

## Benjamin Franklin and the Enlightenment

**Grade Level:** 10-12

**Time Required:** 1 hour

**Historical Thinking Skill:** Analysis

**Objective:** Benjamin Franklin was a proponent of Enlightenment thought and his life is a reflection of the values and aspirations 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, the class will examine this reality through the lens of his most well-known achievement that brought him global fame and celebrity status—the famous lightning experiment.

**Required Materials:** Modern Marvels *Benjamin Franklin* clip.

**Video:** This clip comes from Season 12, Episode 16 of the History Channel’s series “Modern Marvels” – if it’s not available online for free, it can often be found on DVD or for a small price. <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=modern+marvels+benjamin+franklin&docid=608006819230923785&mid=9F1A6CC93F75C091BFEB9F1A6CC93F75C091BFEB&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

**Activity:** In class, watch the first 17 minutes of the documentary. Then lead a Socratic discussion, reflecting on the below topics and questions.

**Socratic Discussion Topics:** Some notes for discussion are included

### 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?
    - Tyrants relied on religion to support their rule. By demystifying the universe, their power would be diluted because their authority rested on authority
  - Why did some religious leaders oppose the use of lightning rods?
    - They were considered to “tamper with God’s work”
    - Consider discussing the issue of free will. How would knowledge be a threat to these leaders?
  - 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.
    - Church and state were closely linked in Europe. If you weaken the Church, you also undermine the government.
    - Contrast this with the United States, which puts a distinct boundary between civil and religious authority.

## 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
  - Consider linking this to the modern world. For example, should vaccines be patented or shared with the world?
- 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.
  - How is a patent a form of property? What if patents were not issued? What would be the impact?

## 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)

