

# Decision Education Foundation English Curriculum

## “Much Madness is Divinest Sense”

by Emily Dickinson

### Unit Snapshot

<b><i>Designed For</i></b>	High School Students
<b><i>Essential Questions</i></b>	What is the point of declaring a decision? Is the majority view the best one to follow? How are decisions related to popularity? What does it mean to have a “discerning eye”? Does it depend on pure talent or learned skill?
<b><i>Content and Skill Focus</i></b>	Decision Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• declaring a decision</li><li>• multiple perspectives in framing</li><li>• values and commitment to follow through</li></ul> English Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• how to read a poem</li><li>• listening to a poem</li><li>• use of paradox, irony, and connotation</li></ul>
<b><i>Expected Outcomes</i></b>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• declare and frame a decision</li><li>• develop more than one perspective for a given problem</li><li>• apply poetry reading skills</li><li>• define poetic terms: line, stanza, paradox, connotation</li></ul>
<b><i>Kinds of Assessment</i></b>	Performance Task: Diary entry of a non-conformist Journal assignment Small group discussion Quizzes on poetic terms and vocabulary
<b><i>Time Required</i></b>	A minimum of five class periods
<b><i>Comments</i></b>	While this lesson focuses primarily on conformity, non-conformity, declaring, and framing, it includes an exploration of ten contemporary poems in addition to an in-depth study of Dickinson’s “Much Madness is Divinest Sense.”

(Version 7)



# Overview

**General Description:** Through a close analysis of Emily Dickinson’s poem, students will explore the importance of the seven elements of decision quality and focus primarily on [declaring](#) and [framing](#) decisions. This lesson is designed for high school students, and it can be incorporated as a part of a larger unit of poetry or remain a stand-alone lesson. Teachers can easily adjust this lesson to serve either as an introduction to declaring and framing or as a more advanced exploration of the topics.

**Duration:** While the lesson is designed for five class periods, a warm up exercise using ten contemporary poems requires ten to fifteen minutes of class time for two weeks before students study “Much Madness.” The learning plan includes descriptions of class instruction, discussion and assessment listed in chronological order. This flexible format allows teachers to adapt the lessons according to the specific needs of their students. The duration can be adjusted by selecting or adapting the particular learning and assessment activities that will be most useful for the class.

**The Poem:** Because Dickinson’s poem is abstract, it is a challenging study for high school students. That said, the ambiguity of much of the language (Does “madness” mean insanity or anger--or both? Does “divinest” mean delightful or godly?) variety of interpretations (Is the poet’s tone one of anger or playfulness?), and multiple themes (insanity vs. sanity; individual vs. majority; rebellion) provide discussion topics that are appealing to most teenagers.

This lesson focuses primarily on the theme of the individual vs. the majority: how do we navigate the tricky waters of taking charge of our lives while gaining the approval of a group? Teenagers often face the challenge of declaring a decision that could cause their peers to view them as “mad.” Some examples: Everyone is drinking at this party--should I? Some of my friends in this class are cheating on math tests—should I? Do I associate with the new kid and risk the possibility of ridicule from my friends? Should I drive home with my friend who has been drinking? Sometimes declaring a decision requires taking a stand that goes against the majority view. While conformity may be easy, non-conformity can sometimes be the more beneficial route when seeking to make a good decision.

A second purpose of this lesson is to help students see the value of exploring multiple perspectives when framing a decision. The paradox Dickinson develops in her poem, beginning with the startling first line, challenges our perspective: the poem forces us to look at sanity, madness, majority, and rebellion from different points of view. This poem and lesson provide students with opportunities to exercise their skills in shifting frames and changing perspectives.



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# 1. Learning Plan

## Unit Preparation: Ten Poems

### Materials

Poetry Unit Warm Up

### Procedures

Based loosely on former poet laureate Billy Collins's *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools* (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>), this warm up gives students the opportunity to hear a variety of contemporary poems and practice decision skill vocabulary—the six elements of a good decision. Like *Poetry 180*, the primary goal is to inspire interest in poetry through familiarity: no tests, no grades, and no in-depth analysis of the ten poems. Reading and discussion should take approximately ten to fifteen minutes a day (for ten class periods).

Follow specific instructions found in **Poetry Unit Warm Up** (next page).

### Next Steps

Ask students to be on the lookout for a newspaper comic strip that they think is particularly funny. Tell them that during the course of the week you would like them to bring a comic strip to class. Collect for later use.



# Poetry Unit Warm Up

## Procedure:

1. Explain to the class that they will be taking a close look at Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Much Madness is Divinest Sense.” To prepare, or “warm up,” they will listen to a poem a day for the next two weeks. Explain that there are three purposes for this exercise:

- to become familiar with a variety of poems,
- to practice hearing and reading poetry,
- to see what light these poems shed on decision making, and
- to use the six elements of a good decision as a means to discuss the poems.

There will be no academic requirements for the ten poems.

2. Introduce the ten poem program to your students by projecting (or handing out copies) and reading Billy Collins’s poem, “Introduction to Poetry” <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>).

Then do the following:

- Ask for students’ reactions to the poem.
- Read the poem a second time.
- Ask the following discussion question: Where does the poem take a major turn? Why? Would someone like to describe the two frames in this poem?
- Points to emphasize:
  1. Poets often help us look at experience from different perspectives or frames.
  2. Notice that the people represented by “I” and “they” use two different perspectives and the word “but” signifies the frame shift. The poet longs for readers to enjoy the poem, but some readers insist on beating the poem to death in order to find meaning.
  3. Other ways to describe the two frames: intimacy with the poem vs. taking action against it; enjoyment vs. torture; living in the poem vs. killing it.
  4. Put a decision chain poster on the wall for reference throughout this unit. Connect the idea of perspective to decision making by pointing out the “Useful Frame” link. Explain that poetry can help us become more agile at moving among different frames.

3. Ask for volunteer readers and give them copies of their poems in advance. The titles are listed below, and teachers can print copies from *Poetry 180* website (links provided below). Readers should look up unfamiliar words and understand the guidelines for reading a poem (see *How to read a poem out loud*: <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-howtoread.html>). **Note:** So that the entire class has the opportunity to read, teachers can assign two readers for each poem.

4. At the beginning of the class, the reader first defines any unfamiliar words for the group and reads the introduction to the poem, if there is one. After the student reads the poem once, project the text for all to see (if possible) or hand out copies to the class. Next, the student reads the poem again. **Note:** It is important that students practice listening to the poem before they see it.

Then ask the class, “What are your reactions to this poem?” Once students have had a chance to share their responses, ask the discussion questions that follow each poem.



**The Poems.** Below is the list of ten poems selected from *Poetry 180*. Discussion questions related to decision making and guidelines for teachers follow each poem.

**“Did I Miss Anything”** by Tom Wayman

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/013.html>

**Discussion:** What choice was made before the time of the poem? Where does the frame shift in this poem? What values do you see describes in these stanzas?

**Notes for Teachers:** A student missed class—perhaps a choice, but we don’t know. The words “nothing” and “everything” signify frame shifts. Tease out the different values concerning class time. What assumption about class does the student make? Connect to the values and frame links of the decision chain.

**“Lift Your Right Arm”** by Peter Cherches

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/113.html>

**Discussion:** What insight does this poem give about the choices we make?

**Notes for Teachers:** At the end of the poem the speaker’s command reflects a narrow set of choices. Alternatives are sometimes limited by habit. Finding creative solutions can require looking beyond our usual courses of action. Connect to the “creative alternative” link of the decision chain.

**“Machines”** by Michael Donaghy

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/114.html>

**Discussion:** How does the author define chance? What is the connection between balance and movement? In what ways is decision making like riding a bike as described in this poem?

**Notes for Teachers:** At its core a decision is an action. Like bike riding and music, a decision comes to life when we commit to follow through—take action. At that moment none of the work that went into the decision matters anymore. A decision lived is like a bike ridden or a piece of music played. Connect to the commitment to follow thought link of the decision chain.

**“Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper”** by Martin Espada

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/136.html>

**Discussion:** Where and why does the frame shift in this poem? Describe the different frames.

**Notes for Teachers:** “Ten years later” signifies the shift. This poem demonstrates a shift of time, education, and experience. In decision making gathering information from our own past experience can help us as we make present choices

**“96 Vandam”** by Gerald Stern

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/150.html>

**Discussion:** Does the speaker make a decision in this poem?

**Notes for Teachers:** The speaker mentions what he “is going” to do. Because a decision is defined by action (commitment to follow through), we do not see a decision in this poem. The speaker explores possibilities.



**“Dandelion”** by Julie Lechevsky

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/156.html>

**Discussion:** What value(s) does the speaker express when she says, “I wish I could grow like a dandelion”?

**Notes for Teachers:** Some possibilities: graceful growth; inner strength; freedom: both rooted in one place and ability to blow into the next yard. Connect to values link question: What do I want?

**“Forgotten Planet”** by Doug Dorph

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/158.html>

**Discussion:** How many different perspectives (frames) are there in this poem? Identify them.

**Notes for Teachers:** daughter’s view; speaker’s perspective as a child with his father and now as an adult with “knowledge;” speaker’s father’s frame. Which frame does the speaker choose in this poem?

**“Mentor”** by Timothy Murphy

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/163.html>

**Discussion:** What choice does the speaker describe in this poem? What does he learn from hindsight?

**Notes for Teachers:** Decision was not to go to his mentor for help. The reason he did not go was fear. Fear can keep us from exploring creative alternatives or hinder out commitment to follow through (connect to decision chain poster). Ask for student examples.

**“Our Other Sister”** by Jeffrey Harrison

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/174.html>

**Discussion:** What does this poem suggest about how one decision is connected to another? What causes the “blowdart of remorse”?

**Notes for Teachers:** The speaker’s remorse could be both his regretting that he told his sister a lie and having to acknowledge that the other sister they had both grown to love did not exist. Decisions (good and bad) can increase in size and effect like a snowball rolling down a hill. Again, we have a speaker who learns from hindsight



## Introduce the Unit

### Materials

Student comic strips posted on a bulletin board (previous week)  
Comic Strip Example

### Procedures

- Before class pick a few of the comic strips that will be useful in a discussion of framing (perspective), declaring, and outcome. See **Comic Strip Example** for specific discussion questions and ideas.
- Continue with a class discussion of the following topics:
  1. *What makes someone a non-conformist or rebel?*
  2. *Name some examples from history, movies, literature, your experience.*
  3. *Are non-conformists accepted in our society? our school? your family? your social group?*

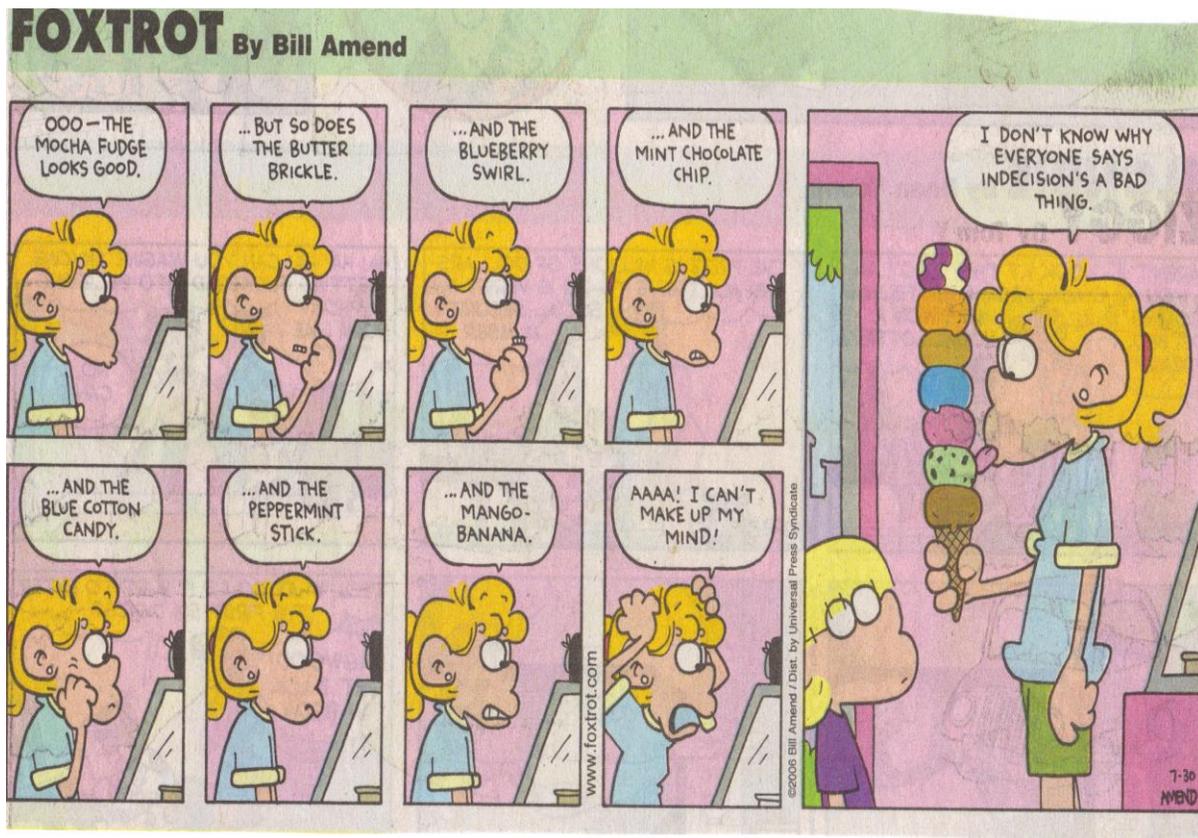
Record responses for later use in final class reflection.

### Next Steps

**Journal Entry 1:** *Describe an unpopular decision you made OR one you witnessed someone else make. (Students can complete this exercise in class or for homework.)*



## Comic Strip Example



1. *Has Paige made (declared) a decision? Explain.*

2. *What are some possible perspectives (frames) for this problem? What is Paige's perspective? Imagine how Jason and/or her mother might advise Paige to frame the decision.*

3. *What do you think of the outcome in the final frame of the comic?*

### Additional ideas for class discussion:

- While Paige ends up with an ice-cream cone, by her own admission she has not made a decision: one could argue that she ends up “going with the flow” of her desire to have every flavor.
- Comic strips provide good examples to help us understand framing. Have students discuss the differences between the frames in their strips. Here, for example, the first eight frames Amend created and the last one are noticeably different. Why the change? What is left in and omitted from the frames? Why is getting the frame right essential for making a good decision?

## Class Discussion and Instruction: Declaring and Framing

### Materials

Unit Snapshot

Handout 1—Declaring a Decision

The Poem: Student copies of “Much Madness is Divinest Sense”

Handout 2—Focus on the Frame

Handout 3—Framing Practice Part 1

### Procedures

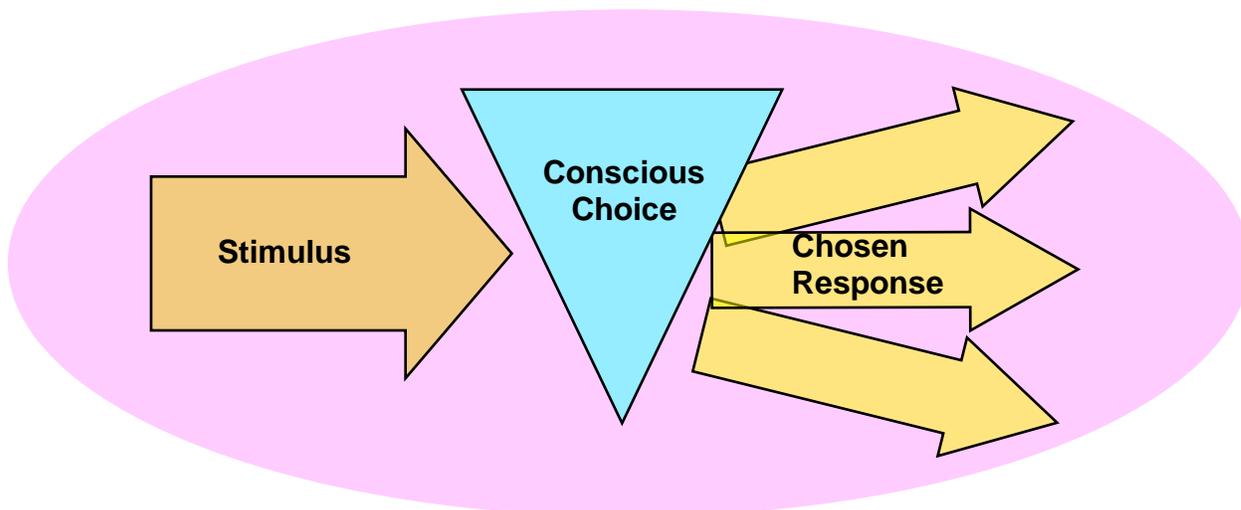
- Explain the goals of the unit by introducing the *Essential Questions* (from *Unit Snapshot*, page 1), the diary entry, the essay, and their rubrics.
- As students share responses to the first journal entry, use **Handout 1** to introduce the concept of *declaring a decision*.
- Give students copies of the poem and ask them to read it a few times to themselves.
- Read the poem aloud and help students define unknown words (*demur, discerning, stark, assent, divine*). Note the use of punctuation in the poem. Introduce the idea of perspective (and paradox). Ask students to identify different frames in the poem.
- Use **Handouts 2** and **3** to connect the idea of perspective and frame to decision making. **Handout 3** will work as a class, small group, or individual exercise.

### Next Steps

**Journal Entry 2:** *Rewrite in your own words the three sentences in the poem. Do they make sense in a different order? (What is the total number of possible alternatives?)*



**Handout 1. Declaring a Decision:** *An essential decision-making skill is recognizing when we have a decision to make.*



The opposite of *declaring a decision* is *going with the flow* or letting circumstances control us. Often we find ourselves in the middle of a situation before we even recognize we are making a decision. And sometimes we make a decision without realizing we have done so. Declaring a decision is a way we can take charge of our lives.

**For example:** *Jack's teammates were headed to the city on Saturday afternoon. They expected Jack to go with them because he always had before. When the group made the plan, Jack also assumed that he would go because that's what he always did. However, this time Jack had some other things he wanted to do with his brother, and he also was not comfortable with everything the group had planned. He liked his friends, and he did not want to disappoint them. However, Jack realized for the first time that his and others' habits and assumptions had clouded the fact that he was making a choice. Jack took control by declaring the decision, weighing his options, and choosing what he wanted to do most: play basketball with his brother.*

***DECLARING helps us to create space for a good decision.  
We STOP and THINK before we ACT.***

***Making a conscious effort to recognize decision situations is the first step in making the best choices.***

Declaring a decision can also be challenging and can make us unpopular. How might Jack's teammates respond?

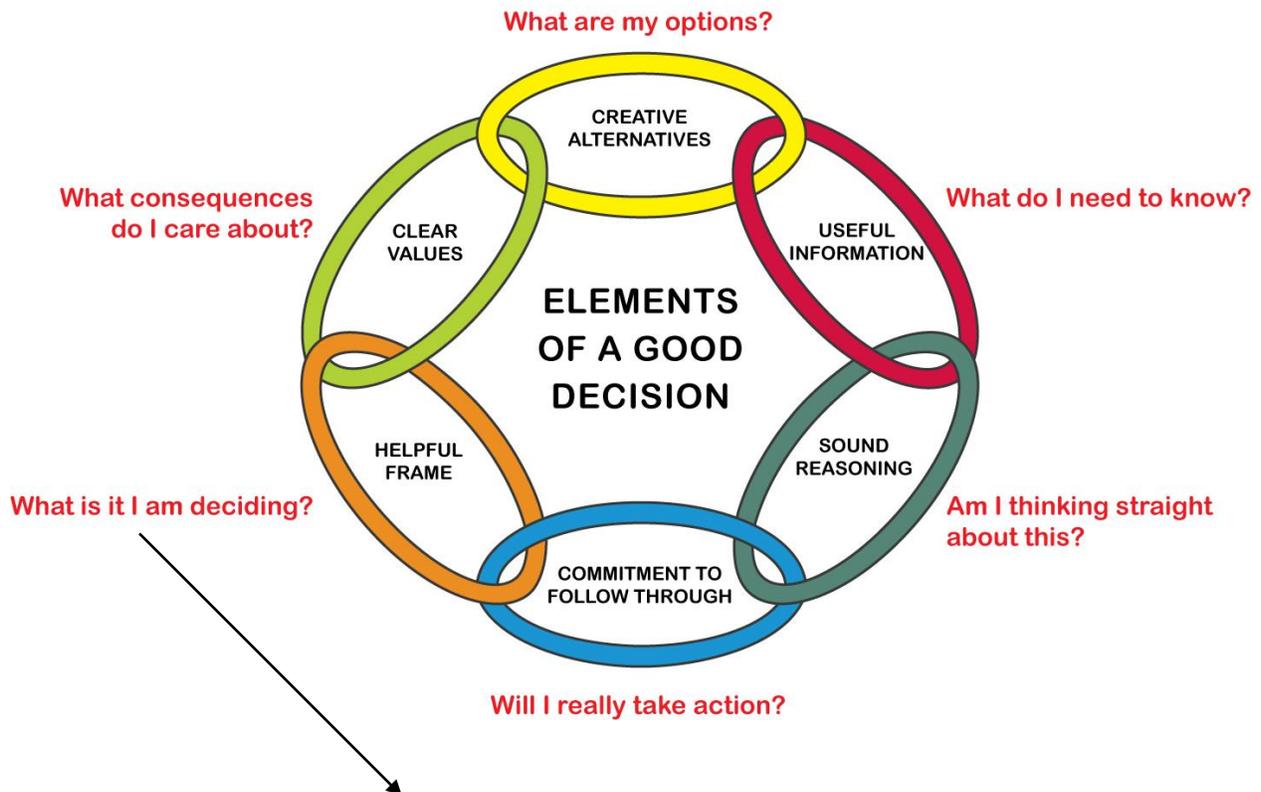
Other examples from your experience?

## The Poem

Much madness is divinest sense  
To a discerning eye;  
Much sense the starkest madness.  
'T is the majority  
In this, as all, prevails.  
Assent, and you are sane;  
Demur, — you're straightway dangerous,  
And handled with a chain.

## Handout 2. Focus on the Frame

After recognizing we are making an important decision (declaring), we can use the following *six elements* to help us choose the best alternative...



*An important part of FRAMING a decision well is taking the time to look at it from a number of different perspectives. Jack took the time to explore his decision. What are some perspectives he might have considered? (his own, his teammates' ....What others?)*

## Handout 3. Framing Practice Part 1

Fill in the chart for the three different frames.  
How does the frame affect the decision?

	1	2	3
<b>Decision situation</b>	Should Sarah, a sophomore, go out with Bill who is a junior?	Sarah is captain of the swim team but has a boring social life. She has practice every Saturday morning at 8:00. Bill has a lot of cool friends and likes to stay out late at parties on Friday night. Should Sarah go out with Bill?	Bill likes to drink. The swim team has a no drinking rule, and the coach expects his swimmers, who are headed for national success, to be well rested for practices. Should Sarah go out with Bill?
<b>Issues considered</b>			
<b>Issues excluded</b>			

## Class Discussion: Conformity

### Materials

Performance Task: Diary Entry  
Handout 4—Framing Practice Part 2

### Procedures

- Discuss responses to the second journal entry and compare them to the poem.
- Small Group Discussion: *Do you consider yourself a conformist or non-conformist? Why?*

### Next Steps

**Performance Task:** Review directions for the diary entry and assign a due date. Give students **Handout 4** as a pre-writing exercise for the diary entry.



# Handout 4. Framing Practice Part 2

Considering your decision from 3 different perspectives – what should you consider?

	Perspective 1 :	Perspective 2 :	Perspective 3 :
	_____	_____	_____
<b>Issues considered</b>			
<b>Issues excluded</b>			



## Final Reflection and Discussion

### Materials

Comic Strip Examples

### Procedures

Use the following questions to review the main points of the unit. Refer to additional comic strip examples as needed

- *Has Dickinson's poem influenced my view of conformists and non-conformists?*
- *What does it mean to "declare a decision"?*
- *How can other people's perspectives (views, attitudes) both help and hinder my decision-making?*

### Next Steps

- Plan time for students to share diary entries.
- **Optional Writing Assignment**  
After researching some details of Emily Dickinson's life (at least two sources), discuss how this poem might apply to the poet. Does she represent "much madness" or "divinest sense"? Explain.

Note: Students can use Web Resources (page 17) to complete the research.



## 2. Assessment Evidence

<b>Performance Tasks</b>	<b>Other Evidence</b>
<p data-bbox="180 373 394 415"><b>Diary Entry:</b></p> <p data-bbox="180 457 737 793">Pick a person from history, popular culture, or your family, a person whom you consider to be a rebel (non-conformist). Imagine you are that person, and write a diary entry that describes an important decision that led to your non-conformity.</p> <p data-bbox="180 884 599 926">In the entry, make sure you</p> <ol data-bbox="180 968 737 1304" style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) describe in detail the circumstances that led to declaring the decision, and</li><li>2) explain your perspective in framing the decision as well as the perspective of a person who held the opposite view.</li></ol>	<p data-bbox="764 373 1029 415"><b>Journal entries:</b></p> <ol data-bbox="764 422 1339 674" style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Describe an unpopular decision you made OR one you witnessed someone else make.</li><li>2. Rewrite the three sentences in the poem in your own words. Do they make sense in a different order?</li></ol> <p data-bbox="764 716 1292 842"><b>Small Group Discussion:</b> Do you consider yourself a conformist or non-conformist? Why?</p> <p data-bbox="764 884 1317 1136"><b>Essay:</b> After researching some details of Emily Dickinson’s life (at least two sources), discuss how this poem might apply to the poet. Does she represent “much madness” or “divinest sense”? Explain.</p> <p data-bbox="764 1178 1256 1220"><b>Final Class Reflection on Unit</b></p>

### 3. Resources on the Web

- **Electronic versions of “Much Madness is Divinest Sense”**
  - Bartleby.com: <http://www.bartleby.com/113/1011.html>
  - American Verse Project (can be used for distributing poem to students):  
<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?type=boolean;subtype=bib;c=amverse;cc=amverse;sid=6c24dcb65f1df0f6840bb6e01f4c1c2a;q1=dickinson%2C%20emily;rgn=div2;view=text;idno=BAC5632.0001.001;node=BAC5632.0001.001%3A5.11>
- **Biographical Information on the Web:**
  - Bartleby.com: <http://www.bartleby.com/65/di/DickinsoE.html>
  - Modern American Poetry:  
[http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/dickinson/bio.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/bio.htm)
  - Academy of American Poets: <http://www.poets.org/index.php>
- **More Information and Links:**
  - Today in Literature:  
<http://www.todayinliterature.com/biography/emily.dickinson.asp>
  - About—”What Would Emily Say?” (A humorous “in death” interview with Dickinson through her verse, and it includes “Much Madness...”):  
<http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa021803a.htm>
  - D. Campbell at WSU (wealth of annotated links and resources):  
<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/dickinson.htm>