would people be happier, less resentful, kinder, wiser OR would they just be poorer and have less freedom?

2. Do you think Thoreau's depiction of poverty is realistic? Are the poor really more independent than the rich? If you are poor, would you even have time for contemplation?

Now keep reading on to page 391. **Mark Lines** 290-293 "No man...soul..."

Here is Thoreau's explanation about why money is not important!

He believes that truth and the inner meaning of life are available to the rich and poor alike. The poor might have an advantage in finding them, however, since they are freed from the distractions that wealth brings.

**Mark the simile** in line 294 and explain it here in a sentence or two:

Now look at the **Parable of the Bug** in lines 299-317. What is the message of this famous parable about the "strong and beautiful bug"? The words resurrection and immortality are key words to address in your response.

**Mark the last 2 lines** (321-322)

Discuss how that passage suggests the possibility of a favorable future:

**Whew! You made it!** Thoreau would tell you that the **most valuable lesson** he learned from his experience of living in the woods was that **one CAN live a full life without material possessions.**

Finally, go back to the homework page. Click on the link to a REAL-WORLD application of Thoreau's philosophy! You'll read about a concept that is growing in popularity!