

ESSAY

Reading Tips

An **essay** is a short work of **nonfiction** in which a writer presents his or her personal views. Thoreau published this essay in 1847. At that time, writers typically used long sentences and paragraphs. Such a style makes this essay challenging for modern readers.

• Read the essay more than once. The first time, try to get the overall sense. Then reread it to deepen your understanding. During your second reading, answer the Pause and Reflect questions. Also use the Guide for Reading, beginning on page 91, for help with unfamiliar words and difficult passages.

As the essay begins . . .

- Thoreau states his ideas about what makes good government.
- Thoreau asks for a better government.

from

Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau

PREVIEW In this classic **essay**, Thoreau describes the highest duty of good citizens. They must do what they think is right, even at the cost of going to jail. Written more than a century ago, this essay still stirs the mind and the heart. Thoreau's message inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the civil rights crusade in the 1950s and 1960s.

FOCUS
Thoreau begins his essay by explaining his views on government. Read to find out whether he favors more government or less.

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least;" and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it,

that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, **inexpedient**. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act

GUIDE FOR READING

Use this guide for help with unfamiliar words and difficult passages.

More About . . .

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE The term *civil disobedience* means protesting without violence. In this essay, Thoreau favors the nonviolent protest of unjust government policies, even if that protest results in going to jail.

★ Reader Success Strategy

After you read each section of the essay, go back and reread long sentences aloud. Try breaking long sentences into smaller sections. Often, a comma will set off a section of a sentence.

MARK UP KEEP TRACK

As you read, you can use these marks to keep track of your understanding.

- ✓ . . . I understand.
- ? . . . I don't understand this.
- ! . . . Interesting or surprising idea

MARK UP WORD POWER

Mark words that you'd like to add to your **Personal Word List**. After reading, you can record the words and their meanings beginning on page 476.

6-7 "That government . . . not at all":

Thoreau is saying that it is best to have no government at all. Someday, people will need no government to make laws and enforce them.

9 expedient (ĭk-spē'dē-ənt): a means to an end.

13 standing army: a peace-time army, or one in place even though the nation is not at war. When Thoreau was writing, the United States did not have a standing army.

18 perverted: turned away from what is right.

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inexpedient (ĭn'ĭk-spē'dē-ənt) *adj.* not useful for achieving a goal

through it. Witness the present **Mexican war** the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure. . . .

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

Pause  Reflect

PROBLEMS
Thoreau wanted to limit the power of the majority so that individuals could follow their conscience. Read to find out why the individual conscience is so important to him.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a

government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of **conscientious** men is a corporation *with* a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.

WORDS
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conscientious (kŏn'shē-ēn'shəs) *adj.* guided by conscience; honest

GUIDE FOR READING

19 **the present Mexican war**: the war between the United States and Mexico in 1846–1848. Thoreau strongly opposed this war.

28–37 Thoreau points out that a government based on the rule of the majority is based on power, not justice. The majority rule because they are the strongest class.

41–42 **Must the citizen . . . legislator**: To Thoreau, the answer to this question is “No.” In other words, the citizen must always follow his or her conscience; **resign**: give up.


47 **corporation**: group.

49–51 Thoreau says that people can commit injustices by having too much respect for the law; **a whit**: the least bit.

More About . . .


THE U.S.—MEXICAN WAR During Thoreau's time, many Americans believed that the United States should expand until it reached from coast to coast. President James Polk tried to buy the territories that are now California, Arizona, and New Mexico. When Mexico refused to sell, Polk prepared to fight. Thoreau viewed the war as an unjust cause.

Pause  Reflect

 **ANALYSIS** Thoreau favors (circle one) *more/less* government. Circle details on page 90 that support your answer. (**Infer**)

As the essay continues . . .

- Thoreau explains why the majority is able to rule.
- He explains the difference between being ruled by law and being ruled by one's conscience.

 **Reading Check**

What is the only obligation, or duty, that Thoreau feels he has?

A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.

They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined.

Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy-Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts—a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniments, though it may be,—

“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.”

Pause  Reflect

FOCUS
Thoreau describes three ways that citizens can serve the state: with their bodies, with their heads, and with their consciences.

MARK IT UP As you read, circle details that explain these three ways. An example is highlighted.

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the

purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of

WORDS
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unscrupulous (ŭn-skrōō'pyə-ləs) *adj.* without principles; dishonorable

GUIDE FOR READING

54 **powder-monkeys**: boys with the job of carrying gunpowder to artillery crews.

57 **palpitation** (pāl'pŭ-tā'shən): irregular, rapid beating.

61 **magazines**: places where ammunition is stored.


64 **black arts**: witchcraft.


65 **a man . . . standing**: a man who is dead as a human being because he does not obey his conscience.

68–71 **“Not a drum . . . we buried”**: the opening lines of “The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna” by the Irish poet Charles Wolfe.

72 **The mass of men**: most people; **the state**: the nation or the government.

76 **posse comitatus** (pös'ē kŏm'ĭ-tŏt'əs) *Latin*: power of the county—a term used to refer to the group of people that can be called on by a sheriff to help enforce the law.

 **Reader's Choice**
Why does Thoreau criticize soldiers?


 **Reader's Survival Strategy**

One way in which Thoreau makes his point is by comparing people to things, such as when he likens soldiers to “movable forts.” Use a marker to highlight sentences or phrases in which Thoreau compares people to things.

Pause 

1. Underline the phrase below that completes the following sentence correctly: According to Thoreau, his highest duty as a citizen is to _____ . (*Infer*)

- follow majority rule
- do what he thinks is right
- obey the law

 **REAPPLY** 2. Read aloud the boxed sentence on page 94. The soldiers marching off to war respect (circle one) *the law/their consciences* more than anything else. (*Main Idea*)

As the essay continues . . .

- Thoreau distinguishes between the different ways a person can serve his or her government.
- He believes that the noblest way to serve the government is with one's conscience.

straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without *intending* it, as God. A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and *men*—serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. . . .

Pause  Reflect

The government does not value reformers. Read to find out how the government treats reformers and how citizens should respond to unjust laws.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them.

They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy *is* worse than the evil. *It* makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and *do* better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels? . . .

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth, —certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice

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endeavor (ĕn-dĕv'ər) *v.* to make an earnest effort; strive

GUIDE FOR READING

90–93 Notice that those who serve the state in the highest way challenge or oppose it if their consciences tell them to do so.

97 **transgress:** to act in violation of the law.

110 **Copernicus** (kō-pŭr'nĕ-kəs) and **Luther:** Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a Polish astronomer, theorized that the sun rather than the earth is the center of our planetary system. Martin Luther (1483–1546), a German theologian, was a leader in the Protestant Reformation. Both men were excommunicated (barred from participation in religious rites) by the Roman Catholic Church.

112–114 Thoreau compares injustice within government to friction in the workings of a machine. Both are often unavoidable byproducts of the workings of a complex system.

Pause  Reflect

1. Review the details you circled as you read. Thoreau favors serving the state with your (circle one) *body/mind/conscience* because

(Main Idea)

2. Imagine you are Thoreau. Which one of the following groups would you say is serving the state in the best way? Circle or check your answer. (Evaluate)

police officers who arrest dangerous criminals

students who protest against an unfair law


judges who sentence lawbreakers to jail

As the essay continues . . .

- Thoreau points out that government resists reform, or change for the better.
- He comments on injustice in government.

★ Reader Success Strategy

Rhetorical questions are questions to which an answer is not expected. Highlight the rhetorical questions Thoreau poses in this section. Think about the point he is trying to make by using these types of questions.

 TREASURY Lines 103–111

Read aloud the boxed passage on page 96. Then write a sentence to **summarize** how the government treats those who resist injustice.

has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. . . .

Pause & Reflect

FOCUS

A citizen can protest government policy by not paying taxes. Thoreau believes that citizens should be willing to go to jail to protest unjust policies. Read to find out why he believes such extremes are needed.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the state government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensablest mode of

treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with,—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he shall treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighborliness without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten *honest* men only,—ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small

GUIDE FOR READING

Pause & Reflect

1. Thoreau says that if a certain condition applies, a citizen should break the law. Underline the words at the top of page 98 that identify that condition. (Clarify)
2. In Thoreau's time it was legal to own slaves. Can you think of other examples of laws that allow injustice? Name one example below and explain the injustice. (Connect)

As the essay continues . . .

- Thoreau explains why he does not pay taxes.
- He believes that prison can be a house of honor.
- Thoreau encourages protests without violence.

More About . . .

TAXES The American government collects taxes from all U.S. citizens. Taxes are monies used to pay for government programs, roads, and schools, among other things. Today we do not have tax-gatherers who come to our doors. Rather, Americans send taxes to the Internal Revenue Service and to their respective state governments every year on April 15. It is illegal not to pay taxes.

What Does It Mean?

The word *indispensable* means "absolutely necessary" or "essential." *Indispensablest*, then, means "the most necessary." The most common form of this expression is "most indispensable."

★ Reader Success Strategy

Find the long sentences in this section. As you read them, write down the main idea of each sentence.

130–131 **posture of affairs:** situation.

143 **impetuous:** filled with sudden emotion.
144–151 Thoreau says that the opponents of slavery should break the law and go to jail. Although most people in Thoreau's time did not act on his suggestion, civil rights leaders more than one hundred years later, in the 1960s, staged protests and went to jail to oppose unjust segregation laws and practices.

the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man. . . .

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not *with* her, but *against* her,—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now. . . .

Pause & Reflect

GUIDE FOR READING


152–153 Many newspapers print editorials calling for reform. No one, however, has the courage to go to jail for the sake of justice; **score:** 20.

157 **desponding:** discouraging.

159–165 Thoreau was opposed to the government because it allowed slavery in the South and waged war against Mexico in the West. By not paying his taxes, Thoreau denied the government some of the revenue it needed to exist. The punishment for refusing to pay taxes was imprisonment. To Thoreau's way of thinking, however, a prison was not a place of shame. Instead, it was a place of honor set aside for those brave enough to act on their consciences.

171–174 A minority is powerless when it goes along with the majority. However, a minority can have great influence when it opposes the majority.


176–179 **If a thousand . . . innocent blood.** If a thousand men refused to pay taxes, such action would not be violent. Those who pay taxes to support a war, however, are guilty of violence.

 **Reading Check**

What does Thoreau suggest is the best way to change unjust policies?

Pause & Reflect

1. Thoreau says that he denies the government through its representative. Who is that representative? (**Clarify**)


 **MARK YOUR READING** 2. What would happen to slavery if even one honest person were to go to jail as a form of protest? Circle the sentence on page 98 that tells the answer. (**Cause and Effect**)

3. Reread the boxed sentence on page 100. How would you state Thoreau's idea in your own words? (**Paraphrase**)

4. Which two phrases below are true to Thoreau's views of a "peaceable revolution"? Circle or check them. (**Infer**)

- involves breaking the law
- never causes bloodshed
- is led by the majority
- is based on conscience

Read to find out about Thoreau's experience in jail.

 **MARK IT UP** As you read, circle details that help you understand his attitude toward this experience.

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the

foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and *they* were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe

WORDS
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conclude (kən-klōd') *v.* to arrive at a judgment or decision
blunder (blūn'dər) *n.* a mistake
meditation (mēd'ī-tā'shən) *n.* a thought or reflection
confront (kən-frūnt') *v.* to come up against; meet face to face

GUIDE FOR READING

poll tax: a tax that one had to pay in order to vote.

Thoreau tells of his time in jail and his feelings about his experience.

Others do not know how to react to him.

Thoreau will not let government force him to do anything.



Why has Thoreau refused to pay his taxes?



Lines 202-207

Notice the contradiction in these lines. Thoreau in jail is truly free. The townsmen outside the jail are not.

underbred: ill-mannered.

I could not . . . that was dangerous: To Thoreau, his townspeople are fools. They locked him in jail to punish him. All they punished, however, was his body. They could not lock up their real enemies—Thoreau's mind and his conscience; **without let or hindrance** (hīn'drəns): without encountering obstacles.

spite: grudge.



Why does Thoreau lose all respect for the State?

Hindrance means "something that delays, blocks, or prevents action."

after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a **multitude**? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of *men* being *forced* to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government which says to me, "Your money or your life," why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and **flourish** as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

Pause  Reflect

GUIDE FOR READING

227-238 They only can force me who obey a higher law than I: Thoreau says that only those on a higher spiritual level can make him want to be like them.

236 snivel: whine or complain.

236 machinery of society: the government.

237 an acorn and a chestnut: An acorn is the fruit of an oak tree; a chestnut is the nut from a chestnut tree.

238 inert: unable to act.

1. Thoreau was put in jail because _____

(Clarify)

2. Review the details you circled as you read. Then write a sentence to **summarize** Thoreau's feelings about his experience in jail. (Main Idea)



3. Read aloud the boxed sentences on page 104. Both the acorn and the chestnut obey the laws of nature. They fall to the ground, where each tries to take root, grow, and develop into a tree. What does this example suggest about Thoreau himself? (Infer)



In this essay, Thoreau uses **aphorisms**—brief statements that each express a truth about life. Why do you think Thoreau uses aphorisms in this **persuasive essay**? **In your own words, rewrite the following aphorisms.**

1. "That government is best which governs not at all;" (lines 6–8)
2. "Law never made men a whit more just;" (lines 49–50)
3. "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man." (lines 241–242)

WORDS
TO
KNOW

multitude (mŭl'tī-tōōd') *n.* a great number of people
flourish (flŭr'īsh) *v.* to thrive