

## Follow George Washington's Example

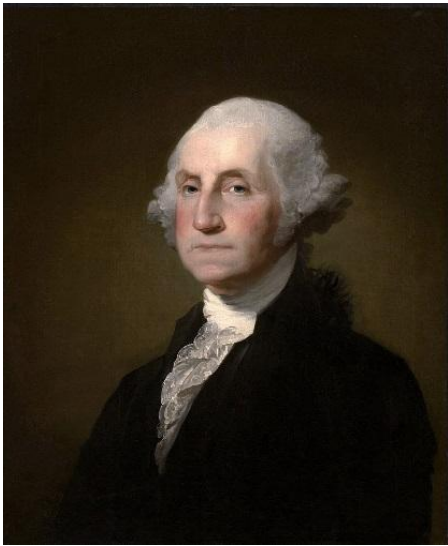
**Brief:** George Washington offers a useful model for understanding the power developing character has on influencing others.

**Learning Objective:** Explain the purpose of creating a personal ethical code.

**Key Terms:**

- George Washington: One of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America who served as the nation's first president (1789–1797).
- Ethical code: Rules to guide behavior and decisions in a specified situation.
- Conscience: A moral sense of right and wrong, chiefly as it affects one's own behavior.

### A Model of Character: George Washington



*Portrait of George Washington*

Aristotle, the Ancient Greek “Father of Western Philosophy,” understood that effective public speakers need more than just well-chosen words. He proposed that “ethos,” the sum total of a speaker’s character, is the primary requirement for persuasion.

George Washington, “Father of the United States of America,” was educated in Classical Western Philosophy and shared Aristotle’s respect for the influential power of personal character—an influence that is still felt to this day. As Pulitzer Prize winning biographer Douglas Southall Freeman explained, “The great big thing stamped across that man is character.” Modern historian David Hackett Fischer defines Washington’s character as “integrity, self-discipline, courage, absolute honesty, resolve, and decision, but also forbearance, decency, and respect for others.”

During his lifetime, Washington’s character loomed large and greatly influenced his peers. At his funeral, Congressman Light-Horse Harry Lee, a Revolutionary War comrade, famously said, “First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

### Lessons in Character

What lessons can we draw from Washington’s effective use of character? Here are a few:

1. Throughout history, Aristotle’s emphasis on ethos as a tool of influence has been proven true. Character does matter.

2. It is possible to possess positive character qualities while—at the same time—possessing moral flaws. Washington, for example, owned slaves. However, his accomplishments as a force for creating a new government and society still endure.
3. No matter what your personal and professional goals, strengthening your ethos will help you gain influence and success. Strengthening your ethos begins by making character development a top priority.

## Choose a Personal Ethical Code

As a young schoolboy in Virginia, Washington copied, by hand, a list of 110 *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* based on a 16th-century code of behavior. While we can't know for sure if Washington made a commitment to follow all 110 of these rules (a good number of which pertain to personal hygiene and dietary habits), we know by his example that he took to heart many of the rules related to communication and public speaking. Here are some examples:

*Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.*

*Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not on when others stop.*

*Turn not your back to others, especially in speaking; jog not the table or desk on which another reads or writes; lean not upon anyone.*

*The gestures of the body must be suited to the discourse you are upon.*

*Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.*

*Think before you speak, pronounce not imperfectly, nor bring out your words too hastily, but orderly and distinctly.*

*When another speaks, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience.*

*If any hesitate in his words, help him not nor prompt him without desired.*

And, the final, and perhaps the most important, rule of all:

*Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.*

## From Concept to Action

What rules affect how you communicate? Follow Washington's example and make a list of your rules.

### OER IMAGE SOURCES:

"George Washington." Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=591229>. Accessed 12 November 2018. [Public Domain]

### OER TEXT SOURCES:

"George Washington." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Washington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington). Accessed 12 November 2018. [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License]

### REFERENCES:

"George Washington's Rules of Civility." National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1248919>. Accessed 12 November 2018.