Group One:

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…

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

Be sure your group understands this section of Civil Disobedience and is prepared to explain it to the class. Use these questions to help guide your thinking.

1. Is Thoreau using logos, ethos, and/or pathos here? Explain.
2. Emerson wrote, in “Politics”, “The less government we have, the better.” Who else have we read this year that also favored smaller government?
3. Thoreau says that his readers will have a government that doesn’t govern “when men are prepared for it.” How can Americans be prepared for this?
4. Define expedient. What is a government at its best?
5. Thoreau was against the Mexican-American war. Why?
6. Thoreau wants to make sure readers don’t see him as an anarchist. What are anarchists, and where does he draw a distinction between his line of thinking and theirs?
7. What is the call to action here?

Group Two:

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 is right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience. Law never made man a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? Or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.

Be sure your group understands this section of Civil Disobedience and is prepared to explain it to the class. Use these questions to help guide your thinking.

1. Thoreau makes a distinction between respecting “the law” and respecting “the right”. What is the difference? Which is more important in his eyes?
2. What are powder monkeys?
3. Why does Thoreau characterize this marching as “steep”?
4. The second section here is a paradox. Consider what Thoreau means by “gives himself”.
5. As you know, Thoreau was an abolitionist. How do his feelings about slavery influence his opinion of the government?

Group Three:

Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?...

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; perchance it will wear smooth – certainly the machine will wear out. 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. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

Be sure your group understands this section of Civil Disobedience and is prepared to explain it to the class. Use these questions to help guide your thinking.

1. Is Thoreau using logos, ethos, and/or pathos here? Explain.
2. Why doesn’t government welcome change?
3. What does Thoreau think people should do when faced with unjust laws?
4. Who was Copernicus? Who was Luther? How does Thoreau use these allusions?
5. How does Thoreau use the image of a machine in the second section? Remember that transcendentalists were a subset of romantics. They were also against the industrial revolution. Does this fact add to the imagery?

Group Four:

…I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, “But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now…

Be sure your group understands this section of Civil Disobedience and is prepared to explain it to the class. Use these questions to help guide your thinking.

1. Is Thoreau using logos, ethos, and/or pathos here? Explain.
2. What does Thoreau call on Abolitionists to do?
3. Thoreau talks a lot about conformity here. Does he sound like Emerson? How?
4. How does Thoreau redefine the power of the majority?
5. How does he define a peaceable revolution?

Group Five:

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder, for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, and it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it…

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow-countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot one with – the dollar is innocent – but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

Be sure your group understands this section of Civil Disobedience and is prepared to explain it to the class. Use these questions to help guide your thinking.

1. Does Thoreau use logos, ethos, and/or pathos here? How?
2. In what way is Thoreau freer than his fellow townspeople even when he is in jail?
3. What does he think the State should have done with him instead of locking him up? Why?
4. Why does he refuse to pay taxes?