

Thread: **Being Awake, Aware, and Alive**

This unit asks students to keep a Thoreau-inspired observational journal and use its raw material to craft and deliver a Lyceum lecture.

**Learning Goals:**

Students will understand how the discipline of journal-keeping was integral to Thoreau's writing and way of seeing the world.

Students will discover the value of a daily writing practice to living awake and aware lives.

Students will learn how to craft the material of their daily observations, as collected in a journal, into an essay and lecture.

Students will learn to tailor their lecture to a specific audience by composing it for and delivering it to their classmates in the form of a "Lyceum lecture."

**Essential Questions:**

1. How can a daily writing practice make us more awake to and aware of our daily lives?
2. What is the moral value of this awakensness?
3. How can we share our awakensness and aliveness with others? What is the personal and social value of that sharing?

**Unit Length:** 6 class periods (55 minutes) for initial study of Thoreau; 5-6 class periods, some weeks later, for composing and presentation of lecture.

[**Note:** For student journals to be a useful source of material from which to develop a Lyceum lecture, students will need to keep the journals for some weeks. I teach the Transcendentalists at the end of November, so I will assign this project at that time but have students draft and deliver the lecture after Christmas break, perhaps near the end of January. Thus, **Days 7-11** below happen 4-6 weeks after **Days 1-6.**]

**Readings:** Excerpts from *Walden* (20 total pages, *passim*)  
“Life Without Principle” (abridged)  
“Walking” (abridged)  
[**Note:** email me at [wyss@jesuitnola.org](mailto:wyss@jesuitnola.org) if you are interested in these selections and abridgements.]

**Materials:** 1 Composition notebook per student.

**Day 1:**

--Students write in composition notebooks for 10 minutes in response to this prompt: *Describe something you saw or did this morning.* (Students will be encouraged to write for the entire ten minutes and to capture the experience vividly.) This first journal entry is followed by a brief discussion of the experience of the writing experience (and perhaps with a sharing of favorite sentences/images).

--Introduction to HDT’s journal-keeping and a brief introduction (with PPT images) to the biography of HDT.

--Assign and explain the journal/Lyceum lecture project. (Assignment sheet below.)

--Explain and assign reading selections for the following class periods. (Readings assigned as homework. Students will be given guiding questions to accompany their reading and bring completed questions to class as a basis for discussion. Discussion will focus on both the ideas of the passages—as they relate to Thoreau, Transcendentalism, American life—and on Thoreau’s rhetorical techniques.)

**Day 2:** Excerpts from *Walden*

[**Note:** Days 2-4 concentrate on about 20 pages of selected passages from *Walden*—for the purposes of this assignment, mainly observational passages from “Sounds,” “Winter Visitors,” “The Ponds,” etc. Discussion format during Days 2-6 will vary depending on time and inclination: think/pair/share, small-group response, whole-group circle, etc.]

**Day 3:** Excerpts from *Walden*

**Day 4:** Excerpts from *Walden*

**Day 5:** “Life Without Principle”

**Day 6:** “Walking”

.....[4-6 weeks intervening].....

**Days 7-8:**

1. Discuss techniques for shaping the material of the journals into a lecture: motif, theme, rhetoric, etc. Review of Thoreau's rhetorical techniques as discussed during earlier segment of lesson.

2. Compare an excerpt from *Walden* with its source text in Thoreau's *Journal* as a way to discuss illuminate rewriting/reshaping/rethinking. (I will use the description of an owl's hooting from "Sounds" and these source Journal passages accessible on [walden.org](http://walden.org): Journal III, Ch. 2, p. 122, and Journal IV, Ch. 2, p. 191.)

3. Students mine their journals for material and begin drafting.

**Days 9-11 [some days later to allow reasonable time for writing and rewriting]:** Students deliver their Lyceum lectures.

### Henry David Thoreau: Journal Project

When Thoreau met Ralph Waldo Emerson, the older writer asked, “Do you keep a journal?” Thoreau began to do so and at his death left behind journals surpassing two million words. These journals served as the source material for his Lyceum lectures and books, including *Walden*.

As biographer Laura Dassow Walls writes, Thoreau used his journal to “explore whatever caught his mind that day”—the weather; the water, plants, and animals of Walden Pond; his fellow townspeople; his thoughts about money, politics, and technology.

This project asks you to keep your own journal—beginning with the entry you made in class today—and to write in it every day for the next several weeks. We will use these journals as source material for a Lyceum-style lecture in January.

#### Guidelines and Suggestions:

1. Make a daily entry (including over Christmas break!) and write for at least ten minutes. Label each entry with the day’s date.
2. This is a journal, not a diary; a factual listing of the day’s activities is not the goal. The goal is, rather, description, observation, exploration, meditation.
3. I recommend setting aside a time and place to do your writing, just as you might devote a special block of time to prayer or exercise.
4. For an especially Thoreauvian version of this assignment, 1) incorporate walking into your daily practice and collect field notes for your journal entries, and/or 2) choose a particular place (as Thoreau chose Walden pond) as a site for your daily observations. Your place needn’t be the woods; a mall, library, public park, or even a daily off period at Jesuit will work.
5. At the end of the project, your journal will be collected and receive a grade based on completeness.