

Name: _____

Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment

Objective: Benjamin Franklin was a proponent of Enlightenment thought and his life is a reflection of the values and goals of the Enlightenment. This movement was characterized by a focus on reason and logic as opposed to faith. Prominent thinkers asked questions about the nature of the universe, how it worked, etc. They also questioned the role of God in its operations. In this exercise, we will examine this reality through the lens of Benjamin Franklin’s most well-known achievement that brought him global fame and celebrity status—the famous lightning experiment.

Required Materials: Modern Marvels *Benjamin Franklin* clip

Directions: In class, watch the first 17 minutes of the documentary clip. Then participate in a Socratic discussion, reflecting on the questions and topics below.

Socratic Discussion Topics:

Topic 1: The Lightning Rod and the Link to the Enlightenment

Start with the quote at the bottom of the statue at the end of the segment:

- “He took lightning from the sky and the scepter from tyrants”
 - What does this phrase mean?
 - Why did some religious leaders oppose the use of lightning rods?
 - How can discoveries in science affect political authority? In this case, how did Franklin’s discovery undermine political authority? Discuss the impact of demystifying the world.

Topic 2: Franklin’s Inventions and Patents

Note Benjamin Franklin’s inventions, like the Franklin stove, spectacles, glass armonica, etc.

- Discuss how Franklin wanted to share these inventions with humanity. Contrast this with patented inventions
- Which do you think is preferable? Why? Link this to civic responsibility and personal ambition.
- Discuss patents – link them to economic liberty, their importance, etc.

Topic 3: Franklin and Modern Technology

Benjamin Franklin believed scientific experiments and discoveries should better mankind, a concept that is implicit in civic responsibility. If he could come back today, what would Franklin think of the following developments which use modern technology? Would they align with his values? Do they serve the larger community?

- Self-driving cars
- Online voting
- Twitter
- CRISPR (gene-editing technology)