

Primary Source Analysis:

Benjamin Franklin and Civic Virtue

- ☐ I can analyze Benjamin Franklin's method for developing and practicing virtues.
- ☐ I can close-read a primary source and summarize main idea of a historic text.



Directions: Read excerpts of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. While reading the text, you will understand how Franklin purposefully tried to be virtuous throughout his life. After reading the text, answer the analysis questions.

Essential Vocabulary



conceived	To form or devise (a plan or idea) in the mind.
arduous	Involving or requiring strenuous effort.
inclination	A person's natural tendency or urge to act or feel in a particular way.
rectitude	Morally correct behavior or thinking; righteousness.
enumerations	The action of mentioning a number of things one by one.
annexed	Append or add as an extra or subordinate part, especially to a document.
Precept	A general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought.
eradicate	To destroy completely; put an end to.
Endeavour [endeavor]	To try hard to do or achieve something.

Building Context:

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston in 1706. Growing up, he heard a great deal about morality and religion in the Puritan society. As a young man, however, he rebelled against authority and loved to play devil's advocate by questioning all accepted wisdom. Franklin liked to argue and was seen as combative and confrontational.

Realizing he was rubbing people the wrong way and making as many enemies as friends, Franklin decided to reform his character. His first goal was to stop being so argumentative — he came to believe he did not need to win every debate. In doing so, Franklin learned an important lesson in moderation and prudence.

After running away to Philadelphia, he set up a printer’s shop and began making something of himself as an adult. He started a plan to practice virtue. He also took part in civic life in Philadelphia by creating a subscription library. Over the course of the next few decades, Franklin created a number of civic institutions including a volunteer fire department, a system of night watchmen, and educational academies. He would later enter politics and serve as a member of the Continental Congress, a diplomat to France, and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

Document Text	Notes
It was about this time that I conceiv’d [conceived] the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish’d [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 allways 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 Attention was taken up in guarding against one Fault, I was often surpris’d [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 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 contriv’d [contrived] the following Method.	
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 fewer Ideas under the same Name...I propos’d [proposed] to myself, for the sake of Clearness, to use rather more Names with fewer	

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<p>Ideas annex'd [annexed] to each, than a few Names with more Ideas; and I included under Thirteen Names of Virtues all that at that time occur'd [occurred] to me as necessary or desirable, and annex'd [annexed] to each a short Precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its Meaning.</p> <p>These Names of Virtues with their Precepts were:</p> <p>TEMPERANCE. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.</p> <p>SILENCE. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.</p> <p>ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.</p> <p>RESOLUTION. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve. FRUGALITY. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.</p> <p>INDUSTRY. Lose no time; be always employ'd [employed] in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.</p> <p>SINCERITY. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.</p> <p>JUSTICE. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty. MODERATION. Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.</p> <p>CLEANLINESS. Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths [clothes], or habitation.</p> <p>TRANQUILITY. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.</p>	

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<p>My Intention being to acquire the Habitude of all these Virtues, I judg'd [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 thro' the thirteen...</p>	
<p>I made a little Book in which I allotted a Page for each of the Virtues. I rul'd [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 cross'd [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 & 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.</p>	
<p>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 every 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 clear of Spots, I suppos'd [supposed] the Habit of that Virtue so much strengthen'd [strengthened] and its opposite weaken'd [weakened], that I might venture extending my Attention to include the next, and for the following Week keep both lines clear of Spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' [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, & having accomplish'd [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</p>	

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successively my lines of their Spots, till in the end by a Number of Courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean Book after a thirteen Weeks, daily examination.	
I enter'd [entered] upon the execution of this Plan for Self examination, and continu'd [continued] it with occasional Intermissions for some time. I was surpris'd [surprised] to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined, but I had the Satisfaction of seeing them diminish...	
...on the whole, tho' [though] I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavour , 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, tho' [though] they never reach the wish'd [wished]-for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavor , and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible.	

Analysis Questions

1. How does Franklin understand virtue? How does he define, use, and refine the term?
2. How did Franklin incorporate the virtues he wrote about into his project to embody them?
3. How does Franklin describe his struggle to live virtuously? Do you believe moral perfection is possible? Is so, how? If not, what motivates an individual to act virtuously? Is it better to aim for perfection and fail than to not try at all?
4. Did Franklin believe he succeeded in his ultimate goal? Why or why not?
5. What value did Franklin find in the project?
6. What most impresses you about Franklin's project?
7. How could you borrow some of Franklin's ideas and strategies to help you work on just one or two character traits you would like to improve?