



Overview

Thoreau’s hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, often called the “birthplace of freedom” in the United States, was also a gathering place for passionate abolitionists. These activists condemned the hypocrisy of a government that celebrated freedom and liberty while enslaving millions of Black people and making war against Mexico to expand its slave territories. This remote-learning-friendly lesson plan explores the nature of informed civic action from Thoreau’s time to the present day. Supporting the 15-30 minute gameplay experience are a set of modular lessons that will extend and deepen students’ reading of his essay Civil Disobedience, and the nature of becoming an engaged participant in society.

Essential Question

- How can we engage in civic action that is authentic, responsible, and informed?

Enduring Understanding

- Henry David Thoreau and his contemporaries show us some ways in which we can take action to fight back against systems of oppression, such as slavery. We can all take our own actions, as Thoreau wrote in Civil Disobedience, to “let our lives be a counter-friction to stop the machine.”

C3 FRAMEWORK ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

D2.Civ.10.9-12.

Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

Also addresses [Educating American Democracy Design Challenge 1: Motivating Agency, Sustaining the Republic](#).

Subjects

Social Studies, Civics, and History

Gameplay Time

15-30 minutes with six options for related activities

Activity Time

Six activities ranging from 20-60 minutes each

Cost: Free

Age Range: 14-18

Languages

English. The game is also available with Spanish and French subtitles.

Materials

- Web-based game module <https://www.waldengame.com/play-civil-disobedience>
- Curriculum materials included in this PDF
- Related materials mentioned **in bold** are in the appendix at the end of this document

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the meaning of freedom in our society.
- Identify issues and civic action around slavery and abolitionism leading up to the Civil War.
- Compare and contrast writings about abolitionism and civic responsibility by Thoreau and contemporary authors.
- Evaluate ways in which people can take civic action around issues that matter to them.
- Create their own activist campaigns for issues that matter to them.



Warm-Up Activity (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

Are you free? Are those around you free?

Objectives

Students will analyze the meaning of freedom, their own level of freedom, and the freedom of those around them.

Activity Time

30 minutes

Materials

- [Worksheet: “Free/Unfree”](#) (which serves as the exit ticket)
- [List of Inquiry Questions](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Teachers will post questions from the *List of Inquiry Questions* on the classroom wall (or, if this lesson is virtual, on an online collaborative tool like [Padlet](#)). Students will go around and respond to questions using words or pictures.

Lesson Prompts

Students will discuss their answers to the Inquiry Questions. They will also critically examine the following Henry David Thoreau quote:

“When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is that fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.”

Exit Ticket

Students will fill out the “Free/Unfree” worksheet, answering the questions: How are you free? How are you unfree? What about the grey areas?

Ours is the Invading Army

It’s very clear from the quote in the lesson prompt that Thoreau is talking about American slavery. It may not be equally clear to students that the foreign army he is talking about is the American army and its invasion of Mexico in 1846-1848, which resulted in Mexican territories such as California and Arizona being absorbed into the U.S.

This conflict upset the intricate balance between American states over the question of slavery. In these conquered territories, slavery took many forms, official and unofficial, and included the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act in areas as far away as California before it officially became a state in 1850.



Pre-Game Discussion (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

In what ways can we engage with our society to make an impact?

Objectives

Students will identify actions people can take to engage in responsible, authentic civil action.

Students will compare and contrast strategies for civic engagement.

Activity Time

30-40 minutes

Materials

- Abolitionists & more in the 19th century:
[Powerpoint link](#)
[PDF link](#)
- [Worksheet: impact vs. engagement matrix](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Drawing on the examples of issues and actors from the mid-19th century abolitionist movement, students will form their own tactics for authentic civic participation.

Lesson Activity

Teachers can use the provided slide presentation to discuss the context of abolitionism and protests against slavery in the U.S. in the 1840s and 1850s. They will discuss what actions abolitionists took to make an impact on their society.

Then, students will partner up and complete the impact vs. engagement worksheet. There is a list of tactics/actions on the second page, and students will plot them on the matrix defining the range of impact vs engagement.

Exit Ticket

Students will think of 2-3 activities (of any level of engagement) that can have an impact on society. These must be *new & distinct from the activities listed on the worksheet!*



Playing the Game (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What were the defining issues around slavery, abolitionism, and expansionism facing the United States in the 1840s and 1850s?

Objectives

Students will discover events and issues around slavery, abolitionism, and expansionism facing the United States in the leadup to the Civil War. They will roleplay as an engaged citizen in Concord, Massachusetts, and analyze and react to choices facing society at the time.

Activity Time

30 minutes

Materials

- *Walden, a game* Civil Disobedience module
<https://www.waldengame.com/play-civil-disobedience>
- [Game characters of Concord](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The game takes place in an immersive version of Concord, Massachusetts on July 4th in the mid-19th century. The explorable 3D simulation offers choices and activities to draw students into the issues.

Lesson Prompt

- Students will play the Civil Disobedience module (30 minutes).
 - ▷ If students are playing in pairs or groups, they are encouraged to discuss their choices and thoughts about the game out loud with each other while the teacher circulates and checks in with each group.

- In the game, they will:
 - ▷ Discover the issues by finding and reading posters, newspapers and articles.
 - ▷ Find passages from Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* by gathering arrowheads.
 - ▷ Discuss the issues by interacting with townspeople on the questions they face and choosing whether to publish an article about “Slavery in Massachusetts”.
 - ▷ Take personal action by choosing whether or not to attend a rally, sign a petition, or purchase free produce.
 - ▷ Become an activist by protesting unjust laws -- refusing to pay taxes, aiding fugitives on the Underground Railroad.
- At the end of the module, students will be shown a recap screen reviewing their choices in the game. Their in-game journal will include the passages from Thoreau’s writings that students found during play.

Exit Ticket

The journal has blank space for students to reflect on each passage from *Civil Disobedience* by adding their own journal entries. This exit ticket will be useful for the next lesson.



Reading and Responding to Texts (Part 1) (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What can we learn about our society and civil engagement from the actions that Henry David Thoreau and his contemporaries took with regards to abolition?

Objectives

Students will identify concrete actions that Thoreau and his contemporaries took to fight against slavery, using arrowheads found in the game.

Students will critically examine abolition, especially in the 19th century.

Students will apply and analyze Thoreau's quotes to the greater context of 19th century abolitionism.

Activity Time

30-45 minutes

Materials

- [Worksheet on abolition](#)
- [For teachers: helpful information on teaching abolition](#)
- [Excerpts from *Civil Disobedience*](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Journal prompt: Spend 5 minutes writing about what *specific* things you noticed from the game with regards to slavery and abolition. What effects, attitudes, or otherwise evidence can you find of slavery in the

United States? How did this make you feel?

Lesson Prompt

The class will first discuss *abolition* as led by the teacher: what does it mean as a political concept, and how is it done in practice? Then, students will get into pairs to discuss their journal prompts together. From there, each pair will collect 3 quotes from Thoreau, represented by the arrowheads in the game, that reflect Thoreau's attitudes on slavery and abolition. Each pair will complete the abolition worksheet to help with their exit ticket.

Exit Ticket

Each pair will present to the greater class on their selected quotes, using the worksheet to guide their points. Students must explain *what* each quote means, *why* it's significant within the great context of the 19th-century abolitionist movement, and discuss the ways in which Thoreau and his contemporaries practiced abolitionism.



Reading and Responding to Texts (Part 2) (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What can the members of our society learn about civil engagement from the actions that abolitionists -- past and present -- have taken?

Objectives

Students will analyze modern-day abolitionists, and specific actions they are taking toward abolition of long-term effects of slavery, such as the prison industry and police state.

Students will evaluate how abolition & civic engagement is relevant today.

Activity Time

30-60+ minutes (depending on documentary-watching time)

Materials

- Contemporary Abolitionists:
[Powerpoint Link](#)
[PDF Link](#)
- [Worksheet: Compare & Contrast](#)
- [Ava Duvernay's documentary 13TH](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Journal Prompt: What's something you would work to abolish in the present day? How would you go about doing it?

Lesson Prompt

Students will watch parts of Ava Duvernay's documentary *13TH*. Then, students will discuss contemporary abolitionists and the work that is being done to dismantle the ongoing effects of slavery's legacy, such as the prison-industrial complex and the police state. Students will fill out the compare/contrast worksheet in order to analyze the similarities and differences between Thoreau's writing and the work of contemporary abolitionists.

Exit Ticket

Think back to the warmup lesson on being free/unfree. How does the legacy of slavery affect you personally? *(Students will not share their answers, this is a private journal.)*



Engagement and Action (Summative Assignment)

(REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

How can we take action around a social issue that is important to us?

Objectives

Students will apply their knowledge of abolitionism to the contemporary world. They will create a campaign that educates and informs their community on an issue.

Students will take specific actions around that social issue.

Activity Time

Can be as short as 30 minutes, or a multiple-day final project

Materials

- Dependent on the nature of the lesson (ie. remote or in-person) and what is possible for each team!

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Journal: What is a social issue that is important to you? How does it affect your personal life? Examples: immigration, prison-industrial complex, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and so on.

Summative Assessment Prompt

- Students will be grouped according to the social issues that are important to them, in teams of no more than 4 people. Using valid news sources, photos and other media, teams will research and brainstorm around the issue that they have chosen. They will use these sources to create a “campaign” to inform the rest of the class. This can take the form of a poster, podcast, social media video, newspaper, zine, or other media. They should have evidence to support their claims.
- Teams will present their campaigns to the class for discussion. Outcomes of the discussion should be calls to action that the class can decide to take, if they are convinced by the campaign. These can be in-class actions, or, if safe and within school appropriate guidelines, actions outside of class.

Valid News Sources

It is crucial to know how to identify what is “fake news”, and what is a valid source of information in this day and age. Use the following steps to help critically examine the sources of your information, as you do research for this project. (Read more here: <https://www.factcheck.org/2016/11/how-to-spot-fake-news/>)

1. Consider the source.
2. Read beyond the headline.
3. Check the author.
4. What's the support?
5. Check the date.
6. Is this some kind of joke? (ie. Is this satire?)
7. Check your biases.
8. Consult the experts.



Appendix: Related Materials

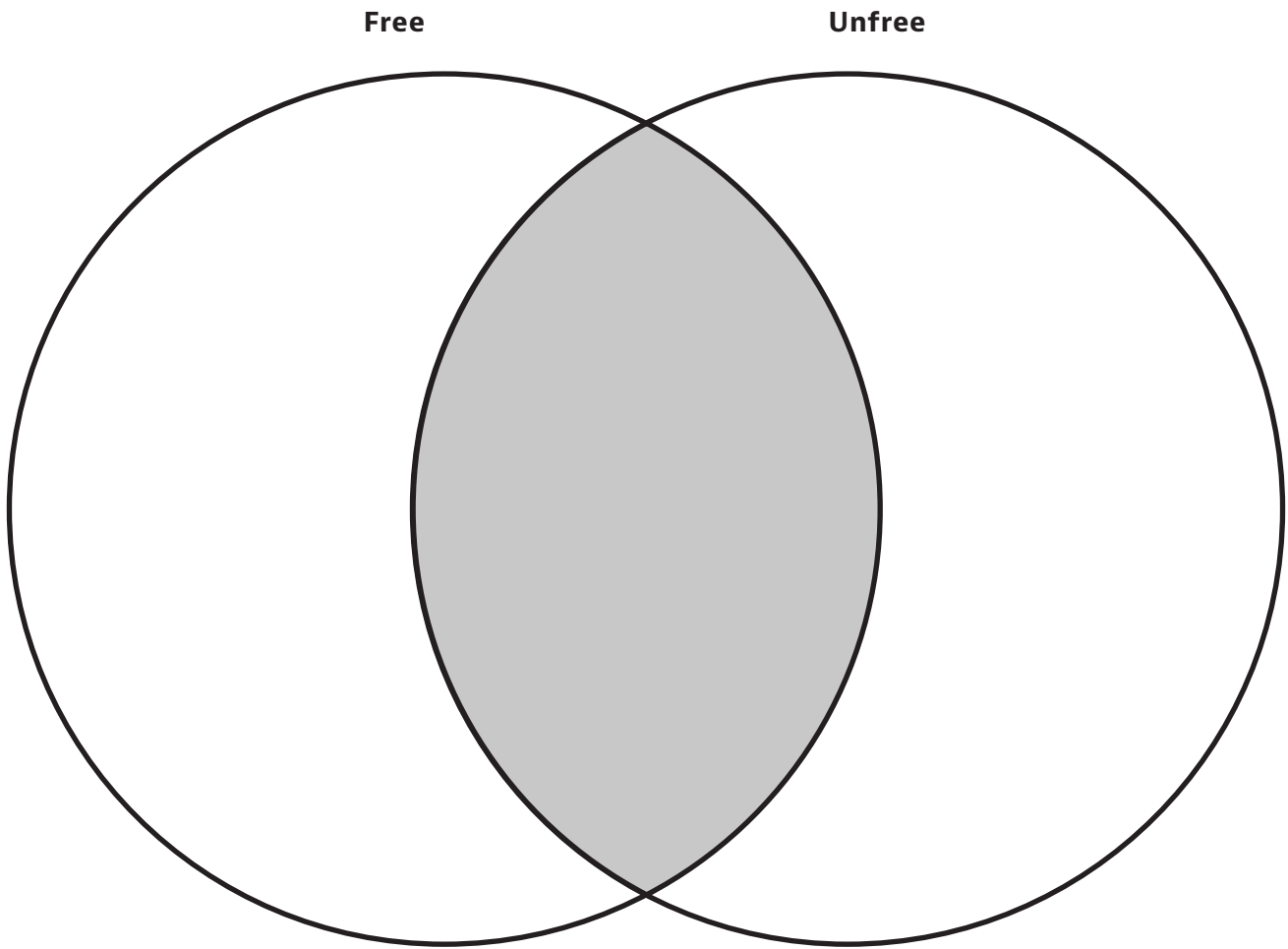
Free / Unfree Graphic Organizer

Civil Disobedience

Name _____

Date _____

How are you free? How are you unfree? What about the grey areas?





Appendix: Related Materials

List of Inquiry Questions (Teacher Support)

1. What is freedom? What does it mean to be free?
2. What is the opposite of freedom?
3. Can we be free and not free at the same time? How?
4. What role does the government play in our freedom and lack of freedom?
5. What role do social structures like communities play in our freedom or sense of freedom?



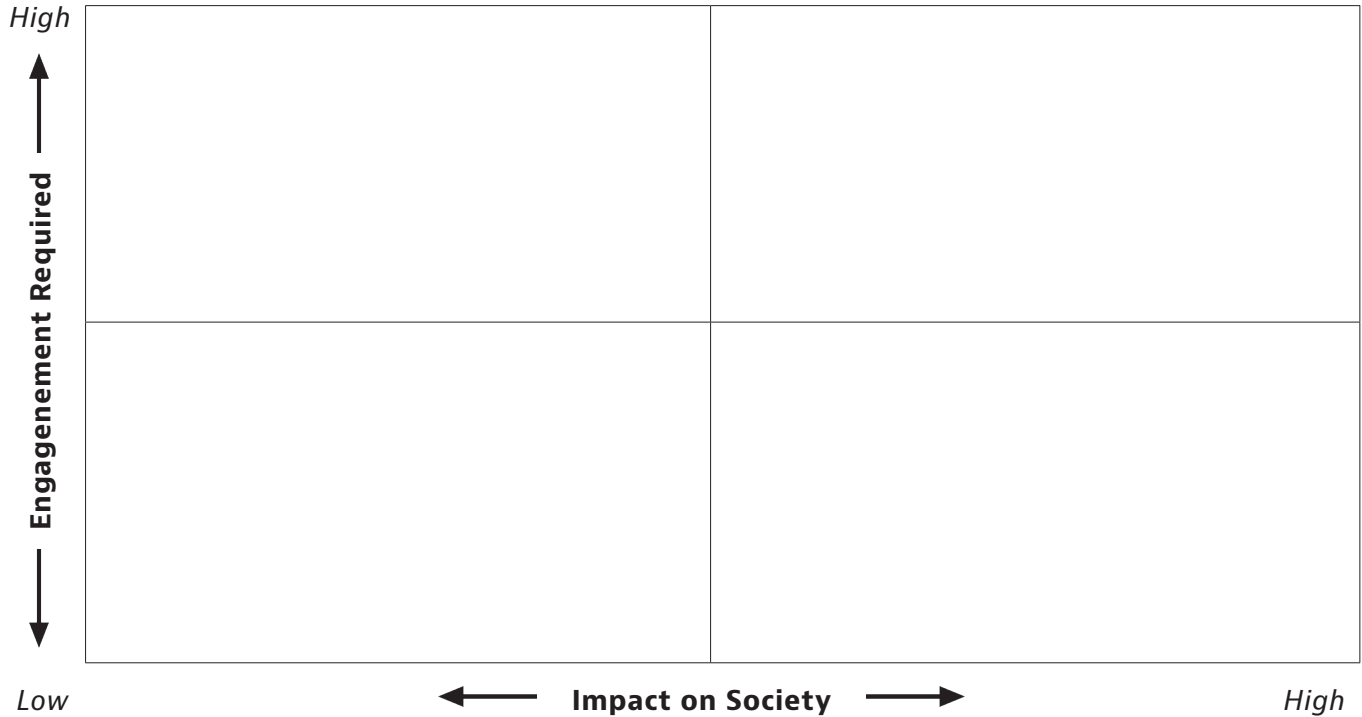
Appendix: Related Materials

Impact x Engagement

Civil Disobedience

Name _____

Date _____



- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1. Provide mutual aid | 8. Vote |
| 2. Write an essay/speech | 9. Campaign for an issue or candidate |
| 3. Click “like” on a cause you care about on social media | 10. Put up bumper stickers/lawn signs |
| 4. Read valid news | 11. Go to a march |
| 5. Talk with family members | 12. Make a political meme |
| 6. Protest with a dedicated group | 13. Refuse to pay taxes (like Thoreau) |
| 7. Community organizing | |



Appendix: Related Materials

Abolition & Henry David Thoreau (Teacher Support)

Define **abolition** for the class.

- Definition (from Cambridge dictionary): the act of ending an activity or custom officially, eg:
 - ▷ The reforms that followed led to the abolition of the monarchy.
 - ▷ He fought for abolition of the death penalty in Britain.
 - ▷ The abolition of slavery in the United States was a historic moment.
 - ▷ We advocate the abolition of all nuclear weapons.
- Definition (from [Reina Sultan and Micah Herskind at Princeton](#)): “Ultimately, *abolition is a verb, a practice*. It consists of the actions we take to build safety and to tear down harmful institutions.”
- What actions constitute abolition?
 - ▷ Could be legal, eg. Emancipation Proclamation
 - ▷ Writing essays
 - ▷ Giving speeches
 - ▷ Mutual aid
 - ▷ Protesting (e.g. not paying taxes, going to jail)

Discussion:

- Was Thoreau an abolitionist?
- Does anybody know about other abolitionists at that time (ie. 19th century)?
 - ▷ Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass are popular names.
- ***Important callout:** The truth is, Thoreau’s work was only possible because of the work of Black abolitionists who came before (and after) him. In the next lesson, we will take a look at some of these writers & thinkers -- these are the people who did the work to make the formal institution of slavery *illegal*, long before Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862.



Appendix: Related Materials

Abolition & Henry David Thoreau

Civil Disobedience

Name _____

Date _____

1. In your own words, describe what “abolition” means:

2. With your partner, choose 3 arrowheads that resonate with you:

A.
B.
C.

3. In your own words, explain what Thoreau is trying to say about individual and community responsibilities, government accountability, slavery, and abolitionism. What actions is he advocating for in each quote? Why is this significant?

A.
B.
C.

4. In summary, what are the ways that Henry David Thoreau and his contemporaries practiced abolitionism (ie. of slavery)? (Think about examples of choices you made in the game.)



Appendix: Related Materials

Compare and Contrast: Thoreau & Contemporary Abolitionists

Civil Disobedience

Name _____

Date _____

If necessary, take out your worksheet on Henry David Thoreau & abolition from the last lesson.

1. Think of the present-day abolitionists we talked about. List what kinds of actions they take to abolish harmful institutions:

2. Choose a quote from one of our present-day abolitionists. Write it down here:

Use the compare/contrast graphic on the next this page to identify similarities and differences between your chosen quote, and the writing of Henry David Thoreau. For example: **WHAT** are they talking about? **HOW** are they advocating to do it? What **ACTIONS** are they taking?



Appendix: Related Materials

Compare and Contrast: Thoreau & Contemporary Abolitionists

Civil Disobedience

Name _____

Date _____

