

Merry Gordon
merry.gordon@dvusd.org
Mountain Ridge High School
Glendale, Arizona

Unit plan: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.” —Thoreau, Social Location, and the Personal Statement

NEH Landmarks

Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry David Thoreau

Essential questions:

- How was Thoreau a product of his physical, social and intellectual landscapes? How are we products of our physical, social and intellectual landscapes?
- What does it mean to “account” for ourselves?—and how do we account for possible disparities between the ways in which we spend our time and the things for which we claim to stand?

Unit objectives:

TSW list and evaluate their time expenditures.

TSW create a survey map of influences in their lives.

TSW compose a personal statement.

Materials:

- Video clip: [Alice meets the Caterpillar \(from Disney’s Alice in Wonderland\)](#)
- [Excerpts from “Economy” by Henry David Thoreau](#) (use as little or as much as you need)
- Social location survey map template and instructions
- EdPuzzle clip: [Thoreau at 200: Reflections on “Walden”](#) (I use this with [EdPuzzle](#), but you can simply show the clip)
- “Accounting” chart
- [TEDTalk: “Who am I? Think Again” by Hetain Patel](#)
- Personal statement prompt and rubric

Day 1

Procedure:

1. INTRODUCTION: Show video clip from *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice meets the Caterpillar and he asks her who she is. (In the original text, Alice's reply begins, "I hardly know, sir, just at present...")
2. Table/post-it discussion (each table of students discusses the question and sums up the table consensus on a post-it note, which is shared out with the class): *Why is it so difficult to truly know who we are?* (5-10 minutes)
3. Give students 5 minutes to journal a response to this question: *Where do you live, and what do you live for?* Emphasize the fact that while this is a complex, nuanced question, they only need core ideas here rather than justifications.
4. Allow students to work individually on EdPuzzle Thoreau video clip (I created an EdPuzzle to pause them at certain points to ask them to reflect and check for understanding, but you can just use the YouTube link as well).
5. CLOSURE: Discuss how Thoreau was a product of his physical, social and intellectual landscapes, as well as any other landscapes/influences students can brainstorm.

Assignment:

Read and annotate "Economy" excerpt for class tomorrow.

Day 2 (this could easily go into Day 3 if you have some robust discussion)

Procedure:

1. INTRODUCTION: Have students mind map potential connotations of the word "account(-ed, -ing, etc.) and discuss ideas.
2. Recap Thoreau's accounts of himself in "Economy" with the class. This can be done more formally with a Quizizz or simply through discussion depending on the nature and accountability level of your students.
3. Distribute accounting chart and give students about 15 minutes in which to account for the last 24 hours in terms of time spent. This is a great place for discussion about presentism and intentionality: students shouldn't be able to merely list where their physical bodies were in the past 24 hours, but where their minds were engaged, too.
4. Have students look back at their prompt from yesterday about where they live and what they live for. Allow them a 15-minute speed dating round to share ideas on whether or not their account of time spent matches their statements of purpose from yesterday's

journaling activity. Are their ideas about themselves consistent with their realities? Why or why not?

5. CLOSURE: Choose one speed dating couple to hot seat and allow the class to question them.

Assignment: None

Days 3 - 4 (I like to leave this open ended to allow for discussion)

Procedure:

1. INTRODUCTION: Introduce the idea of social location (the ways in which people belong and create identity based on their position in society and history) and Thoreau's own social location (a white male, a friend of other prominent writers, a citizen in a town associated with revolution, a Harvard graduate, etc.).
2. Watch the TEDTalk "Who am I? Think Again" by Hetain Patel. Have students list Hetain Patel's social locations and discuss how we come to an awareness of social location. (We do a ton of discussion in my class, as I teach high school seniors enrolled for college credit.)
3. Allow students 15 minutes to brainstorm all of the ways in which they themselves are socially located (which often can include their physical locations). Ideas about how a person can be socially located: geographic region, religion, race/culture/ethnicity, gender, profession, relationship status, social class, age, ability, etc.
4. Show students one of Henry David Thoreau's surveys and discuss: What can we learn from his surveys? It is worth noting that a survey is not merely a list of grid coordinates and town names, but a rendering of boundaries and things in relationship to one another.
5. Distribute social location survey map (instructions are on the survey map—see sample) and have students create a survey map of their own social locations.
6. CLOSURE: Poll Everywhere Word Cloud on students' most prominent social location (one word each).

Assignment: Complete social location survey maps and upload to Canvas.

Day 4-5

Procedure:

1. INTRODUCTION: Give students about 10 minutes to respond to at least 2 of their peers' survey maps on Canvas. Discuss: what surprised them? What did they seem to have in common?
2. Show students a [sample Common App essay response](#) and give them time in their collaborative scoring groups to score, using the same rubric upon which they will be graded (I'm using my college's rubric here, but you could easily substitute another). Discuss the essay's strengths and weaknesses.
3. Distribute Common App prompt and give students time to draft.
4. CLOSURE: Reflect as a class on how their understanding of self is different after accounting for their time and creating a social location survey map. How do they understand themselves a little differently?

Assignment: Write and edit Common App/personal statement response.

Accounting for ourselves
ENG 101

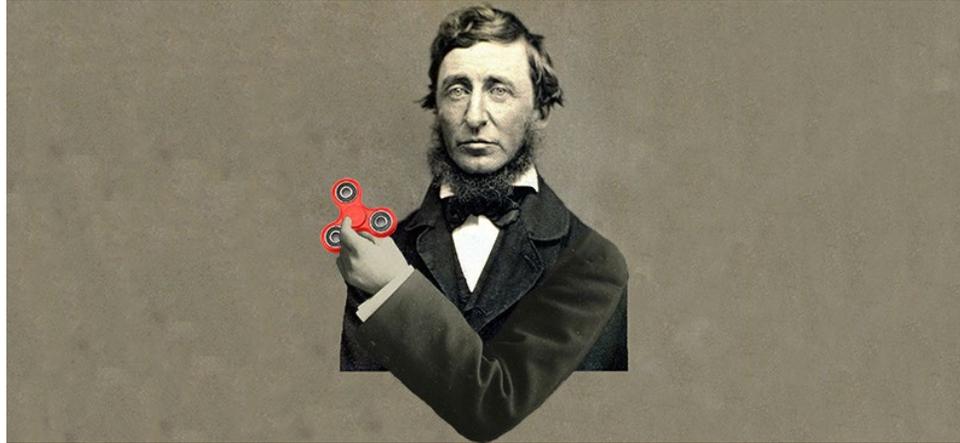
Give an honest account of the 24-hour period that began Friday at 11:59 PM and ended Sunday at 12:01 AM. Where were you? What were you doing? Were you fully engaged in that activity? Finally, was it worth your time?

Example (I made this one up with ample amounts of good, bad and ugly):

| Time | Activities | Good investment of time? How do you feel about the time you gave up? |
|------|--|--|
| 1 PM | 1-1:15: Called my mom 1:15-2:15: Yoga at Valley Fitness | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good. We needed to catch up.• Great! I feel refreshed and focused. |
| 2 PM | 2:15-2:30: Waited in line at Dutch Bros for coffee 2:30-3: Instagram and Snapchat while drinking my latte | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ick. I should've just grabbed a cup of coffee at Dunkin.• Not great. I can't even remember what I was looking at. |
| 3 PM | 3-3:45: Studied precalc with Amy 3:45-4: Drove home, showered | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Really needed that! I feel prepared for my test.• Kinda necessary. Can't get around travel time. |
| 4 PM | 4-5: Watched <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> while texting ex-boyfriend | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I have seen this show 10 times and let's face it, the boy is toxic. What am I even doing with my life, lol? |

Be specific and truthful about how you spent your time...nobody is going to judge you except for you. Nothing is more important than the account we make to ourselves—you owe it to yourself to be honest!

Accounting for ourselves
ENG 101



| Time | Activities | Good investment of time? How do you feel about the time you gave up? |
|-------------------------------------|------------|--|
| Midnight (begin 11:59 PM on Friday) | | |
| 1 AM | | |
| 2 AM | | |
| 3 AM | | |
| 4 AM | | |
| 5 AM | | |
| 6 AM | | |
| 7 AM | | |
| 8 AM | | |
| 9 AM | | |
| 10 AM | | |
| 11 AM | | |
| Noon | | |
| 1 PM | | |
| 2 PM | | |

Accounting for ourselves
ENG 101

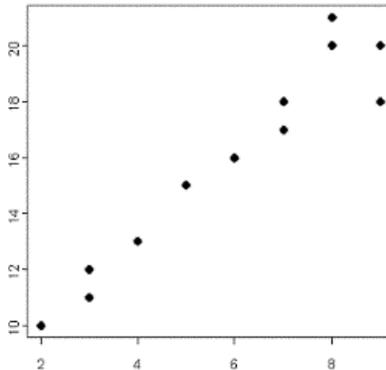
| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | | |
| 3 PM | | |
| 4 PM | | |
| 5 PM | | |
| 6 PM | | |
| 7 PM | | |
| 8 PM | | |
| 9 PM | | |
| 10 PM | | |
| 11 PM (end 12:01 AM on Sunday) | | |

Is there a difference between the narrative you tell about yourself and what your true account of time spent says about you? Why?

A survey marks the boundaries of an existing plot of land and shows how it is uniquely located. Thoreau drafted a number of surveys in his time (you can see his survey map of Nantucket [here](#) and another of John B. Moore's farm [here](#)). Today, you're going to create a survey map of your social locations—the elements which make up who you are.

I. Plotting the landscape

To begin, you'll need to make a scatter plot of your social location using an X and Y axis. It might look a little like this, except yours will go from 0-10 on each axis and probably have fewer points.



Here's how to do it:

Your **X axis** is the extent to which you can control that element of your social location. For example, I can't really control my racial background, so that might score low for me (perhaps a 0 or 1, but this might go higher depending on whether or not you've got a heritage that allows you to draw from multiple multiethnic backgrounds to different extents...I don't happen to have such a background, so mine is low).

Your **Y axis** is the extent to which you are affected by that element of your social location. For me, being white affects most aspects of my life through privilege, whether or not I am always conscious of it. Therefore, my racial background is going to score higher—maybe a 7.

Plot at least 6 points on your social location survey map. You can choose from any of the following, or create your own:

- a. Gender
- b. Family Size
- c. Nationality
- d. Relationship Status
- e. Race
- f. Political Affiliation
- g. Class
- h. Social Associations
- i. Religion
- j. Educational Background

- k. Work Experience
- l. Any other social positions that influence the way you experience the world....think sports, music, any other background, interest or talent.

Please clearly label each of your plot points.

II. Filling in the landscape

Once you have at least 6 plot points on your map, draw in your map. The purpose of a survey map is to account accurately for the boundaries and relationships between places. Please do the following for your geography of self:

- For each plot point, choose an icon to represent what that element of your social location means to you. Perhaps your work experience has been a stumbling block for you. Great—make it a wall. Maybe your social associations through sports are all stress-relief and fun. That’s cool—plot a baseball diamond. Drowning in your educational background as an AP student? Make it a lake. We’re all dog paddling in this together. Icons to consider: buildings, walls, geographical features like hills or bodies of water, etc. You can make the plot points as large or small as you want to reflect how they apply to your life.
- Make roads to link any elements of your social location that are connected. For strong connections—for example, the link between my career and my economic/social class are pretty strong, haha—I might make a highway. My family size isn’t hugely important to my life, but my relationship as a wife and mother is, and those two elements are connected. Maybe I’ll make a dirt path between the two. See how your map develops?
- Finally, add color, graphics, etc.—whatever it takes to make this your own. Be prepared to share your survey map with your peers.

LAND SURVEYING

Of all kinds, according to the best methods known; the necessary data supplied, in order that the boundaries of Farms may be accurately described in Deeds; Woods lotted off distinctly and according to a regular plan; Roads laid out, &c., &c. Distinct and accurate Plans of Farms furnished, with the buildings thereon, of any size, and with a scale of feet attached, to accompany the Farm Book, so that the land may be laid out in a winter evening.

Areas warranted accurate within almost any degree of exactness, and the Variation of the Compass given, so that the lines can be run again. Apply to

HENRY D. THOREAU.

*Near the Depot
Concord, Mass*

With your initial definition of self, an honest accounting of your time and your social location survey map, you are ready to begin writing your personal statement. For convenience's sake, we will be using Prompt #1 from the Common App—in fact, many of you will be using it this year to apply for college. Your writing should be engaging, authentic and focused, and between 300-400 words (we'll expand it a bit later in the semester). A longer sample response is located [here](#).

PROMPT #1:

Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Your rubric is below. Please note that *each section of the rubric will be multiplied by 3 for a total of 48 possible points.*

| | |
|---|---|
| Content | <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Maintains clear, obvious purpose3. Contains purpose but not consistently clear or obvious2. Presents a purpose that is confused, general, or vague1. Does not present a unifying purpose |
| Organization | <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Maintains clear and obvious organization3. Uses a suitable organizational plan2. Unclear organizational plan1. Does not present an organizational plan |
| Sentence Structure and Mechanical Errors | <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Uses correct, varied sentences with few, if any, errors in mechanics, grammar, syntax or spelling3. Uses sentences that are usually correct but sometimes awkward with some errors in mechanics, grammar, syntax or spelling2. Uses sentences that are often incorrect and are difficult for the reader to understand with multiple errors in mechanics, grammar, syntax, or spelling1. Uses sentences that are incorrect and are impossible for the reader to understand with many errors in mechanics, grammar, syntax, or spelling |
| Language | <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Uses language effectively, with a consistent and appropriate tone for the intended audience3. Uses language that is adequate but occasionally unclear2. Uses language that is sometimes inadequate and unclear1. Uses language that is inadequate and unclear |