



Overview

Henry David Thoreau went down to Walden Pond in 1845 to live simply in nature. In this game-based learning experience, students take on the role of Thoreau as they attend to his basic needs of life in the woods for one day of his time there. This remote-learning-friendly lesson plan explores the nature of Thoreau’s thoughts on self-reliant living as well as his critique of the materialist culture he saw developing in early industrial society in America. Supporting the 15-30 minute gameplay experience are a set of modular lessons that will extend and deepen students’ reading of the text and understanding of Thoreau’s experiment in simple, self-reliant living.

Essential Question

- What is a basic need and what is a luxury?

Enduring Understanding

- What becomes possible when we simplify our lives and free ourselves from materialism?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

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.

Subjects

English–Language Arts and Social Studies

Gameplay Time

15-30 minutes with five options for related activities

Activity Time

Five 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-selfreliance>
- 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:

- Identify Henry David Thoreau and his book, *Walden*.
- Analyze key themes in the first 2 chapters of the book: self-reliance & critiquing materialism.
- Compare and contrast Thoreau’s life at Walden Pond to their own lives.
- Imagine their own experiment in self-reliance and freedom from materialism.
- Compare and contrast this experiment to Thoreau’s.

Warm-Up Activity (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

You are going to the woods. What will you bring?

Objectives

Students will be able to rank items based on importance to their survival, physically, and for their well-being.

Activity Time

20 minutes

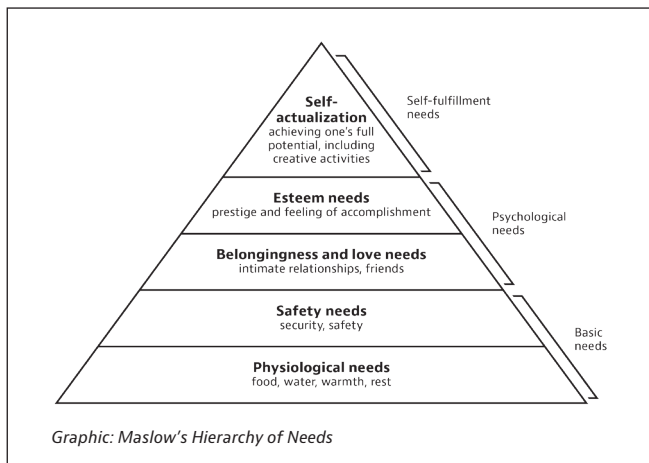
Materials

- 20 items from the printable Survival Game cards: https://www.waldengame.com/s/Walden_Edu_Survival_Game_Cards.pdf
- Note that printing is optional, with a digital-only game play option available. Cards are formatted to be printed on Avery Cardstock (<https://www.avery.com/products/cards/5371>) or on 8.5 by 11 paper to be cut out.
- Alternatively, professionally printed decks of the survival cards can be purchased here: <https://www.thegamecrafter.com/games/walden-a-game-edu:-survival-cards>
- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [graphic](#).

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Teachers should present the following game, in person or over a synchronous remote learning platform:



“You are going to the woods to live ‘off-the-grid’ for a few days. What do you bring? What will you need the most to survive? Look at the deck of cards with items on them. Pretending you are packing, sort these items into 3 different piles in front of you: 1) things you definitely will need, 2) things you might need, and 3) things you won’t need. Important: you can only ‘pack’ three things in your ‘definitely will need’ pile, so choose wisely!” This can be an individual activity, but it could also work as a pair-share exercise leading to a class discussion. If you don’t have a printer, write your three lists down on paper. The teacher might want to frame the discussion in terms of identifying food, fuel, shelter, tools, etc. There is one “wild card” in the deck for students to propose an item themselves.

Lesson Prompts

- Introduce Thoreau’s idea of living simply in nature. What is a “basic need” versus a “luxury” if we are living simply?
- Display **graphic** of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and discuss the concepts of “basic needs” vs. “psychological” and “self-fulfillment” needs. Of the items students chose, what type of needs do they fulfill?
- Ask students: Are our human needs really a hierarchy? How would you add to the needs in Maslow’s diagram?
- Discuss mental well-being, but not deeper than identifying, as this is addressed in a subsequent mindfulness lesson.

Exit Ticket

Imagine you find out you have space to bring one more item to the woods with you. Select one more item from that could be considered part of the higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy, and add it to your pile of things you will bring.

Assessments

Student generated piles/lists of items, whole-class discussion, and updated piles/lists at the end, whole-class discussion, individual exit ticket responses.



Pre-Game Discussion (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What does it mean to “go to the woods”? Why would we do this and what can we learn from it? Who gets to do this?

Objectives

Students will be able to critically analyze Thoreau’s intent in going to the woods, as well as his cultural assumptions about nature and self-reliance, and their own.

Lesson and Activity Time

20 minutes

Materials

- Intro video to *Walden, a game*
https://youtu.be/A_Un-g_5cII
- Spanish subtitles: <https://youtu.be/iwyoAJUZ290>
- French subtitles: <https://youtu.be/ME2uNQsqAU8>

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The teacher will play the *Walden, a game* intro video from the website, projecting it on an overhead projector or a synchronous video screen share. Then they will provide a quick introduction to who Thoreau was; for example, they could say “Henry David Thoreau was

a philosopher who lived in Massachusetts in the mid 1800s, at a time when the United States had recently gone through a period of rapid industrialization. In this context, Thoreau was trying to figure out how to live a simple, non-materialist life, so he went to the woods and lived in a cabin that he built himself, on land owned by his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. While he was there, he wrote the beginnings of his famous book *Walden, or life in the Woods*, which this game is based on. He also began to resist the government and support the abolitionist struggle against slavery.”

Class Discussion

In pairs or small groups, students will discuss how they would feel if they were to go live in the woods like Thoreau. Volunteers will share with the class. Based on student responses, the teacher will lead a 10-15 minute discussion about students’ perceptions of nature and self-reliance, comparing and contrasting these to Thoreau’s. Teachers will need to differentiate this discussion and make it culturally relevant in their own settings, in response to issues students raise. The boxes on this page include some suggestions for how to do that.

Don’t worry, there won’t be any jump-scares

For students who may not be familiar with the outdoors, popular media might shape their perceptions of the game they are about to play. It is important to let them know that the woods Thoreau was in were not full of zombies, hostile humans, or dangerous beasts. In the game, no one is trying to kill you, and you don’t need to shoot anyone. The module students will play today takes place mostly during daylight hours so students can see what they are doing.

Black histories of self-reliance

Popular media often portrays the woods as dangerous places for Black people, and this relates to very real concerns about white supremacist violence in rural areas in the U.S. Black students might be considering this history as they evaluate the game. Historically, violence has been used to keep Black people from forming their own relationships to the land and to indigenous people living there, out of fear they might organize self-reliant communities with the power to challenge institutional racism. Despite the violence they have faced, Black people have formed projects of communal self-reliance, from the maroon communities that escaped slavery to live in the swamps to the Republic of New Afrika land projects in the 1960s. Teachers might want to encourage students to research these histories in contrast to Thoreau’s experience of nature.



Playing the Game (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What do you need to survive? What do you need to thrive?

Objectives

Students will take on the role of Thoreau in his experiment with self-reliant living.

Students will be able to reflect on the themes of self-reliance and freedom from materialism, the two main themes in the first two chapters of the book *Walden*: “Economy” and “Where I lived and What I lived For”.

Lesson and Activity Time

30 minutes

Materials

- *Walden, a game* Self-Reliance module
<https://www.waldengame.com/play-selfreliance>

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The game itself is an immersive environment that provides a hook to draw students into playing the role of Thoreau.

Lesson Prompt

- Students will play the Self-Reliance module (30 minutes).
 - ▷ If they are playing in pairs or groups, the teacher can encourage them 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, students will:
 - ▷ Gather life essentials: food, fuel, shelter, clothing
 - ▷ Explore the woods, and interact with plants and animals
 - ▷ Discover passages from Thoreau’s writings by gathering arrowheads

- At the end of the module, students will be shown a recap screen reviewing how they survived in the woods. The screen will allow them to save and print their in-game journal. The journal will include the passages students found (all of them are excerpts from *Walden* about self-reliance and critiques of materialism). It also includes records of their interactions with objects, and quotes about the tasks they completed

Exit Ticket

The journal has blank space for students to reflect on each passage by adding their own journal entries.

Assessments

In-game journal. Written reflection student adds to journal.

Is total self-reliance an American myth?

It is different to choose to go to the woods vs. to go there out of necessity. Thoreau went to practice sustainability, not to prep for the apocalypse. He was living on his mentor’s land, near his parents’ house, and his mother helped do his laundry. His sister, Sophia, visited him regularly, as did other friends. Thoreau was living in the woods in order to simplify his life, but he says himself that he was not a hermit. We all rely on someone. The discussion could include discussion of the privilege Thoreau had that allowed him to choose to live in the woods.



Reading and Responding to Texts from *Walden*

(REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

What did Thoreau write about his experiment in the woods? Why should we care about his ideas around self-reliance and his critique of materialism?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze Thoreau’s historical/cultural context
- Identify and summarize what Thoreau means by basic needs and luxuries
- Analyze how Thoreau constructs his arguments around self-reliance and his critique of materialism
- Connect Thoreau’s ideas to their own lives and historical moment

Lesson and Activity Time

45-60 minutes

Materials

The downloadable materials and printable **packet** included in the appendix of this document includes:

- 15 short primary source selections from the *Walden* book related to themes of self-reliance and Thoreau’s critique of consumerism and the full text of the first two chapters of *Walden* with these selections highlighted in the context of the larger text.
- Excerpts: https://www.waldengame.com/s/Walden_Edu_Self-Reliance_Excerpts.pdf
- Walden Chapters 1 and 2: https://www.waldengame.com/s/Walden_Chapters_1_2.pdf
- A reading comprehension [worksheet](#)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

In 1-2 sentences, write how Thoreau’s ideas of self-reliance and critique of materialism might relate to your life.

Lesson Prompt

Students will read the excerpts, and annotate/mark up the texts with notes, underlining or highlighting things that interest them, etc. This could be done individually, in groups, or as a whole class. It could be a permeable textual discussion, using the reading comprehension materials as a guide. Students who finish early could be encouraged to read more of the first two chapters of *Walden*, looking for other examples of Thoreau’s thoughts on self-reliance and his critique of consumerism.

Exit Ticket

Revisit the lesson hook question, now supported with textual evidence:

- What did Thoreau write about his experiment in the woods?
- Why should we care about his ideas around self-reliance and his critique of materialism?

Assessments

Students’ answers to the reading comprehension questions could be a formative assessment to gauge how prepared they are for the summative final project. They should be encouraged to keep their responses, with peer or teacher feedback, to reference as they work on that project.



Summative Final Project (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

You've explored Thoreau's experiment in living self-reliantly. Now see if you can do your own.

Objectives

Students will synthesize what they learned during this lesson and will create a final project that applies to their lives.

Lesson and Activity Time

2-5 days outside class

Materials

- An [assignment sheet](#) and [rubric](#) for assessing the project is included in the appendix and should be passed out to students before they begin.

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Teachers will pose this prompt for discussion in person or over a remote learning platform: “If you were to launch a playful experiment in simple, self-reliant living today, what challenges would you give yourself? What aspects of modern life would you free yourself from? What would you consider essential?”

Lesson Prompt

Students will create an essay, slide presentation, or creative project (video log, game, etc.) addressing the question just posed. In their response they will quote and respond to at least one of the excerpts from *Walden* from the game module and/or reading packet. Students are encouraged to consult their printed game journal reflections as they work on this project. Teachers can pass out the [assignment sheet](#) and [rubric](#) to help guide students in their work. Teachers could give students time in class to work on this, especially the writing components, through writers' workshops, one-on-one coaching, peer feedback, etc.

Exit Ticket

Students will turn in final projects for feedback.

Post-Lesson Activity (REMOTE-FRIENDLY WITH OPTIONAL IN-PERSON ACTIVITIES)

How do the things we leave behind tell a story? What will you leave behind?

Objectives

Students will analyze primary sources from a text.

Students will create primary source materials to tell a narrative about themselves.

Lesson and Activity Time

40 minutes

Materials

- **List of excerpts** from in-game arrowheads that will serve as a [mentor text](#) for students to make theirs.

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Is Instagram an artifact that represents you? Or TikTok?

Lesson Prompts

Teachers will present these prompts to students:

- “Today you will write down five original quotes about your life, one quote per slip of paper. The quotes should connect in some way (you may number them, if you want). Write your initials on the back of each. Next, you will put each slip of paper into a [plastic egg shell](#) (or similar small vessel). Your classmates may search for your quotes, so don’t get too personal! You may refer to the **list of excerpts** from the game to help guide you.” (For remote learning, messages may be shared in an online Document.)
- “Before we begin, why are we using plastic egg shells but not arrowheads, like from the game and the book?” Discuss the context of [cultural appropriation](#); how does it affect Native American communities? Use this website: <https://native-land.ca> After a brief discussion, students write their quotes and place them in the plastic egg shells.

Exit Ticket

Refer back to the **list of excerpts** from the game. Which of Thoreau’s was your favorite? Why?

Assessments

Whole class discussion responses. Individual shared quotes and exit ticket responses.

Artifacts left by the Pennacook, Nipmuc, and Massachusetts Indigenous Peoples

Thoreau collected arrowheads that were left there by these nations before they were harmed by disease, war, and colonization. Thoreau was critical of the colonial society that his community was building on their land, but his desire to collect their arrowheads is also an attempt to mine and claim their legacy, something students can be encouraged to think critically about in this lesson. The module *Where I Lived* will deepen this critique.



Appendix: Related Materials

Reading Comprehension Questions

Self-Reliance Lesson

Name _____

Date _____

1. List three things you read about Thoreau’s life and social context that you saw reflected in the game.

A.
B.
C.

2. List two ways that Thoreau’s context is similar to your own and two ways it is different.

SIMILAR	DIFFERENT
A.	A.
B.	B.

3. What does Thoreau mean by “necessary of life”? Please summarize in your own words.

4. What might he consider a luxury or “so-called comforts” of life? Why does he think it is a luxury?



Appendix: Related Materials

Reading Comprehension Questions *(cont.)*

Self-Reliance Lesson

Name _____

Date _____

5. What does Thoreau think happens to people when they focus too much on securing luxuries and comforts in life? What are some ways you see this happening today?

6. Identify a passage where Thoreau is being ironic: where he means something different than what he actually says. What does he say? What does he really mean?

7. Summarize Thoreau’s overall argument based on what you read in these texts. At the beginning of this lesson we looked at Maslow’s model of human needs. Based on these passages, summarize Thoreau’s model of human needs.



Appendix: Related Materials

Final Project Assignment Sheet and Rubric

Self-Reliance Lesson

Name _____

Date _____

You've explored Thoreau's experiment in living deliberately. Now see if you can do your own experiment.

For your final project, you will create an essay, slide presentation, or creative project (video log, game, etc.) addressing the following question. In your response, please quote and respond to at least one of the passages from *Walden* found in the game and/or reading packet. Please consult your printed game journal reflections to help you work on this.

Question: If you were to launch a playful experiment in simple, self-reliant living today, what challenges would you give yourself? What aspects of material culture would you free yourself from? What would you consider essential? Compare and contrast your experiment to Thoreau's.

The project will be assessed with the rubric on the back of this page.



Appendix: Related Materials

Final Project Assignment Sheet and Rubric

Self-Reliance Lesson

Name _____

Date _____

IN THE FINAL PROJECT, THE STUDENT DOES THE FOLLOWING:	MEETS EXPECTATIONS	APPROACHES EXPECTATIONS	DOES NOT MEET EXPECTATIONS
Includes and analyzes evidence from the texts	Includes and analyzes evidence from the game and/or the readings and connects them clearly to student's own experiment	Includes evidence from the game and/or the readings and connects them clearly to student's own experiment	Does not include evidence, or includes it but does not connect it to the student's own experiment
Reflects on student's own experiences and/or other media and literature	Shows a thoughtful reflection on student's own experiences; chosen experiences are relevant to the topic, and the student clearly compares or contrasts them to the themes of <i>Walden</i>	Shows a thoughtful reflection on student's own experiences; chosen experiences are important, but may not be clearly compared or contrasted to the themes of <i>Walden</i>	Does not include any experiences, or mentions them but does not reflect on them
Analyzes the relationship between self-reliance / living simply and a criticism of material culture	Shows clearly how the challenges the student would choose might make it possible to criticize one or more aspects of material culture, and includes the beginning of such a criticism in the project	The challenges the student chose are personally significant and are communicated clearly, but it is unclear how choosing them might make it possible to criticize one or more aspects of modern society	The challenges the student chose are not communicated clearly, or do not seem personally significant to the student



Appendix: Related Materials

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Self-Reliance Lesson

Name _____

Date _____

