

Quotes about words and writing by Henry David Thoreau (taken from the Walden Woods Project at <https://www.walden.org/thoreau/thoreau-quotations/>)

A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself.—*Walden*

I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.—*Walden*

In this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation.—*Walden*

Language is the most perfect work of art in the world. The chisel of a thousand years retouches it.—*Journal*, 27 July 1840

Context: For 11 – 12 grade English 101 or English 102 students. I teach high school juniors and seniors in a dual – enrollment program. Students still struggle with writing that goes beyond the five-paragraph essay. Students are also trying to find their identity. I teach in a block of 80 minutes twice a week with a once in a week 45-minute session in a computer lab.

Length of Unit: 1 – 3 weeks. Lesson components can be deleted or added on to as fits the needs of the class.

Essential Questions:

How does word choice impact meaning in a written work? How can we be deliberate in our choice of words when we write?

Lesson 1: Connotation / Denotation

Define connotation and denotation using the word “home”

a. Ask students to write all the meanings associated with the word “female” and the word “male” Once all the meanings are up on the board, ask students if there are words they are happy to be associated with, unhappy to be associated with? What meanings are still missing?

b. Have students write one paragraph about which meanings they identify with in terms of gender, if any.

c. Divide class into groups of 4 – 5. Each group receives a word that they are to define in as many ways possible. Here are some possible words: “period” “floss” “ratchet”
“cool” “slay” “camp”

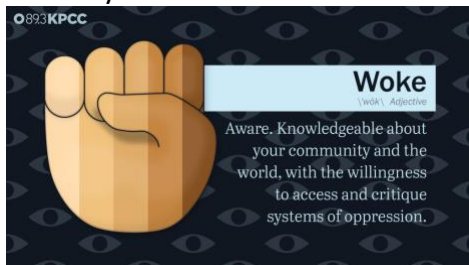
d. After they have defined the word in as many ways possible, including part of speech for each definition, they are to look the word up in an academic dictionary and write all the dictionary definitions including where and when the word originated. (If permissible in your environment, I would do the same with Urban Dictionary).

e. Discuss how words have different meanings and how those meanings change over time. Also discuss how using a word without knowing all of its meanings can have unintended consequences. Or on the other hand what happens to meaning if your audience does not know your intended meaning.

Lesson 2: Connotation / Denotation / Etymology

a. “To be Awake is to be Alive”: Students free-write for 10 minutes write in their journals what this quote means to them.

b. Put the following slide up and discuss the word “woke” as a full class. What does it mean? Are they comfortable with the word? How many think they are “woke”?



c. Introduce students to the Oxford English Dictionary and look up the words “awake” and “woke.” (This section of the lesson works best when all students have computer and OED

subscription access) How does this information help or change your understanding of the word “woke”?

d. Write a one paragraph definition of the word “woke” using the information you gained from The Oxford English Dictionary and class discussion.

Lesson 3: Introduction to Thoreau

a. Provide students with the list of quotes above; ask them to choose **one** and write what it means for them in their journals (10 minute freewrite).

b. Provide a brief biography of Thoreau and his reasons for moving to Walden Pond.

c. Provide the following excerpt to students:

Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

Walden, Where I Lived and What I Lived For

With a partner, discuss whether or not Thoreau is writing about being “woke,” particularly in the second paragraph. After you have shared with your partner, have a full class discussion on whether or not this passage indicates that Thoreau may have been “woke” long before the word took on its current weight.

Lesson 4: “Walking” and etymology

a. Provide the students with the following passage from “Walking” by Thoreau.

Serrin Anderson

NEH Thoreau Workshop Lesson Plan

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going à la Sainte Terre,” to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. But I prefer the first, which, indeed, is the most probable derivation. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.

“Walking”

Go back to the Oxford English Dictionary and look up the definition of etymology of “saunter.” Where do you think Thoreau got his definition from? Does his definition make sense? Do you think he invented the definition? Discuss in small groups and then as a full class.

b. In groups of 3 – 4, let students come up with a word and invent their own etymology so that the word means what they want it to. Have them create a paragraph or two in the style of Thoreau with their new word.

Lesson 5: Living Deliberately

Homework:

Distribute Chapter 2 of *Walden*, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” for homework. Tell students to highlight or note any time they see the word “deliberate” or “deliberately” and bring text to class the next day.

a. “I wished to live deliberately”: Ask students to freewrite for five to ten minutes in their journals on this quote and what it means to them in their own lives.

b. Share the following definitions of the word “deliberately” with the students (from Dr. Laura Walls):

Living “deliberately”:

Serrin Anderson

NEH Thoreau Workshop Lesson Plan

“It appears as if men had **deliberately** chosen the common mode of living”

“I went to the woods because I wished to live **deliberately**”

“Let us spend one day as **deliberately** as Nature”

“Books must be read as **deliberately** and reservedly as they were written.”

From Latin *deliberare*, to consider, weigh, from *libra*, balance or scales;

* and from L. *liber*, free (“liberty”);

* and from L. *lib[er]*, of books (“library”):

To live **deliberately means to live with the freedom to read the world and weigh its meanings.**

c. In a Socratic seminar, using their textual notes, discuss how Thoreau uses “deliberately” in this chapter and in the above quotes. Let the seminar evolve into a discussion of how students do (or don’t) live deliberately in their own lives – use all of the definitions and etymology to answer this question.

d. Following the seminar, students write a 1 page in class response to the class discussion and what new insights they have on both Thoreau and their own lives.

Homework:

Find another word in the same chapter of the text (“Where I Lived and What I Lived For” and complete a slide like Dr. Walls in which you research the etymology and different definitions of the word. Include quotes from the chapter. You may also use Thoreau’s essay “Walking” for this exercise if you would rather.

Lesson 6: Culminating paper / assessment

Homework:

Choose your own word that has layered meaning in your life. Define the word (1) using the OED; (2) creating your own etymology if you wish

Write a 2 – 3 page typed MLA formatted paper that (1) defines a word as Thoreau does in “Walking”; (2) uses that word in a variety of ways; (3) is personal in nature and reveals something about you and what you care about.

Bring one slide to class with your word, quotes using that word from your paper, and a brief definition and etymology of your word. Each student will share their slide with the class.

(Modeled after Dr. Laura Walls’ slide)