

Study questions are listed by paragraph ¶ number of the text.

¶1

1. What do you think government is? What kind of government do you think Thoreau is referring to?
2. Early in his essay, Thoreau tells us that the government is best when it governs not at all. How can there be a government that actually does this? What does this statement assume about the ability of human beings to live with each other? Do you think Thoreau is right? Why?
3. Vocabulary: expedient; inexpedient

(For fun, look up a word now and then using the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).)
4. What is a "standing army"? And by extension, what is a "standing government"?
5. What does Thoreau take to be the relationship between the government and the people?
6. Find out what was the outcome of the Mexican-American War. Thoreau seems to cite the Mexican war as one reason why he is unhappy with the government. Specifically, he tells us that, in going to war, the US government has not listened to the people. Why might Thoreau's claim about public opinion not be justified?
7. Does Thoreau offer approbation or disapprobation for the war?

¶2

8. Thoreau speaks of the government as though it were a person or a living entity. Do you think our government is such a thing?
9. "Tradition" is a loaded term here. What is Thoreau's value judgment on "tradition"?
10. In what sense do you suppose a single person could bend the government to his or her will?
11. Explain the simile of the "wooden gun".
12. What is the "it" to which Thoreau refers when he writes "But it is not the less necessary for this"? What does he mean?
13. What does "din" mean here?
14. Usually "imposition" has a negative connotation. Does it have that here?
15. Vocabulary: alacrity
16. To what does the pronoun "it" refer in "it is excellent, we must all allow."

17. Thoreau denies that the government has furthered any enterprise except by getting out of the way. What enterprises might Thoreau be speaking about? And do you think that our government today would serve us well by "getting out of the way"? Why?

18. Instead of the government, what has done the work of the country?

¶3

19. What chief complaint does Thoreau make in ¶3?

20. Vocabulary: fain

21. Whom does Thoreau think should be punished? Why?

¶4

22. Thoreau advocates for what kind of government? What form of government would command your respect?

23. How does Thoreau suggest people go about creating this new form of government?

¶5

24. What problem does Thoreau see with majority rule?

25. Give your definition of "conscience". What do you think Thoreau means by 'conscience'? What role does Thoreau say conscience play in society? Why does he think conscience is superior to the law? Do you agree with him? Why?

26. Do you think that a person can be sufficiently confident that his or her conscience is right on a particular issue? Why? Do you think a person's conscience is able to address all issues or do you think that some issues exist that a conscience cannot? What is your reason for thinking so?

27. Under what circumstances can a corporation have a conscience?

28. Vocabulary: whit

29. Vocabulary: magazines

30. Can the law (or following the law) make a person more just? Why or why not?

31. What dangers does Thoreau see in being overly obedient to "the law"?

¶6

32. Vocabulary: black arts

33. What kind of scene is Thoreau envisioning?

34. Vocabulary: laid out

35. What does it mean to be "laid out alive"?

¶7

36. What is the meaning of the poem from your perspective?

¶8

37. Vocabulary: posse comitatus

38. Vocabulary: &c

39. Thoreau makes a distinction between what three categories of people?

¶9

40. What do you take the first line of the poem ("I am too high-born" to be propertied") to signify?

¶10

41. What kind of person or activity is Thoreau describing in each type here? What do you think Thoreau envisions as giving yourself "entirely" or "partially" to your fellow-man?

¶11

42. What was the "Revolution of '75 about? Would Thoreau have advocated for revolution then? Why or why not?

43. What is the "invading army" Thoreau speak of?

44. Why is it not too soon from Thoreau's perspective to "rebel and revolutionize"?

¶13

45. William Paley was an English theologian and philosopher. What rule of thumb does Paley advocate? Why does Thoreau think this an unreasonable rule of thumb in some cases?

¶14

46. Thoreau places Massachusetts on Paley's side of the debate. Why?

¶15

47. What does the poem depict the state of Massachusetts as?

¶16

48. What attributes of his fellow citizens does Thoreau criticize?

¶17

49. Why is voting a kind of gambling in Thoreau's view?

50. Thoreau thinks that just voting will do little to effect change in society. What else has to happen for one's vote to matter?

¶18

51. Thoreau prefers what type of voter?

52. Vocabulary: demagogue

53. Vocabulary: gregariousness

54. Instead of being a country filled with the type of citizen Thoreau desires, what has the country basically become?

¶19

55. What is a citizen's duty?

56. In what hypocrisy and inconsistency does Thoreau see his fellow citizen engage?

57. What is the difference between being immoral and unmoral?

¶20

58. Try your hand at reconstructing Thoreau's argument here about the relationship between those who disapprove of certain government action being its "most conscientious supports".

59. What is "the Union"? Why do some want to dissolve it?

60. What is the other "union" that Thoreau discusses?

61. What action does Thoreau think people could take to dissolve this union?

¶21

62. Vocabulary: aggrieved

63. Thoreau makes an analogy between what two things?

64. What is the relationship Thoreau perceives between "action and principles"? Which comes first? The "action" or the "principle"?