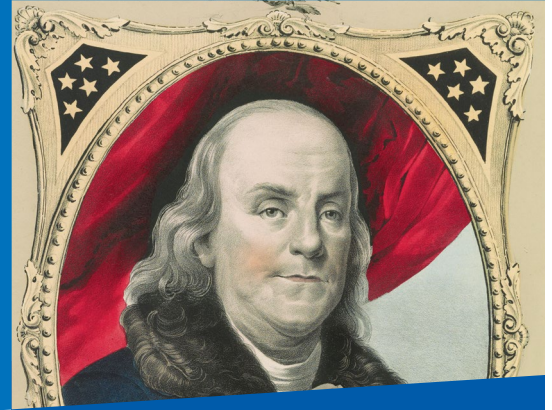


from The Autobiography

Based on the autobiography by **Benjamin Franklin**



This adaptation of the autobiography excerpt includes targeted passages from the text for you to read on your own.

BACKGROUND

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was the oldest of the founders of the United States—the people who worked together to create the government. He was 69 when he helped Thomas Jefferson draft the Declaration of Independence. He had already had an interesting life. He had been a printer, publisher, scientist, inventor, businessman, philosopher, postmaster, and statesman. He also wrote many essays, travel journals, newspaper articles, speeches, and more. His autobiography was his greatest work and is still read today.

NOTES

ADAPTATION

I thought of the difficult project of becoming morally perfect. I wanted to live without doing anything wrong at any time. I expected that I could conquer any faults, or mistakes, that my habits or other people might lead me into. I thought I knew what was right and wrong and thought I could learn to always do what was right. But I soon found that this was more difficult than I imagined. Often, while I was trying to avoid one fault, another fault would happen. I decided that just wanting to be completely virtuous, or without fault, wasn't enough to prevent a person from slipping into bad habits. Therefore, I created the following method for achieving my goal.

In various lists of moral virtues, I found that different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. **Temperance**, for example, included only eating and drinking for some writers, while others extended it to mean being moderate in appetite, inclination, or bodily or mental passion. Some writers even included greed and ambition. To be entirely clear, I decided to use more names, with fewer ideas attached to each. My list included thirteen names of **virtues** that I decided were necessary, along with a short general rule for each.

Reading Check

What goal does Franklin want to accomplish?

temperance: showing control in the things you say or do

virtues: good qualities

These names of virtues, with their rules, were:

1. **Temperance.** Don't eat or drink too much.
2. **Silence.** Only speak when it helps others or yourself. Avoid trivial, or unimportant, conversation.
3. **Order.** Have places for all your things; have a regular schedule for your business or work activities.
4. **Resolution.** Decide to do the things you should; do not fail to do what you decide.
5. **Frugality.** Do not spend money except to help others or yourself; waste nothing.
6. **Industry.** Do not waste time; always work at something useful; stop all unnecessary actions.
7. **Sincerity.** Do not hurt people with lies and tricks; speak innocently and justly to others.
8. **Justice.** Do not hurt others; do the good and honest things that are your responsibility.
9. **Moderation.** Avoid extremes; do not overreact to things that annoy or hurt you.
10. **Cleanliness.** Don't accept a dirty body, clothes, or house.
11. **Tranquility.** Do not be upset by trivial things or by common or unavoidable accidents.
12. **Chastity.** Use relationships with the other gender only to stay healthy and have children, not to cause harm to your own or another person's peace or reputation.
13. **Humility.** Imitate Jesus and Socrates, a philosopher who believed that knowledge comes through talking and questioning ideas.

My intention was for all of these virtues to become habit. I thought it would be best not to become distracted by attempting all of them at once. It would be better to focus on one of them at a time. Then when I mastered, or achieved, that one I could move on to each of the others until I went through the thirteen. Since mastering some virtues first might help in mastering others, I arranged them in the order shown above.

Temperance is listed first because a person who has temperance thinks clearly. This is very necessary when a person needs to avoid the attraction of old habits and temptations. Once I achieved Temperance, Silence would be easier. I gave Silence the second place because I wanted to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue. I thought that in conversation knowledge was obtained by listening rather than by speaking. I also wished to break my habit of prattling, punning, and joking, which made only less interesting people want to talk to me.

I expected that Silence and the next virtue on the list, Order, would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. Resolution, once it became a habit, would keep me firm in my endeavors,

Reading Check

How did Franklin decide on the order in which to list the virtues?

or efforts, to obtain all the rest of the virtues. For example, Frugality and Industry would free me from my remaining debt and would create wealth and independence. This would make the practice of Sincerity and Justice easier, etc. I then thought that daily review of my progress would be necessary. Therefore, I created the following method for conducting that examination.

Read this passage from the selection to understand how Benjamin Franklin wanted to record his progress.

TARGETED PASSAGE

5 I made a little book, in which I **allotted** a page for each of the virtues. I 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 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, and 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.

allotted: gave; assigned

examination: inspection; analysis; evaluation

✓ Reading Check

Why does Franklin record his progress? How will knowing his mistakes help him achieve his goal?


TEMPERANCE							
eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
T.							
S.	•	•		•		•	
O.	••	•	•			•	•
R.			•			•	
F.		•			•		
I.			•	•			
S.							
J.							
M.							
C.							
T.							
C.							
H.							

ADAPTATION (continued)

I decided to give each virtue a week of strict attention in the listed order. Thus, in the first week, my goal was to avoid mistakes with Temperance. I did not worry about the other virtues, but I marked the mistakes I made in every virtue every evening. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I expected the habit of that virtue to be strengthened. That meant I could extend my attention to include the next virtue, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last virtue, I could complete all of them in thirteen weeks, and repeat the sequence four times in a year.

This process is like the person who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to get rid of all the weeds at once because it would be too difficult. Instead, the person works on one section of the garden at a time, and then proceeds to the next. As I went through the thirteen weeks, I hoped to have the encouraging pleasure of seeing the progress I made in virtue. If I cleared the lines of their spots by the end of the weeks, I would be happy to see an entirely clean chart....

To help achieve the rule of Order that required that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following schedule for the twenty-four hours in a day.

 **Reading Check**
Why does Franklin decide to work on one virtue at a time?

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

I started this plan for self-examination, and continued it, with some pauses, for a long time. I was surprised to find myself with more faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish, or lessen. To avoid the trouble of creating new little books after scraping out the marks made holes in the paper, I transferred my charts and rules to a notebook. On the ivory pages of this book, I drew lines with red ink, and on those lines I marked my faults with a pencil. I could easily wipe out the pencil marks with a wet sponge.

After a while, I went through only one thirteen-week course in a year. Thereafter, I only did one every several years. Finally, I omitted them entirely. I was too busy with travel and business abroad, with many affairs that interfered. But, I always carried my little book with me.

The virtue of Order gave me the most trouble. I found that the rule might be practical for a person whose business allowed him to have a regular schedule. For example, the schedule of a printer was regular, but the boss of the print shop had to do business with many people and often had to meet with people when they were available. Order, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not learned to put things in order when I was young. Since I had a very good memory, I had no problems caused by not following a process, or method, in organizing my life.

I made so little progress in this virtue that I was almost ready to give up the attempt. I thought I would have to be happy with a faulty character in that respect. I was like the man who, in buying an ax from a blacksmith, wanted to have the whole ax shiny. The smith agreed to grind it for him if the man would turn the wheel as the ax was shined. The man turned the wheel while the blacksmith pressed the ax hard on the stone, which made turning the wheel tiring. The man looked every now and then to see how the work was going, and soon decided he would take his ax as it was, without further grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by-and-by; so far, it is only speckled." "Yes," said the man, "*but I think I like a speckled ax best.*"

I believe this may have been the case with many people, who did not have the lists and charts that I created. They found it difficult to break bad habits and gave up the struggle, deciding that "*a speckled ax was best.*" Even I started to think that my strict rules for myself might be a kind of foppery, or overly great concern, with morals. My rules and charts would make other people tease me if they knew about them. In fact, a perfect character might cause a person to be envied and hated. I realized that a kind man should allow a few faults in himself in order to keep his friends' approval.

 **Reading Check**

Why does the man in Franklin's story decide he likes a speckled ax better than a shiny one? How is this similar to how Franklin thinks about the virtue of Order?

Read this passage from the selection to find out why Franklin had trouble with the virtue of Order.

TARGETED PASSAGE

10 In truth, I found myself **incorrigible** with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very **sensibly** the **want** of it. But, on the whole, though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and 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, though they never reach the wished-for excellence of those copies, their **hand** is mended by the endeavor, and is tolerable while it continues **fair** and legible.

incorrigible: not able to be improved

sensibly: keenly; noticeably

want: lack or deficiency of something

hand: handwriting

fair: acceptable; moderately good

Reading Check

Why is Franklin happy that he tried to achieve the virtue of Order?

descendants: people who are related to a person who lived a long time ago

ADAPTATION (continued)

Perhaps my **descendants** should be told that their ancestor owed his great happiness in life (at least to his 79th year, in which this autobiography is written) to the clever way he tried to achieve every virtue. What problems may affect the rest of his life is in the hand of Providence, or God. If problems do happen, remembering past happiness should help in accepting them. He has Temperance to thank for his long-continued health. Industry and Frugality helped him to be comfortable

and to gather enough money. The knowledge that he gathered helped him be a useful citizen and gave him some degree of reputation, or respect, among educated people. He has Sincerity and Justice to thank for the confidence of his country and the honorable work it gave him. He is grateful to the influence of all the virtues, even though he acquired them imperfectly. Because of all the virtues, he had an evenness of temper and cheerfulness that even now make younger people want to speak with him. I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow and benefit by the example I set.



TURN & TALK

In a small group, discuss Benjamin Franklin’s ideas about the virtues he wanted to achieve. Are there virtues that you think should be added to or removed from the list? Would it be worthwhile to follow his example for thirteen weeks? Why or why not?

