

## Questions for Discussion

1. In this essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes his view of an ideal education. What are its defining characteristics?
2. In what ways is Emerson's advice appropriate to a child's first teacher — his or her parents?
3. Why does Emerson believe “[i]t is better to teach the child arithmetic and Latin grammar than rhetoric or moral philosophy” (para. 5)?
4. In what ways does this essay point out the education system's effect on teachers as well as students?
5. What exactly is the “natural method” to which Emerson refers (para. 8)?
6. Why does Emerson criticize schools as bureaucratic institutions (para. 10)?
7. Emerson refers to educating “a boy” and “a man” and uses masculine pronouns when referring to students. As a reader, does this gender bias affect how receptive you are to Emerson's ideas? Are his ideas equally applicable to women? If you do not think so, then how would they need to be changed to be applicable to both men and women, boys and girls?
8. Describe the adult that Emerson imagines would emerge from an education based on the principles he supports.

## Questions on Rhetoric and Style

1. What does Emerson mean when he says, “Nature loves analogies, but not repetitions” (para. 1)?
2. Why is the relationship between “Genius and Drill,” as Emerson explains it, paradoxical (para. 3)?

3. Paragraph 4 is taken up almost entirely by an extended example. What is Emerson's purpose in developing this long explanation?
4. Identify at least three examples of figurative language that Emerson uses to advance his argument, and explain their effect. In responding, consider the following line from paragraph 11: "Alas for the cripple Practice when it seeks to come up with the bird Theory, which flies before it."
5. Identify examples of the following rhetorical strategies in paragraph 13, and explain their effect: rhetorical questions, sentence variety and pacing, analogy, allusion, and imperative sentences.
6. Examine Emerson's appeals to pathos through highly emotional and evocative diction.
7. Rephrase the following sentence in contemporary language: "And yet the familiar observation of the universal compensations might suggest the fear that so summary a stop of a bad humor was more jeopardous than its continuance" (para. 12).
8. Explain why you do or do not interpret the opening line of paragraph 14 as ironic: "I confess myself utterly at a loss in suggesting particular reforms in our ways of teaching."
9. Why does Emerson believe that the "will, the male power" (para. 14) will be of less benefit to the child than "[s]ympathy, the female force"?
10. What is Emerson's purpose in shifting among the pronouns *I*, *we*, and *you*?
11. How would you describe Emerson's tone in this essay?

## Suggestions for Writing

1. In paragraph 12, Emerson makes the following assertion about education in his time: "Our modes of Education aim to expedite, to save labor; to do for masses what cannot be done for masses, what must be done reverently, one by one: say rather, the whole world is needed for the tuition of each pupil." What does he mean? (You might have to look up the meaning of *tuition* in this context.) Do you think that public education today still resembles Emerson's description? Explain.
2. If you were responsible for the education of a child, which of Emerson's assertions about education would you choose as your guiding principle? Write an essay explaining why you would choose that principle over another of Emerson's beliefs.
3. Explain why you agree or disagree with Emerson's assertion that "every young man [and woman] is born with some determination in his [or her] nature, and is a potential genius" (para. 10).
4. Write a response to Emerson in the voice of Francine Prose, explaining why you agree or disagree with the issues he raises and the positions he takes.
5. Evaluate your own schooling according to the criteria presented in paragraph 10.