Walden Teaching Guide
Teaching Thoreau’s Book with Confidence

Facts at a Glance

History of the Text

Significant Allusions

Approaches and Discussion Questions

Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching

Alternative Approaches to Teaching Walden

Texts that Go Well with Walden
Significant Allusions

Thoreau uses allusions throughout Walden in part to help establish his authority (which explains why there are more allusions in the first two sections than in many of the others). Much of the time, the allusions offer examples on which to base his argument. These figures’ situations offer a teachable connection to his rationale at a given point. Students can discuss these various allusions to practice presenting evidence and judging its effectiveness.

**Classical:** Thoreau makes by far the most allusions to classical antiquity. Many are to Homer’s *Iliad*, but the references also extend to other stories, historians, and classical figures. This should remind readers that, though Thoreau’s woods persona and plainspoken tone are relatable, Thoreau himself was well educated and a voracious reader. These allusions can foster discussion about Thoreau’s credibility and its impact on the persuasiveness of his claims.

**Biblical allusions:** For a 19th-century writer, Thoreau makes comparatively few allusions to the Bible. The most direct references, when they do appear, are usually to Adam in the Book of Genesis. This is unsurprising since Adam, too, lives for a time in Eden, a garden that he stewards but does not own, providing multiple points of comparison with Thoreau at Walden Pond.

**Literary:** Thoreau’s references to literary texts go as far back as Chaucer and as contemporary as his friend William Ellery Channing. References to canonical figures including Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton serve to bolster his learnedness and credibility. Other references such as those to William Cowper and William Gilpin show Thoreau reading ideas also influential to British romantics.

**Eastern:** Critics have long noted that Thoreau’s reading of translated touchstones of Asian and Middle Eastern schools of thought made a significant contribution the insights of *Walden*. The many citations of Confucius and other references to texts like the Vedas and *The Bhagavad Gita* are part of how this text challenges conventional ideas in American thinking and gives a more expansive view of humankind. In turn, Thoreau himself has been cited by a number of disparate figures, including Mahatma Gandhi.

**Natural Historians/Travel/Geography:** Categories like “travel” and “nature” writing were not yet fully consolidated in Thoreau’s time, but it’s evident from at least some of these citations how well—in addition to the cultural touchstones of antiquity and his contemporary literature—Thoreau was reading documents of American natural history and the various natural history encounters of anglophone travelers around the world. Like the references to Eastern thought traditions, the geographic reach of Thoreau’s natural history and travel reading help consolidate a planetary element to the book’s argument.
Teaching Approaches

Defying Conventions as Means Toward Good Life: The first and longest section of Walden, “Economy,” provides a rationale for his experiment at Walden Pond. The section as a whole can be productively thought of as a play on the various meanings of “accounting.” Thoreau’s more literal gestures of accounting here—his oddly unliterary-seeming inclusion of cost and income lists—is an extension of his earlier sections renouncing the salaried work he claims makes “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” In other words, Thoreau playfully explores the question of how people account for the lives they lead. Thus, “Economy” is less about dollars and more about efficiently providing for the “vital heat.” Thoreau “avoid[s] all trade and barter” and instead sets off for Walden Pond on the 4th of July (Independence Day).

• For discussion: Depending on how much you can assign to your students as a chunk, “Economy” complements the section immediately following it, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” which has the well-known quotation “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.” These first two sections work well with a discussion or lecture about writing introductions: from lab reports to analytical essays, most papers begin with some gesture of explaining the reason behind a writer’s inquiry.

• For discussion: Ask students to discern Thoreau’s position of the individual toward society in these early chapters. Is Thoreau against living with other people generally, or are there more particular parts of social life that he resists?

Transcendentalism in Practice: Those who read Emerson and Thoreau together typically notice that Emerson emerges as the genteel intellectual, whereas Thoreau gets his hands dirty, putting Transcendental thought into action. Key chapters for thinking about this contrast are “Sounds” and “The Bean-Field.” The opening paragraph of “Sounds” makes some of these points directly: “What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?” Later in “The Bean-Field,” Thoreau writes that he “was determined to know beans”; this is partly a joke (to “know beans” was colloquial for knowing nothing), but in typical Transcendentalist fashion, he is also using his experience cultivating beans to make a wider argument (connecting his actions to a deeper sense of time that entangles Western antiquity with his work on American soil). Readers of Emerson will recognize an overlap of ideas, but Emerson tends to argue based on concepts, whereas Thoreau is able to ground similar questions in his actions at Walden. One concrete way the difference comes across is that Thoreau’s Walden uses second-person appeals (You more than Emerson’s Nature, which instead favors first-person plural we/us).

• For discussion: Consider asking whom students find more relatable. Many readers in the 19th century found Thoreau prickly or abrasive, but his tone may resonate with modern readers more than Emerson’s. Such a conversation (especially if grounded in original reviews or more recent pieces like Kathryn Schulz’s “Why Do We Love Henry David Thoreau?” from The New Yorker) can also promote a conversation about ad hominem/ethos criticism and rhetoric.

The Cosmic Pond: No discussion of this text would be complete without spending time thinking about the importance of Walden Pond to Thoreau’s philosophy. “The Ponds” is a clear focal-point for this conversation. Various readers admire how the exactness of Thoreau’s insights predates later scientific developments, such as in geology (see, for example, Robert M. Thorson’s Walden’s Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science). This section also clearly shows Thoreau’s indebtedness to German naturalist and intellectual Alexander von Humboldt (and other naturalists), whose work Kosmos informs Thoreau’s linking Walden Pond to more expansive scales—especially temporal ones. Point out to students that science and philosophy weren’t always distinct; the split of natural philosophy into philosophy and what is now thought of as “the natural sciences” came about later in the 19th century as education began to tend toward specialization and professionalization.

(continued on next page)
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