

## Advice to a Young Tradesman (1748)

### Benjamin Franklin

#### Historical Background

Written three years before the publication of Franklin's famed *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, this essay originally appeared in a compilation titled *The American Instructor*. The volume was mostly a reprinting of a British work by George Fisher titled *The Instructor: Or a Young Man's Best Companion*. Franklin imported the book to the colonies and liked its main premise. After adding some new material—including the passage advising young tradesman, which he originally left attributed to an anonymous "Old Tradesman"—Franklin published the volume for an American audience with the new title.

Franklin himself remains one of history's greatest polymaths—an accomplished scientist, inventor, politician, diplomat, publisher, political theorist, and master of English prose. However, his renowned character and public persona served as perhaps his arguments' greatest advocates. Few writings on the subject of how one ought to live have ultimately been more influential on American society than Franklin's. Franklin's popular writings both gave voice to and helped define the American ethos that married hard work, thrift, community spirit, entrepreneurialism, and education. With Franklin's help, this ethos became a unique framework for how Americans believed they ought to live.

#### Historical Significance

In 1748, liberal capitalism was still in its early stages. The mercantilist system had given way to the greater freedom offered by open markets and exchange. However, Americans were still struggling in many ways to find an ethical framework that justified merit and reward in a society based on property, trade, and profit rather than one based on piety, hierarchy, and purity. Here, in Franklin's advice to "young tradesman" (which can be read as a dictum not just for the young, but also for society in general), one can see how this change in thinking was promoted by one of the era's greatest and most accomplished figures. Franklin's advice describes both how to be financially successful and how to be a good person—two ideas that in his thinking were deeply inter-connected. His ethical writings were eventually cited by early-nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber as a quintessential expression of the "Protestant work ethic," which Weber believed lay at the heart not only of American society, but of liberal capitalism altogether.

#### Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: thrift; work ethic; time management; profit; interest; credit; reputation; notions of the public and private good.

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- describe how Franklin viewed everyday behavior as shaping one's reputation;
- describe how Franklin believed one's choices regarding credit—and the delay of reward—could be seen as a reflection of one's character;
- evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Franklin's rules of conduct;
- explain the connection between virtue and prosperity in Franklin's system.

## Questions to Explore

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Franklin's argument? How might it apply to a modern context? Are there ways in which it is less applicable today?

If we recognize Franklin's advice as valuable, how might that affect the way we view issues regarding credit and debt today?

How should we judge Franklin's advice? Are his goals of getting rich and being a good person in conflict? Why or why not? Of these two goals, which do you think is more important to Franklin? Which should be more important in your view?

If we accept the idea that Franklin's views have been extraordinarily influential on Americans' self-perception, should those who disagree (with his ideas) still be held to these same standards? Why or why not?