

Writers of the Revolution

from *The Autobiography*

by Benjamin Franklin

NOTABLE QUOTE

"If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead
and rotten,
Either write things
worth reading,
Or do things worth the
writing."

FYI

Did you know that Benjamin Franklin ...

- started the first public library and fire department in America?
- founded what became the University of Pennsylvania?
- invented bifocal eyeglasses?

Author Online

For more on Benjamin Franklin, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Page from *Poor Richard's Almanack*



Benjamin Franklin

1706–1790

Printer, publisher, writer, scientist, inventor, businessman, philosopher, statesman—Benjamin Franklin's numerous roles only hint at the man's tremendous versatility and talent. As the oldest founding father, Franklin had already lived a full life when at the age of 70 he joined 40-year-old John Adams and 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence. Soon afterward, he loaned Congress a large sum of his own money and sailed on a leaky ship to France to arrange for more loans and a crucial alliance to fight the British. His masterly efforts abroad on behalf of the American cause earned him a reputation as one of the most successful American diplomats of all time. Only a few years before he died, his presence at the Constitutional Convention helped unify the delegates. So great was his influence that he is credited with convincing them to approve the final

document by a vote of 39 to 3. A man of great integrity, intelligence, and charm, Ben Franklin embodied the best of the new nation and became its first celebrity.

Pulling Himself Up Born in Boston as the youngest of 15 children, Franklin did not want to follow in his father's footsteps to become a candle and soap maker. Instead, he joined his brother in the printing business as an apprentice. With only two years of formal education, Franklin taught himself to write by imitating the great essayists of his day. At the age of 16, he was contributing satirical pieces to his brother's newspaper. By his own account "too saucy and provoking" as a youth, he soon quarreled with his brother and struck out on his own for Philadelphia. Franklin did very well in Philadelphia, prospering in his own printing business, running the successful *Pennsylvania Gazette* newspaper, writing his popular *Poor Richard's Almanack* for 26 years, and being active in colonial politics.

Citizen of the World Franklin's writing—from humorous satires and wise sayings to serious political essays and scientific observations on electricity—as well as his diplomacy and charismatic personality made him an international celebrity. Although respected by the great minds of his age, he never lost his connection to the common people. In the words of John Adams: "His reputation is greater than that of Newton, Frederick the Great or Voltaire, his character more revered than all of them. There's scarcely a coachman or a footman or scullery maid who does not consider him a friend of all mankind."

FEBRUARY

We smile at Florists, we
And think their Hearts en
But are those wiser, who
Survey with Envy, and pursue with Fire?
What's he, who fights for Wealth, or Fame, or Power?
Another Florist, doating on a Flower,

1	24	2
New D	25 2 mo.	6 29 2
(1 18 9 Deg.	11	X4 2

● **LITERARY ANALYSIS: CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

An **autobiography** is the story of a person’s life, written by that person. As you read this excerpt from Franklin’s autobiography, notice the following characteristics of autobiography:

- **First person:** The author of an autobiography usually writes from the first-person point of view.
- **Dual perspective:** Often the author of an autobiography writes as an older person looking back on him- or herself as a younger person, providing opportunities for reflection.
- **Significant moments:** Autobiographies may vary from straightforward chronological accounts to impressionistic narratives. In either case, especially important events and people in the author’s life are highlighted.

■ **READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Making inferences means “reading between the lines”—making logical guesses based on evidence in the text to figure out what is not directly stated. As you read the *Autobiography*, make inferences about the values and motives that seem characteristic of Franklin’s personality. Use a chart like the one shown to record details from the text about the 13 virtues he hopes to acquire and how he goes about doing so. What inferences can you make about him?

Details or Evidence from Text	Inference

Review: Connect

▲ **VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT**

Franklin uses the following boldfaced words in describing his efforts to improve himself. Restate each phrase, using a different word or words for the boldfaced term.

1. **unremitting** storms that went on for weeks
2. **felicity** over her great good luck
3. a mansion as one symbol of **affluence**
4. dreamed up an **artifice** to avoid doing his job
5. **incorrigible** behavior that disgraced the family
6. a **trifling** problem, easily cleared up
7. would often **contrive** to secretly meet his friends
8. worked to **eradicate** smallpox around the world

Is PERFECTION possible?

KEY IDEA As a young man, Benjamin Franklin believed that human beings could actually achieve perfection in a given area. All you needed was a reasonable plan and a lot of self-discipline. Many people today also aim for perfection, although their quest may take a different path. Bookstores have whole sections devoted to **self-improvement** in a variety of areas, including diet, exercise, careers, and dating.

QUICKWRITE Do you think perfection is possible or at least worth striving for? If you think so, outline a self-improvement plan that shows how you might achieve your goal. If you don’t think perfection is possible, write a paragraph in which you explain why you think it is unattainable.



THE *Autobiography*

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

BACKGROUND Franklin was a prolific writer, producing volumes of essays, travel journals, newspaper articles, satires, speeches, almanacs, letters, and even ballads. But his great masterpiece was his *Autobiography*, which is still very popular today. The following excerpt details Franklin's plan to achieve moral perfection. He was about 20 years old when he first conceived the idea on one of his long, trans-Atlantic voyages. The plan reveals his faith in reason, order, and human perfectibility, which was typical of 18th-century thought.

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our
10 interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method. **A**

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or

ANALYZE VISUALS

What do the details of this famous painting suggest about Franklin?

A AUTOBIOGRAPHY

What characteristics of autobiography do you find in the first paragraph of this selection?

fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use
20 rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts were:

1. **TEMPERANCE.** Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. **SILENCE.** Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid **trifling** conversation.
3. **ORDER.** Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. **RESOLUTION.** Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. **FRUGALITY.** Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; *i.e.*, waste nothing.
6. **INDUSTRY.** Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. **SINCERITY.** Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. **JUSTICE.** Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. **MODERATION.** Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. **CLEANLINESS.** Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. **TRANQUILLITY.** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **CHASTITY.** Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. **HUMILITY.** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.¹ **B**

My intention being to acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I
30 arranged them with that view, as they stand above. Temperance first, as it tends to

trifling (trī'flīng) *adj.*
frivolous; inconsequential
trifle *v.*

B MAKE INFERENCES
Based on Franklin's list of virtues, what inference can you make about his view of his own moral character? Explain.

1. **Socrates** (sōk'rō-tēz'): Greek philosopher (470?–399 B.C.) who believed that true knowledge comes through dialogue and systematic questioning of ideas; he was executed for his beliefs.

procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the **unremitting** attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *Frugality* and *Industry* freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing **affluence** and independence, would make more easy the practice of *Sincerity* and *Justice*, etc., etc. Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses,² daily examination would be necessary, I **contrived** the following method for conducting that examination. **C**

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every³ the least offense against *Temperance*, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened, and its opposite weakened, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding

unremitting
(ŭn'ri-mīt'ing) *adj.*
constant; never stopping

affluence (ăf'lōō-əns) *n.*
wealth

contrive (kən-trīv') *v.* to plan skillfully; to design

C MAKE INFERENCES
What can you infer from lines 25–46 about Franklin's approach to problems?

Form of the pages.

TEMPERANCE							
eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
T.							
S.	•	•		•		•	
O.	••	•	•		•	•	•
R.			•			•	
F.		•			•		
I.			•	•			
S.							
J.							
M.							
C.							
T.							
C.							
H.							

2. **Pythagoras** (pī-thäg'ər-əs)... **Golden Verses:** Pythagoras was a Greek philosopher and mathematician (580?–500? B.C.).

3. **every:** even.

thus to the last, I could go through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to **eradicate** all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplished the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in
 80 viewing a clean book, after thirteen weeks' daily examination. . . . **D**

eradicate (ĭ-răd'ĭ-kăt') v.
to destroy completely

D AUTOBIOGRAPHY
In what way do lines 47–80 provide an example of Franklin's dual perspective?

The precept of *Order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.

The Morning.

Question. What good shall I do this day?

5 } Rise, wash, and address
 6 } *Powerful Goodness!* Contrive
 day's business, and take the
 resolution of the day;
 prosecute the present
 7 } study, and breakfast.

8 }
 9 } Work.
 10 }
 11 }

Noon.

12 } Read, or overlook
 1 } my accounts, and dine.

2 }
 3 } Work.
 4 }
 5 }

Evening.

Question. What good have I done today?

6 } Put things in their places. Supper.
 7 } Music or diversion, or conversation.
 8 } Conversation. Examination of
 9 } the day.

10 }
 11 }
 12 }
 1 } Sleep.
 2 }
 3 }
 4 }

Night.

I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book, which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred my tables and precepts to the ivory
90 leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink, that made a durable stain, and on those lines I marked my faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After a while I went through one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employed in voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me. **E**

My scheme of *Order* gave me the most trouble; and I found that, though it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world, and
100 often receive people of business at their own hours. *Order*, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to it, and, having an exceeding good memory, I was not so sensible of the inconvenience attending want of method. This article, therefore, cost me so much painful attention, and my faults in it vexed me so much, and I made so little progress in amendment, and had such frequent relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the attempt, and content myself with a faulty character in that respect, like the man who, in buying an ax of a smith, my neighbor, desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge. The smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the wheel; he turned, while the smith pressed
110 the broad face of the ax hard and heavily on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man came every now and then from the wheel to see how the work went on, and at length would take his ax as it was, without farther grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by-and-by; as yet, it is only speckled." "Yes," says the man, "*but I think I like a speckled ax best.*" And I believe this may have been the case with many, who, having, for want of some such means as I employed, found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle, and concluded that "*a speckled ax was best;*" for something, that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extreme nicety as I
120 exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals,⁴ which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance. **F**

In truth, I found myself **incorrigible** with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But, on the whole, though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of

E MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 84–95.

What can you infer about Franklin's persistence in pursuing his goals?

F CONNECT

What insight does Franklin come to about his quest for perfection? Consider what you have learned in your own life about perfection. Does his insight seem reasonable?

incorrigible

(ĭn-kŏr'ĭ-jə-bel) *adj.*
incapable of being reformed or corrected

4. **foppery in morals:** excessive regard for and concern about one's moral appearance.



obtaining, but fell short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it; as those who aim at perfect writing by imitating the engraved copies, though they never reach the wished-for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavor, and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible. ⑥

It may well be my posterity should be informed that to this little **artifice**, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owed the constant **felicity** of his life, down to his 79th year, in which this is written. What reverses may attend the remainder is in the hand of Providence; but, if they arrive, the reflection on past happiness enjoyed ought to help his bearing them with more resignation. To Temperance he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to Industry and Frugality, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen, and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to Sincerity and Justice, the confidence of his country, and the honorable employs it conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of the virtues, even in the the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation, which makes his company still sought for, and agreeable even to his younger acquaintance. I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit. ⑦

⑥ **AUTOBIOGRAPHY**
What significant moment or insight is described in this paragraph?

artifice (är'tē-fīs) *n.* a clever means to an end

felicity (fē-līs'ī-tē) *n.* great happiness

from
Poor Richard's
Almanack

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



He that cannot obey cannot command.

Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

A mob's a monster; heads enough but no brains.

Well done is better than well said.

Lost time is never found again.

Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

If you would know the worth of money, go and try to borrow some.

A friend in need is a friend indeed.

Fish and visitors smell in three days.

Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge.

God helps them that help themselves.

If you would keep your secret from an enemy, tell it not to a friend.

Be slow in choosing a friend, slower in changing.

Don't throw stones at your neighbors', if your own windows are glass.

Eat to live and not live to eat.

Love your enemies, for they tell you your faults.

Better slip with foot than tongue.

Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

Never leave that till tomorrow, which you can do today.

A penny saved is a penny earned.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.

Make hay while the sun shines.

Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship.

He that goes a borrowing goes a sorrowing.

Honesty is the best policy.

Little strokes fell big oaks.

He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.