

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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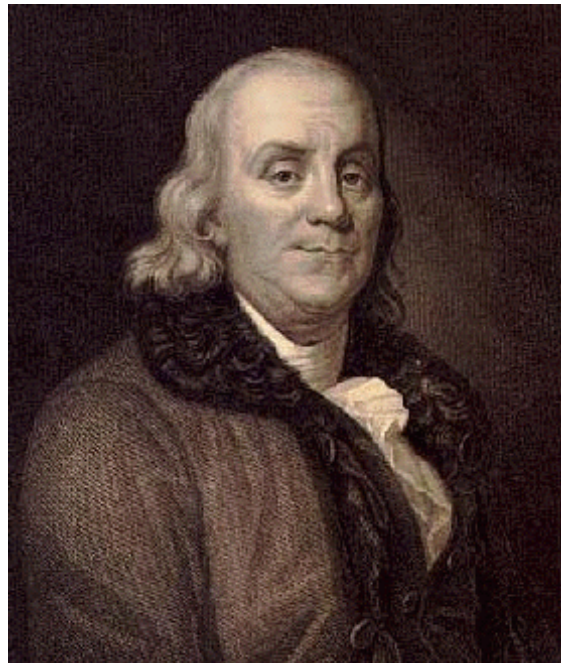
Chapter 2: Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

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Source: [Portrait of Ben Franklin](#)

Primary Works

Dogood Papers, 1722; *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, 1725; *Poor Richard's Almanack* (first annual edition), 1732-57; *The General Magazine and Historical Chronical*, 1741; *Plain Truth* 1747; *Proposals Relating To The Education Of Youth In Pennsylvania* 1749; *Experiments And Observations on Electricity* 1751; *The Way to Wealth* 1757; *Causes Of The American Discontents* 1768; *Political, Miscellaneous, And Philisophical Pieces* 1779; *The Private Life Of The Late Benjamin Franklin, L.L.D....Originally Written By Himself, And Now Translated From The French* 1793.

Benjamin Franklin's Experiments; a new edition of Franklin's Experiments and observations on electricity. Edited, with a critical and historical introduction, by I. Bernard Cohen. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1941. QC516 .F85

Letters and papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson, 1753-1785. Edited and annotated, with an

introduction, by Carl Van Doren. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1947. E302.6 .F75

Benjamin Franklin and Catharine Ray Greene, their correspondence, 1755-1790. Edited and annotated by William Greene Roelker. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949. E302.6 .F75

Autobiography. With an introd. by Verner W. Crane. NY: Harper, 1956. E302.6 .F7 A2

Poor Richard, 1733: a facsimile of the only copy known, in the collection of the Rosenbach Museum & Library. Philadelphia: The Foundation, 1977. PS749 .A4

The ingenious Dr. Franklin: selected scientific letters of Benjamin Franklin. Edited by Nathan G. Goodman. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1974, 1931. Q113 .F7

Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism. Lemay, J. A. Leo, and P.M. Zall. eds. NY: Norton, 1986. E302.6 .F7 A2; Norton critical edition

The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 37: March 16 through August 15, 1782. Cohn, Ellen R. (ed.); Dull, Jonathan R.; Duval, Karen, and others. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003.

| [Top](#) | Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

Buxbaum, Melvin H., ed. *Critical essays on Benjamin Franklin.* Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987. E302.6 .F8 C785

Clark, Ronald W. *Benjamin Franklin: A Biography.* NY: Random House, 1983. E302.6 .F8 C54

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers.* NY: Basic Civitas, 2003.

Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life.* NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003.

Jennings, Francis. *Benjamin Franklin: Politician.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996.

Lemay, J. A. Leo. *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 1: Journalist, 1706-1730; Volume 2: Printer and Publisher, 1730-1747.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.

Wright, Esmond. *Franklin of Philadelphia.* Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1986. E302.6 .F8 W89

Zall, Paul M. *Franklin's Autobiography: A Model Life.* Boston: Twayne, 1989. E302.6 .F7 Z93

I. Major Themes in Franklin's Writing

1. Interest in the individual and society; the creation of an American national identity.
2. Tension between aristocracy and democracy; the awareness of America as distinct in values and interests from those of England.
3. Tension between appearance and reality; shift from an other worldly to a this worldly viewpoint.
4. Tension between romantic idealism and pragmatic rationalism; theory should be tested primarily by experience not logic; reason should be tested pragmatically.

II. Omissions in Franklin's Writings

1. Discussion of racial themes.
2. Love and emotion between men and women.
3. Discussion of the inspirational use of nature.

[Top](#) | III. *The Autobiography* (1815): A Chronology

Division	Began Writing In	At Age	Place	Years Covered
1	1771	65	England	1706-1730
2	1784	78	France	1731-1748
3	1788	83	Philadelphia	1749-1757
4	1789-90	84	Philadelphia	Inconsistent

Division 1: a. explanation why he wrote the book. b. remarks on his family. c. apprenticeship on *The Courant*. d. attempts at becoming an independent printer.

Division 2: Gives attention to what he considered as the causes for the attainment not only of his success up to this point, but also of his success in later life.

Division 3: a. the extension of virtue from an individual to a worldwide basis. b. a record of public projects - the largest and most important section. c. the progress of his political career.

Division 4: Centers on the dispute between the Proprietaries and the Pennsylvania Assembly and the successful petition of the latter to the King to abolish the tax exemption of these original grantees of land from the Crown. 1. Franklin's meeting and disagreement with Lord Granville on the proposition that the King is the legislator of the colonies. 2. The meeting with the Proprietaries at Thomas Penn's house in Spring Garden. 3. The debate and eventual resolution of the dispute in favor of the Pennsylvania Assembly with the help of Lord Mansfield.

[Top](#) | IV. List of Virtues

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 employ'd 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 extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. CLEANLINESS.

Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, 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.

Source: [The Autobiography Chapter 8](#)

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

<p>THE MORNING.</p> <p>Question. What good shall I do this day?</p>	<p>{5}</p> <p>{6}</p> <p>{7}</p> <p>{8}</p>	<p>Rise, wash, and address Powerful Goodness! Contrive day's business, and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast.</p>
	<p>{9}</p> <p>{10}</p> <p>{11}</p>	<p>Work</p>
<p>NOON.</p>	<p>{12}</p> <p>{1}</p> <p>{2}</p>	<p>Read, or overlook my accounts, and dine.</p>
	<p>{3}</p> <p>{4}</p> <p>{5}</p>	<p>Work</p>
<p>EVENING.</p> <p>Question. What good have I done today?</p>	<p>{6}</p> <p>{7}</p> <p>{8}</p> <p>{9}</p> <p>{10}</p> <p>{11}</p> <p>{12}</p>	<p>Put things in their places.</p> <p>Supper. Music or diversion, or conversation.</p> <p>Examination of the day.</p>
<p>NIGHT.</p>	<p>{1}</p> <p>{2}</p>	<p>Sleep.</p>

I enter'd upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continu'd it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surpris'd 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 transferr'd my tables and precepts to the ivory leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink, that made a durable stain, and on those lines I mark'd my faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After a while I went thro' one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employ'd in voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me.

Source: [The Autobiography Chapter 8](#)

| [Top](#) | Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Jasmine Metz

Benjamin Franklin was no ordinary “founding father.” America's first publishing magnate also took on the roles of writer, scientist, inventor, diplomat, and political thinker. He was a major contributor to establishing the United States of America as a country independent of Great Britain. He was a civic leader who, in his hometown of Philadelphia, established a lending library, college, volunteer fire brigade, insurance company, and matching grant fundraiser (Isaacson 2.) He served as a diplomat to France for many years. In the science arena Franklin is most well-known for proving that lightening is electricity, and for his numerous inventions.

It can be argued that Benjamin Franklin's most lasting legacy is his writing. The longtime publisher of the annual “Poor Richard's Almanack,” his works exemplify the American ideal of the Protestant work ethic, good humor, common sense, and wisdom (Amacher 127.) He was a deist, and exhorted his readers to live lives that were useful, frugal, virtuous, moral, and spiritually meaningful (Isaacson 4.) While Franklin became very wealthy and successful later on in his life, he never forgot his more humble beginnings as the son of a family of tradesmen. According to Isaacson, “ From these attitudes sprang what may be Franklin's most important vision: an American national identity based on the virtues and values of its middle class” (Isaacson 3.)

Benjamin Franklin was born January 17, 1706, in Boston, a youngest son of a youngest son for five generations (Amacher 128.) His father, Josiah Franklin, was a tallow and soap maker who had previously emigrated from England with his first wife, Anne, and three children. The couple had two more children before tragedy struck: 1688-89 saw the deaths of their 6th and 7th children at birth, and of Anne herself (Isaacson 13.) Josiah was married to Abiah Folger five months after his first wife's death in 1689. They had eight children, including Benjamin. Franklin grew up with ten older siblings and two younger sisters (Isaacson 15.)

As a child, Franklin was a voracious reader but had little formal education, just two years of grammar school. Initially, his father planned to prepare him for Harvard College and a career in the clergy. However, Josiah realized early on, and perhaps rightly so, his irreverent son was probably not suited for that particular career (Isaacson 19.) Franklin was pulled out of school at age 10 and put to work in his father's shop. Franklin was not silent about his dislike for the tedious and noxious work, so his father, fearing that his youngest son would “break loose and go to sea,” took Franklin to visit various other trade shops throughout Boston to find something that would be a better fit (Isaacson 20.) At age 12, Franklin became apprenticed to his brother James, 21, a printer.

James soon began publishing the first independent newspaper in the colonies, the *New England Courant* ((Amacher 128.) This newspaper provided the young Franklin with an opportunity and an environment for developing his writing skills. “The presence there of a group of young writers of satire& stimulated young Ben to try his hand at this kind of writing” (Amacher 128.) The result was a popular series of essays written from the point-of-view of “ Silence Dogood,” a gossiping, nosy, astute widow. Franklin also had the opportunity to take over the helm of the newspaper and print shop when his brother was jailed on two different occasions (Amacher 128.)

The brothers never got along very well. At age 17, after five years of working for James, Franklin ran away. A ten day journey took him to Philadelphia, where he began working in a print shop owned by Samuel Keimer (Isaacson 38.) Later on, at age 18, he sailed to England. He wanted to set up for himself and his purpose was to acquire type, machinery, and other equipment he would need, based on letters of credit from a powerful man, Governor William Keith, who took Franklin under his wing (Amacher 129.) Unfortunately, Keith's promises turned out to be empty, and Franklin was forced to rely on his own resources. He found work in London at a famous print house owned by Samuel Palmer,

and then at the larger John Watts' print house. While in London Franklin did a lot of soul-searching. It was here he explored his own ideas about religion (Franklin was a famous deist) and embarked on his lifelong journey of "self-improvement," practicing virtues he would expose later in his writings (Isaacson 46-49.)

| [Top](#) | Franklin returned to Philadelphia from London in late 1726, at age 20. After a few years of working at a general store and returning to work for his old boss, Keimer, he was finally able to strike out on his own (Amacher 130.) Franklin and one of Keimer's other employees, Hugh Meredith opened their own print shop in 1728, funded by Meredith's father (Isaacson 53.) Franklin was soon able to buy out Meredith and become the sole owner. This was a major accomplishment for the 22 year old Franklin. "Printing and its related endeavors began to seem not merely a job but an interesting calling, both noble and fun. In his long life he would have many other careers. But henceforth he always identified himself the way he would do sixty years later in the opening words of last will and testament: 'I, Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, printer.'" (Isaacson 55)

In 1732 Franklin embarked on his common-law marriage to Deborah Read. Due to some legal difficulties involving the unknown whereabouts of Deborah's first husband, the couple was never able to marry legally (Isaacson 74.) They raised Franklin's illegitimate son, William, who was born shortly before the Franklins' marriage. The mother's identity has never been discovered. The couple had two children of their own; Francis, who died of smallpox at the age of four, and Sarah.

Franklin began publishing the *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1733. His best-known quotations have come from this annual work. "The *Poor Richard* sayings, embodying the wisdom of the ages, were rarely original with Franklin himself. He merely rewrote them in such a way as to give them currency for his time; they were used as filler in between more important matters" (Amacher 133.) The cultural impact of Franklin's almanacs has been immeasurable; the little "fillers" Franklin threw in have become representations of the "American way" (Amacher 134.)

From 1732-1758 Franklin's writing spanned all subjects. His writing has been characterized as simple, orderly, and methodical; moralizing and didactic; rhetorical and persuasive (Amacher 135.) Along with the *Poor Richard* almanacs, he explored the Great Awakening, chronicled his many science experiments (including his work with electricity and the invention of the Franklin stove) and endorsed higher education. He was also involved in many civil improvement projects, served as Philadelphia's postmaster and a clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and was increasing his political activism (Amacher 135.)

From 1757 until his final return to the United States in 1785, Franklin spent the vast majority of these years abroad, as a diplomat to England and France. He still wrote prolifically, becoming more political. He was a major supporter of the Revolutionary War, and significant in the set-up of the United States government. In 1771 he began work on his famous autobiography. It was written over a period of eighteen years, and finally published in its complete form in 1868, after his death in 1790 (Amacher 142.)

Works Cited

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Study Questions

1. Why is Ben Franklin considered the most important personality of the Age of Reason?
2. Discuss several permanent contributions Franklin has made to American life, ranging from the practical to the ideological.
3. Explain why the eighteenth century was called the Age of Experiment and consider the relevance of this term as a description of Franklin's writing.
4. What is the "religion" Franklin "preaches" to his readers in Father Abraham's speech? How do you explain Franklin's use of religious metaphors in his writing?
5. Choose any single section or aspect of *The Autobiography* as the basis for analysis. Or contrast Franklin's choice of focus in its four parts; consider the significance of his choice to address the book to his son; read closely the letters that begin "Part Two" and comment on their significance to *The Autobiography* as a whole; discuss Franklin's various practical attempts to alter his moral character.

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