
Using Thoreau's *Walden* to Teach Writing and Rhetoric

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Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is an excellent text for teaching many of the complexities of writing in undergraduate courses. *Walden* is richly rhetorical, stylistically sophisticated, and contains examples of some of the finest nonfiction prose ever published in America. The composition of *Walden* is also pertinent to writing instruction since part of it followed a composing process that moved from journal entries to publicly delivered lectures and finally to heavily revised prose. Thoreau revised *Walden* numerous times, and he tested out many of his ideas in his fourteen volume journal and in lyceum lectures.

I intend here to explore the diverse ways that instructors can use *Walden* to study the elements of writing nonfiction prose. I have used *Walden* as a text in writing courses of varied types including required freshman English, honors literature and composition, and advanced courses on expository or rhetorical writing. I will discuss teaching strategies that can be applied in freshman level writing courses, advanced writing courses, and in courses that emphasize writing about literature.

Walden is also a useful text for studying the successful application of rhetorical techniques, strategies, and concepts. Instructors can provide students with a list of rhetorical terms that they will need to fully study Thoreau's rhetoric (see Appendix). *Walden* will also confront readers with rhetorical sentence forms

that are neglected or treated only superficially in grammar or rhetoric handbooks. The first two chapters of *Walden*, for example, are rhetorically intense largely because Thoreau uses aphorisms, paradoxes, and proverbs—three rhetorical forms that have oral roots—to shape his readers' responses. After being introduced to these concepts, students can be asked to identify several of each type, and explain how they operate and what they mean. This exercise will open up a rich vein of material for class discussion. I often ask each student to select at least three examples of Thoreau's sententious phrasing and to identify the rhetorical form of each. Here is a list of sententious statements that illustrate Thoreau's use of the aphorism, paradox, and proverb form:

The Mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. (8)

But lo! Men have become the tools of their tools. (37)

I have learned that the swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot. (530)

Our life is frittered away by detail. (91)

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. (98)

Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they
make a thousand stitches to save nine tomorrow.
(93)

Cumulative or additive sentences are common in the natural history sections of *Walden*. This is a sentence form unfamiliar to most students but very common in modern and contemporary American prose. The instructor can illustrate their use in such chapters as "Spring," and "Conclusion," for example. Instructors can require students to identify examples of cumulative sentences, and students should be required to write some of their own to at least experience the rhythm of this sentence form that Thoreau uses so effectively to create graphic and dynamic imagery of the natural world. Here are two particularly effective examples of Thoreau's cumulative sentences from "Spring:"

We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes
in marshes where the bittern and meadowhen lurk,
and hear the booming of the snipe;
to smell the whispering sedge where only some
wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the
mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. (317)

We must be refreshed with the sight of inexhaustible
vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its
wrecks, the wilderness with its living
and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain
which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. (318)

The theory of the cumulative sentence as well as methods for teaching it can be found in Francis Christensen's *Notes Towards a New Rhetoric*. The fundamental principles of the cumulative sentence as identified by Christensen—levels of generality, direction of movement, texture, and addition—can also be taught through the analysis of Thoreau's rhetorical practice (Christensen 23-44). Introducing the complete rhetorical structure for the cumulative sentence at this time would help students' understanding of Thoreau's rhetoric and provide them with a new sentence form to use in their own writing.

Thoreau shapes his audience's responses in numerous ways beyond the sentence level. He carefully constructs his rhetorical persona in ways connected to his themes and rhetorical purposes. In the first two chapters of *Walden*, he projects the persona of a practical Yankee who is frugal, shrewd, meticulous, hard-working, conservative, conversant with the Bible, mechanically skilled, self-reliant, and a jack-of-all-trades. This rhetorical personality can build his own house, grow his own food, negotiate bargains, quote philosophers, and keep precise records of expenditures in balance-sheet accounting form. Students can find facts, images, patterns, and passages to help identify the features of this persona or find support for other personae used in other sections of the text like "Brute Neighbors" or "Conclusion." Students often identify his use of bal-

ance sheet accounting, his description of building his cabin, his statements on simplicity and agriculture as support for the practical Yankee persona. Analyzing his use of balance sheet accounting in *Walden's* first two chapters provides a useful exercise for students. What is the purpose of his attention to financial details? Why is he so meticulous? Why does he itemize down to the half penny? Who cares how much he spent on hair and chalk? These are all critical questions that students might ask as they investigate the creation of his rhetorical persona.

Thoreau uses many rhetorical questions throughout *Walden*. Sometimes he uses them intensely, including several in a single paragraph. Here students can analyze his use of rhetorical questions, making judgments about their effectiveness, and determining when they are used excessively. Certainly many novice writers over-use rhetorical questions, often developing their arguments through questions instead of careful explication and reasoning. Thoreau's prose offers a chance to examine one author's use of rhetorical questions in a rich cultural and rhetorical context and to link them to the specific genres and subgenres of *Walden*.

Several chapters of *Walden* also provide opportunities for studying the rhetorical use of analogies and metaphors. While *Walden* is densely metaphorical, and Thoreau often uses carefully developed analogies, "The Ponds" chapter provides one of the richest laboratories for the study of metaphoric prose, persuading readers to understand the ponds from diverse perspectives. Instructors may ask students to identify as many figurative ways of presenting the ponds as possible in this chapter. They can do this assignment at home, and a list of metaphoric perspectives on the ponds can be brought to class for discussion. Or students can work in groups to identify Thoreau's pond images. These activities will lead to very productive discussions as students present their findings. Sometimes they identify as many as thirty-five different metaphoric images of which the following examples are representative: "*Walden* is a perfect forest mirror"; the ponds are "great crystals"; they are "lakes of light"; and *Walden* is "earth's eye" (178-232).

Examining these metaphoric interpretations of the ponds

will lead to discussions of sensory language, imagery, and a variety of figures, such as metaphor, simile, personification, and synecdoche. In addition, this discussion should carry over to examination of two important sections of “Brute Neighbors”: “The Battle of the Ants” (228-32) and the “Contest with the Loon” (233-36). Students can be asked to write interpretations of both of these set pieces. Their interpretations of “The Battle of the Ants” often produce interesting discussions of Thoreau’s use of analogies between the ant world and the human world as well as of his rhetorical techniques. Interpretations tend to stress the larger meanings suggested by Thoreau’s microcosm—the Civil War, a commentary on warfare, connections between ants and people, as well as the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest. Discussion of “The Contest with the Loon” leads students to examine Thoreau’s use of clever metaphors to depict the behavior of this majestic, mysterious bird. This piece of natural history writing often leads, of course, to discussions of Thoreau’s philosophy of natural history.

Any rhetorical or stylistic study of *Walden* must involve the larger rhetorical patterns, movements, and design. Here students must explore his strategies of organization, his sequences, and his arrangement. They can explore the arrangement of chapters, his set pieces, paragraphs, or any large units of discourse. They can also examine how much the text is tied to the movement of the seasons. For example, they can apply Kenneth Burke’s theory of qualitative progression in this analysis (Burke 124-25). How does Thoreau use qualitative form in specific chapters of *Walden*? Students notice almost unanimously that Thoreau uses several diverse genres throughout the text. Asking them to identify these genres and provide textual examples or them is instructive. They often find themselves shifting reading strategies as they encounter different genres in *Walden*. Here is a brief list of some forms of writing associated with literary nonfiction that students often find in *Walden*: exposition, argument, persuasion, narration, poetic prose, natural history writing, nature writing, cultural criticism, memoir, autobiography, philosophical writing, meditation, the essay, inspira-

tional prose, parables, and exempla as part of the sermon form.

In the writing courses that I teach, students write expository, analytical, and interpretive papers. The length and complexity of papers will vary according to the course and its level of difficulty. Papers on *Walden* must, of course, be documented according to the MLA format, and they will be evaluated for such things as thoroughness of development, effective use of evidence, and coherence and clarity. Students can address a topic across the whole text of *Walden* or in some cases emphasize only a few chapters. Writing about Thoreau's complex portrayal of the ponds in "The Ponds" and "The Pond in Winter" or about Thoreau's rhetoric in chapters one and two are examples of highly focused papers on small sections of the text. One very useful assignment involves thoroughly analyzing Thoreau's rhetorical practices in a specific chapter of the text. This paper usually flows out of a group report in which students analyze the rhetoric of a single chapter. Hence the topic has been analyzed and discussed prior to writing the required paper. This is an effective way to help immerse students in the analysis of his style and rhetoric in a manageable and highly focused manner.

Students are encouraged to select their own topics with whatever teacher guidance they may need. I will often limit freshman writing students to a handful of manageable topics. For one freshman course on writing about the humanities, students could write on one of the following topics using *Walden*: Thoreau's portrayal of the natural world, self-discovery, portrayal of the ponds, his critique of materialism and or conformity, or his symbolic uses of nature. For more advanced students or for research papers on *Walden* or Thoreau's essays, students can select their own topics or choose from a large selection of suggested topics. Here is a representative list of topic areas that can be narrowed to manageable size and scope:

- Thoreau's economic philosophy
- Thoreau's ideas on individualism
- Thoreau on nature and ecology
- Thoreau on natural history
- Thoreau on morality and ethics

- Thoreau on conformity
- Thoreau's use of symbolic details
- Thoreau's use of the myth of seasons
- Thoreau on materialism
- Thoreau's critique of American society
- Thoreau's optimistic vision

The point of these longer assignments is for students to design their own project and to engage deeply with the text to find evidence in *Walden* to support their explications and interpretations. I want them to examine Thoreau's language, to identify important passages in the text, and to use concrete details whenever possible to support their ideas. They must engage with the ambiguities and contradictions of *Walden* as well as the complexity of Thoreau's thoughts and with his rhetorical practice. These assignments often produce excellent papers.

Basing part of a writing course on *Walden* can be a rich experience for students and teachers alike. Engaging with *Walden* obviously provides an intellectual challenge. Puzzling over Thoreau's rhetorical strategies can help teach students about effective rhetoric. Writing activities and the study of Thoreau's rhetoric will also generate lively discussions of Thoreau's techniques and ideas. Blending the study of rhetoric with the study of Thoreau's ideas builds a humanistic context for the study of rhetorical writing. Students, through controlled writing and rhetorical exercises, engage with literary history and with important themes and philosophies. They will also engage with themes pertinent to their own level of psychological development, such as identity, individualism, the power of conformity, and the disadvantages of excessive materialism.

Most importantly, they will experience rhetoric in action; rhetorical practice that is historically situated as well as effective in modern times. They will come to understand how an accomplished author uses the techniques traditionally studied in prescriptive handbooks on rhetoric and composition. They will also study a wide range of discourse forms in *Walden* in instructive and challenging ways.

Appendix

List of Rhetorical Terms Useful for Studying *Walden*

- Abstraction Ladder
- Antithesis
- Analogy
- Aphorism
- Asyndetic Parataxis
- Balance in Sentences
- Cumulative Sentences
- Didactic
- Exemplum
- Hyperbole
- Imagery
- Journal Writing/Free Writing
- Mechanical Form
- Microcosm
- Organic Form
- Parable
- Parallelism
- Periodic Sentence
- Persona/Voice
- Personification
- Polysyndeton
- Paradox
- Proverb
- Qualitative Form
- Rhetorical Questions
- Sensory Language
- Sententia
- Simile
- Synecdoche

Works Cited

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