



LESSON 1: From Ben's Pen to Our Lives

OVERVIEW

Franklin was an ambitious and accomplished writer, who deftly exercised his wit and wisdom to convey his point of view. As a 16-year old apprentice to his brother James, a printer, Franklin correctly assumed that his brother would not knowingly publish his work. So, using the pseudonym of Silence Dogood, Franklin wrote a series of letters to the editor of *The New-England Courant*, James's newspaper. Franklin's disguise was that of a "prim," middle-aged widow from a rural area—a remarkable contrast to the cheeky unmarried teenager who had never been out of Boston! The letters poked fun at the pretensions of the elite and the follies of everyday life, but also revealed Franklin's emerging opinions on education, women, and religion.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Be introduced to the unique blend of humor and insight that characterized much of Franklin's writing throughout his life.
- Analyze the meaning of Franklin's essays and identify the personas reflected in the writing.
- Craft their own newspaper editorial, under an assumed persona, that addresses an important contemporary local or national issue.

TIME

This lesson and activity require one to two class periods.

MATERIALS

- All Franklin readings below can be found in:
Franklin Writings, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay. (New York: The Library of America, 1987).
 - ▶ Silence Dogood No. 1 in *The New-England Courant*. (April 2, 1722). Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf1/sd1.htm.
 - ▶ Silence Dogood No. 2 in *The New-England Courant*. (April 2, 1722). Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf1/sd2.htm.
 - ▶ The Busy-Body No. 1 in *The American Weekly Mercury*. (February 4, 1728/9). Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf2/bb1.htm.
 - ▶ Anthony Afterwit in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. (July 10, 1732). Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf2/pg1732.htm.
 - ▶ Richard Saunders (Benjamin Franklin). Excerpt from *Poor Richard's Almanack, 1737*. Available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/loa/bf1737.htm>.
- Internet access

McREL STANDARDS

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 10. Understands the characteristics and components of the media

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Discussion

Begin by asking students why a writer might choose to publish a story under a different name. Inform students that writing under a pseudonym is a time-honored tradition and that Franklin was not unique to this practice. Ask students what a writer might achieve by writing under a pen name that they could not otherwise achieve using their real identity.

2. Divide class into student pairs. Distribute copies of Franklin's letters (see Materials section) to each pair. (Additional Franklin writings can be found at History Carper, www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf1/sd15.htm.) Ideally, each pair is assigned a different reading. Ask the pairs of students to read their assigned reading and answer the following questions:

- What is the key issue being addressed in the reading?
- What voice or personality did Franklin assume to write the text?
- Why do you believe he chose this voice instead of his own?
- Do you think Franklin holds the same opinion as the "writer" of the text?
- Does the reading demonstrate the use of humor or satire? If so, provide an example and explain.
- What was Franklin's opinion on this issue?

3. Groups share a summary of their essay with the class, providing the topic, main point, and persona through which the view is expressed. Groups should also share/discuss their answers to the above questions.

4. Homework

Instruct students to compose a letter to the editor of their town's newspaper addressing an issue that is in the news today. Students must craft the letter in the voice of another person, someone whose perspective will require some thought and imagination. Students should be encouraged to use wit and satire as strategies to convey their points of view.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their participation in class discussion and on the extent to which their own letters to the editor demonstrate an understanding of persona, voice, humor, and satire as rhetorical strategies.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Students present their letters to the class by taking on the persona of the letter writer through speech, body language, and/or costume.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/BFrWr.html
- www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf3/quakers.htm
- www.ushistory.org/franklin/courant/index.htm