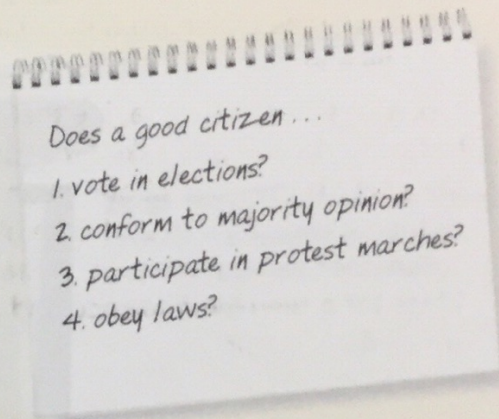


from *Civil Disobedience*

Essay by HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Connect to Your Life

Civic Duty With a small group of classmates, discuss what it means to be a good citizen. Consider the actions listed, and add others to the list. Indicate whether a good citizen would **always**, **usually**, **sometimes**, or **never** perform each action.



Build Background

Nonviolent Resistance Henry David Thoreau put into practice the ideas expressed in Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Thoreau spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax used to finance a government that condoned the institution of slavery and waged war against Mexico. Like many Americans at the time, Thoreau viewed the Mexican War (1846–1848) as a conflict in which a stronger country sought to overpower a weaker one simply to expand its own borders. Inspired by his experience in jail, Thoreau in 1847 published an essay originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government." In this essay, which became popularly known as "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau affirmed individual conscience and advocated nonviolent acts of political resistance to protest government policy.

WORDS TO KNOW

Vocabulary Preview

blunder	flourish
conclude	inexpedient
confront	meditation
conscientious	multitude
endeavor	unscrupulous

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS ESSAY

An **essay** is a short work of nonfiction that deals with a single subject, usually presenting the personal views of the writer. "Civil Disobedience" is a persuasive essay. It presents political ideas that Thoreau hopes his readers will adopt, and at the same time, it reveals much about Thoreau's personality.

ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING ESSAYS

Using these strategies will help you get the most from this essay:

- Keep the **historical context** in mind.
- Use the Guide for Reading alongside the text.
- Keep reading a paragraph even if a sentence stumps you, but read the entire essay more than once.
- Throughout, notice what Thoreau favors and opposes.
- Keep track of the **main ideas** and the **supporting details** that develop them.

READER'S NOTEBOOK One of Thoreau's main ideas in this excerpt is that there are three ways in which citizens serve the state. As you read, identify the three ways on a chart like the one shown. Fill

in examples of each, and mark what Thoreau believes is the best way.

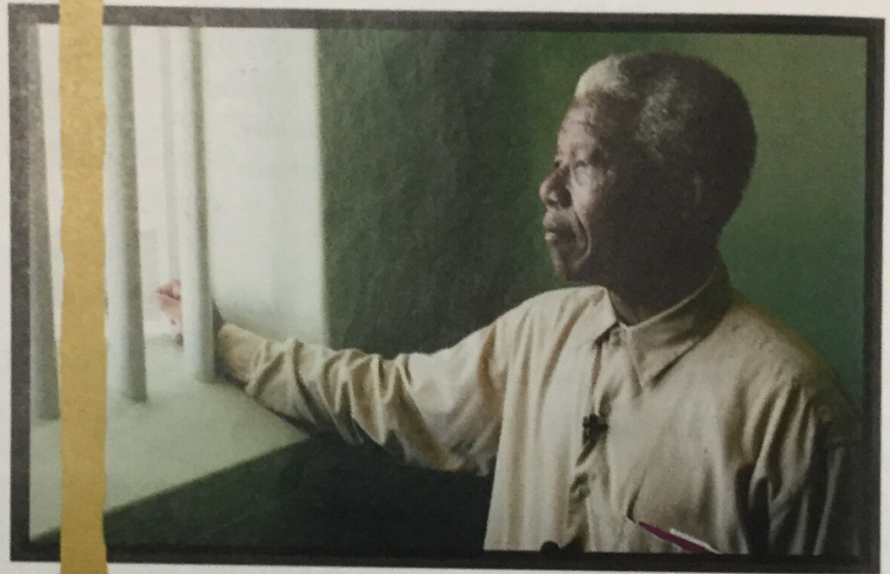
Ways to Serve the State

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____

from

Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau



I heartily accept the motto,
“That government is best
which governs least;” and I should like to see it acted up to
more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts
5 to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which
governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it, that will
be the kind of government which they will have. Government is
at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and
all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections
10 which have been brought against a standing army, and they are
many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be
brought against a standing government. The standing army is
only an arm of the standing government. The government itself,
which is only the mode which the people have chosen to
15 execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted
before the people can act through it. Witness the present
Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using
the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the
people would not have consented to this measure. . . .

Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 27 years by the South African government for his antiapartheid activities, recalls his confinement in this 1994 photo.

GUIDE FOR READING

8 **expedient** (ɪk-spē'dē-ənt): a means to an end.

1-9 How would you restate Thoreau's attitude toward government?

16-17 the present Mexican war: the 1846-1848 war between the United States and Mexico.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

inexpedient (ɪn'ɪk-spē'dē-ənt) adj. not useful for achieving a goal

20 **B**ut, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who
call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once
no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man
make known what kind of government would command his
respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

25 After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in
the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a
long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely
to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority,
but because they are physically the strongest. But a government
30 in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on
justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a
government in which majorities do not virtually decide right
and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only
those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable?
35 Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree,
resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a

29–37 What position does Thoreau take on the conflict between majority rule and individual conscience?

In Tianenmen Square in 1989, Chinese demonstrators support prodemocracy students on a hunger strike.



A young man strapped to logs protests the cutting of California redwoods in 1990.



conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy-Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts—a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniments, though it may be,—

“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.”

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without *intending* it, as God. A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great

42 **corporation**: group.

43 **a whit**: the least bit.

43–45 **What can be the consequences of having too much respect for the law?**

47 **powder-monkeys**: boys with the job of carrying gunpowder to artillery crews.

51 **palpitation** (pǎl'pī-tā'shən): irregular, rapid beating.

54 **magazines**: places where ammunition is stored.

57 **black arts**: witchcraft.

61–64 **“Not a drum . . . we buried”**: the opening lines of “The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna” by the Irish poet Charles Wolfe.

65–82 **Which way of serving the state does Thoreau approve of? Which ways does he condemn?**

67 **posse comitatus** (pōs'ē kōm'ī-tōt'əs) *Latin*: power of the county—a term used to refer to the group of people that can be called on by a sheriff to help enforce the law.

sense, and *men*—serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. . . .

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy *is* worse than the evil. *It* makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and *do* better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate

Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels? . . .

Let your life be

a counter-friction

to stop the machine.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth, —certainly

the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. . . .

I meet this American government, or its representative, the state government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensable mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with,—

96-97 Copernicus (kō-pŭr'nā-kəs) and **Luther**: Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a Polish astronomer who theorized that the sun rather than the earth is the center of our planetary system, and Martin Luther (1483–1546), a German theologian who was a leader in the Protestant Reformation. Both men were excommunicated (barred from participation in religious rites) by the Roman Catholic Church.

100-106 In this metaphor Thoreau compares injustice within government to friction in the workings of a machine—both are often unavoidable byproducts of the workings of a complex system.

114-122 What does Thoreau consider the most effective way of expressing his displeasure with the government?

119 posture of affairs: situation.

for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I
quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the
government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does
as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged
to consider whether he shall treat me, his neighbor, for whom
he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a
maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over
this obstruction to his neighborliness without a ruder and more
impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I
know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men
whom I could name,—if ten *honest* men only,—ay, if *one*
HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold*
slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and
be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the
abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small
the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done
forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our
mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service,
but not one man. . . .

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true
place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place
today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her
freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out
and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have
already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that
the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the
Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them;
on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where
the State places those who are not *with* her, but *against* her,—
the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide
with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost
there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that
they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not
know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much
more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who
has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole
vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A
minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is
not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by
its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in
prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate
which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax
bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure,
as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit
violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition



132-139 Note that Thoreau advocates refusing to go along with the “copartnership of the individual and government if the government acts against an individual’s conscience.” Although abolitionists in Thoreau’s time did not act on his suggestion, civil rights leaders more than one hundred years later, in the 1960s, staged protests and went to jail to oppose unjust segregation laws and practices.



of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done,
170 “But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is
175 wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now. . . .

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood
180 considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best
185 use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to
190 be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and

A 1981 march for nuclear disarmament in London’s West End.

Rosa Parks, whose arrest for refusing to move to the back of a segregated bus touched off the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955.

In the early 1900s, suffragists demonstrate for women’s voting rights outside Buckingham Palace in London.

178–205 Why do you think Thoreau includes this personal anecdote about his one night in jail?

178 poll-tax: a tax that one had to pay in order to vote.

the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

194 underbred: ill-mannered.

Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government which says to me, "Your money or your life," why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

198 without let or hindrance (hīn'drens): without encountering obstacles.

201 spite: grudge.

220-225 What message does Thoreau convey through this example of the acorn and the chestnut?

If a plant cannot live according to its nature; it dies;
and so a man.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

blunder (blŭn'dər) n. a mistake
meditation (mĕd'ĭ-tā'shən) n. a thought or reflection
confront (kən-frŭnt') v. to come up against; meet face to face
multitude (mŭl'tĭ-tōd') n. a great number of people
flourish (flŭr'ĭsh) v. to thrive

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What is your first reaction to Thoreau's views on civil disobedience, or nonviolent resistance?

Comprehension Check

- According to Thoreau, what should be respected more than the law?
- What should a citizen do about an unjust law?
- How does Thoreau respond to being jailed?


Think Critically

2. How convincing do you find Thoreau's argument?

THINK ABOUT

- Thoreau's comment that a man must live according to his nature
- circumstances under which he advocates breaking the law
- his views on majority rule

3. ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING ESSAYS Refer

to the chart you made in your  **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. How important to Thoreau's argument is his idea about the different ways of serving the state? Explain your answer.

4. What might some find threatening about Thoreau's ideas?

Extend Interpretations

5. **The Writer's Style** A **paradox** is a statement that seems to contradict itself but may nevertheless suggest an important truth. "Civil Disobedience" is based on the paradox that a good citizen must be a lawbreaker under certain circumstances. Find other paradoxes in the essay that reinforce and extend this basic paradox.

6. **Critic's Corner** Critic Leon Edel states that Thoreau's theory of nonviolent resistance does not work in all conditions and that it "presupposes . . . a society which has moved beyond barbarism." Explain what you think Edel means. Does his view affect your opinion of Thoreau's argument?

7. **Comparing Texts** Thoreau's ideas influenced many 20th-century reformers, notably Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian nationalist and spiritual leader. What connections do you see between Thoreau's views and Gandhi's in the excerpt "On Civil Disobedience," on page 377?

8. **Connect to Life** How would you compare Thoreau's views on good citizenship with your own?

Literary Analysis

ESSAY An **essay** is a short work of nonfiction that deals with a single subject. The term comes from the French word *essai*, meaning "attempt." The purpose of an essay may be to express ideas and feelings, to analyze, to inform, to entertain, or to persuade. For example, de Crèvecoeur's essay "What Is an American?" was written to inform Europeans about a new breed of people, the Americans. Thoreau's purpose in "Civil Disobedience," on the other hand, is to persuade his audience to use nonviolent resistance to oppose unjust laws.

Even when they discuss serious ideas, essays are often informal, loosely structured, and highly personal. Consider the picture you get of Thoreau the man as you digest the political views in his essay.

Cooperative Learning Activity

Working in small groups, locate passages in which Thoreau refers to himself—identifying his personal opinions or recounting personal experiences, such as the night he spent in jail. How do these passages influence your acceptance of his arguments? Discuss what effect omitting these passages would have on the essay.