



Critical Thinking Exercise Introduction and Tasks

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1. Aim of this Exercise

The Critical Thinking process consists of 7 steps, outlined in the previous part of this course. This exercise focusses on the first step – “Identify the problem”.

In order to answer the questions one should ask during this step, the “close reading” technique (Paul & Elder 2003) can be used. In this exercise you will use the first two levels of the Close Reading technique – paraphrasing and explicating, as important parts of the Critical Thinking process.

The sample text used for this exercise is an excerpt from Henry D. Thoreau’s “On Civil Disobedience” from the late 19th century.



2. The Author

Henry David Thoreau

Born: 12.07.1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, USA

Died: 06.05.1862 (aged 44) in Concord, Massachusetts, USA

- American naturalist, essayist, poet, and philosopher
- He contributed to ecology and environmental history, and was a lifelong abolitionist, writing and lecturing against slavery.
- His philosophy of civil disobedience influenced Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.



Photo taken by: Benjamin D. Maxham, 1856
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3. The Text - Introduction

- In 1848, Thoreau held lectures on “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in relation to Government”. These were the basis for his famous essay;
- In 1849, the essay was published in Aesthetic Papers as “Resistance to Civil Government”;
- In 1866, four years after his death, it was republished as “Civil Disobedience”;
- Today it is also published as “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” or “On Civil Disobedience”.
- The text influenced Gandhi’s and Kings’s nonviolent resistance as well as the 20th century peace movement.

Resistance to Civil Government.

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ART. X. — RESISTANCE TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

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 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.

This American government, — what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The

Aesthetic Papers, p. 189, 1849
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1. Read the text excerpt in part 5 of this document. The full text can be found as an additional material in this course as well. Take your time and look up any phrases you might have difficulties expressing in your own words.
2. Paraphrase the text in sections – see slides below (part 6). Paraphrasing means to accurately translate the author's writing into your own words. It does not include any evaluation of the truth or value of what is written, it just makes you better understand the meaning of the text. Take your time working on each sentence until you are satisfied that you have captured the essential meaning of the part of the text you are paraphrasing as precisely as you can.
3. Explicate the thesis of the excerpt – see slide below (part 7). Explicating extracts the author's thesis from the text and uses examples and illustrations for a better understanding of this thesis.



After completing these three tasks, you can compare your written answers with some specimen answers provided in the next file of this section. Keep in mind that there are multiple ways to accurately paraphrase or explicate a text, so do not dwell on the specific phrases used, but rather compare the clarity, precision, and relevance of your text with the given sample solutions.

If you want to go deeper and work on the more elaborate parts of the close reading exercise, see Paul & Elder (2003).



5. The Text - Excerpt

“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 through it.”

[...]

“Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?”

[...]

“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. ”

[...]

“If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go.”

[...]

“If the 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.”



6. Your Tasks - Paraphrase

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.

Paraphrase:

Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe: "That government is best which governs not at all;"

Paraphrase:

and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.

Paraphrase:

Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.

Paraphrase:



6. Your Tasks - Paraphrase

Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?

Paraphrase:

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.

Paraphrase:

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.

Paraphrase:



After reading the given excerpt from „On Civil Disobedience“, complete the following four tasks:

1. State the thesis of this text in your own words.
2. Elaborate the thesis with additional explanation („In other words...“).
3. Give one or more examples of the thesis.
4. Illustrate the thesis with a metaphor or analogy.

Please work through these tasks (Paraphrase & Explicate) and write down your answers. Once you are done with that, move on to the next file and compare your answers with the provided sample solutions.



Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2006) Critical Thinking Reading & Writing Test – How to Assess Close reading and Substantive Writing. The Foundation for Critical Thinking.
www.criticalthinking.org

Thoreau, H.D. (1849) Resistance to Civil Government (On the Duty of Civil Disobedience). Aesthetic Papers. www.Gutenberg.org/ebooks/71

