

## Freedom and Equality: American Principles at Odds? (Grade 6-8)

### **Purpose of the Lesson:**

This lesson will use close reading of documentary selections and class discussion to analyze the concepts of “freedom” and “equality” as they have appeared and been tested throughout American history. By the conclusion of this lesson, students should be able to view these ideas as contested concepts that can and often do exist in tension. Students will assess whether or not “equality” comes at the expense of “freedom” and vice versa.

### **Critical Engagement Question:**

What do “freedom” and “equality” mean to you? How have principles of equality sometimes been sacrificed in the name of individual liberty, and how is equality sometimes purchased as the expense of freedom?

### **Overview of the Lesson:**

Students will use portions of the Declaration of Independence as well as reference materials covering the Reconstruction Amendments to understand that “freedom” and “equality” are concepts that have been contested throughout American history.

As a warm up, students will be asked to participate in a word association game analyzing “freedom” and “equality.” After examining portions of the Declaration of Independence to appreciate its statement and use of “right words” to make these ideals into a reality, students will engage in a guided discussion and reading to examine how the Civil War was an attempt to “settle” differences between North and South regarding equality and freedom. By discussing the events of the American Revolution, Civil War and Reconstruction, students will see the tension between freedom and equality that has taken place throughout American history.

### **Lesson Objectives:**

1. Students will understand that the colonists used the Declaration of Independence to respond to the injustices committed by the parliament and King of Great Britain, and stated the rights and treatment they would be entitled to once they were independent.
2. Students will understand that the Civil War was a conflict over freedom and equality in two ways. First, that it directly addressed the slavery issue and ended with a Federal mandate that itself ended slavery, and second, that the war also concerned the South’s assertion of the rights of its constituent states.
3. Taking into account the events discussed in the lesson, students will debate whether or not it is appropriate to curtail certain exercises of freedom in order to ensure equality.

## **Standards:**

### **Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts, Literacy in History/Social Studies, 6-8 Grades**

1. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
2. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
3. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.3](#) Identify key steps in a text’s description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).
4. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

## **Materials:**

1. **Print-off**
  - a. Copies of lesson handouts on the Declaration of Independence and Civil War/Reconstruction, found in **Appendices A and B**.
2. **You** will need a means to access the internet via computer and display video (projector, screen)

## **Time/Grade Level:**

One 50 minute class period in Grade 6-8 Social Studies classrooms.

## **Warm-Up for the Lesson:**

At the beginning of the class period, **students** should be asked to recount and briefly discuss the historical events leading to the Declaration’s drafting and signing.

Students should begin the lesson with an understanding that the Declaration was a result of, and a response to, these events.

It may also be useful to review key vocabulary terms with students before reading and discussing the Declaration of Independence.

### **Recommended Vocabulary Warm-up for Students:**

\*Display these key terms on either a projected screen or on your classroom's board as you discuss the Declaration and prepare for the activity\*

#### **REVOLUTION-ERA VOCABULARY:**

1. **Unalienable:** unable to be taken away from or given away by the possessor.
2. **Tyranny:** cruel and oppressive government or rule.
3. **Abdicate:** to fail to fulfill a responsibility.
4. **Charter:** a written grant by a country's legislative or sovereign power, by which an institution such as a company, college, or city is created and its rights and privileges defined.
5. **Traitor:** a person who commits an act of treason by betraying his or her country.
6. **Treason:** the crime of betraying one's country, especially by attempting to overthrow the government.

### **Activity:**

#### **Setting up the Classroom**

Arrange the desks so groups of 3 – 5 students can work with one another. Orient the desks so that you have a clear pathway for movement between groups and so that students may view the projection screen or other audiovisual device positioned at the front of the room.

#### **Student Instructions**

As we read and discuss today, think about whether or not freedom and equality can coexist. Was the Civil War the only way that slavery could be ended? Was the South being forced to give up some of its freedoms to end slavery? Many states refused to comply with Federal anti-discrimination laws, was this rooted in slavery or did States view these laws as an encroachment of their right to govern themselves?

#### **Teacher Instructions**

1. Spend the first 10 minutes of the lesson on word association with the two subject words being **“freedom” and “equality.”** Underscore that providing precise and non-conflicting definitions of these concepts is something the Drafters of the Declaration of Independence, and Reconstruction Amendments faced.
2. Show the linked clip of the PBS show, [“Liberty’s Kids,”](#) which discusses the drafting period of the Declaration of Independence. Ask the students to pay close attention to the video’s emphasis on the “right words.” (5 minutes)
3. Distribute the first handout on the Declaration, found in **Appendix A.** Select readers to work through the handout. As the students read, take time out to ask questions checking the students’ understanding of the ideas of “freedom” and “equality” as presented in the Declaration of Independence. Some sample questions might include:

- a. Did the colonists see any other way to affirm their rights other than to declare their independence?
- b. From your reading, do you think the Declaration was just a statement of separation, or was it potentially a way of stating future principles of a uniquely American system of government?
- c. Can you think of any group of people who might not have been originally included in the Declaration's promise of freedom? (10 Minutes)
4. Using the final sample question as a jumping off point, introduce the debate over slavery leading up to the Civil War, emphasizing to the students that:
  - a. Slavery was acknowledged as unjust by the Founders and early Americans, yet left undecided;
  - b. The Southern states felt they had property rights in slaves and their rights could not be infringed upon.
  - c. Tensions had been mounting for many years since the country's founding, with no permanent answer readily available. (5 Minutes)
5. Distribute the second handout on The Civil War, Reconstruction and Segregation/Civil Rights found in **Appendix B**. As students read, be sure to check their understanding of the tensions between "freedom" and "equality" at play, noting both the Federal Government's actions to preserve equality for black Americans and the South's backlash towards these efforts in order to preserve its vision of freedom. (10 Minutes)
6. Take the final minutes of class to review the content, discussing with the students whether or not "liberty" and "equality" are in tension with one another.

### **Homework:**

Taking note of class discussion and the materials in the handouts, have the students re-write the Declaration of Independence in their own words. Caution them to remember the tensions at play between providing for equality, while still protecting individual freedom. Encourage them to try to find a solution.

### **Extension Activities:**

At the beginning of the next class, encourage a few students to share their essays and why they felt compelled to use the portions of the Declaration that they chose for their evidence.

## APPENDIX A. Check for Understanding: The Declaration of Independence

### Finding the Right Words

“When in the course of human events, **it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth**, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that **they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.**” – The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

When the drafters of our Declaration of Independence wrote those words in 1776, they knew that they were risking everything for what they believed in. The American colonists had had enough of the tyranny of the British and their King, and so the drafters of the Declaration **decided to justify our independence by making the colonies' reasons known to the world.**

**To build a persuasive argument, the colonists listed the long number of injustices that the King and his government had done to the colonies, including:**

- Keeping the Colonies from running their own governments;
- Taxing the citizens of the Colonies without their approval or their representation in the British house of government, Parliament;
- Housing British soldiers in American homes and in the colonists' public spaces without their permission;
- Preventing the Colonies from trading and running their economy in the way that they wished.

### A New Brand of “Rights”

But the causes listed above weren't the only reason that the colonists felt they needed to declare their independence from Great Britain. The drafters of the Declaration also felt that the King had taken away the colonists' **rights** with his actions:

“...We hold these truths to be self-evident:

**That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...** whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, **it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government...**”

The King had tried to keep the colonies from exercising their rights to **“life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,”** rights that the colonists held **above any governmental power.** So, the colonists argued that because King had tried to take away these **“unalienable rights,”** **the colonies had to separate from Great Britain. In order to protect these rights, they declared independence, forming the United States!**

## APPENDIX B. Check for Understanding: The Civil War/Reconstruction

### Unfinished Business

Although the Revolution had set the United States on a path towards freedom and equality for all of its citizens, there were several lingering issues that the Founding Fathers left unsettled.

Of all of the items of “unfinished business,” **slavery** was the most notorious. It was obvious that slavery perpetuated an unjust suffering on African Americans living in the country, but the Federal Government had left the issue unsettled to maintain the Union of North and South as the nation’s founding. However, the tension between the anti-slavery North and the pro-slavery South couldn’t last, and **the American Civil War (1861-1865)** began.

The **Union, representing the North**, and the **Confederacy, representing the South**, fought over slavery, but the South specifically fought for its side of the issue from the perspective of “**States’ Rights**.” The South felt that the policies of the Union were an infringement on their right to own property, slaves, and that the Union’s attempts to strike down the institution of slavery were unconstitutional. However, the North won the war, and the Federal government finally outlawed the institution of slavery.

### Reconstruction

Following the conclusion of the Civil War, **the North** began the process of re-uniting with the South by **instituting Reconstruction (1865-1877)**. Reconstruction was characterized by the passage and adoption of the **13<sup>th</sup> (1865), 14<sup>th</sup> (1868), and 15<sup>th</sup> (1870) Amendments**.

However, the **South resisted Reconstruction because it felt that these Amendments and other Reconstruction efforts were being forced on them**. Southerners attempted to stall Reconstruction efforts, and specifically tried to keep black citizens from voting. **Reconstruction formally ended in 1877**.

- **The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1865)** abolished slavery.
- **The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1868)** established that everyone born or naturalized in the United States is a citizen and entitled to equal protection of their rights as a citizen.
- **The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1870)** guaranteed all citizens the right to vote regardless of their “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

### Jim Crow/Segregation and Combating Both During the Modern Civil Rights Movement

With the conclusion of Reconstruction in 1877, many Southern states constructed a series of **Jim Crow Laws**, which prevented southern African-Americans from exercising their civil rights, in particular the right to vote.

- **Plessy v. Ferguson (1896):**

- This 1896 case addressed a Louisiana **Jim Crow law that dictated that white and black passengers had to be accommodated in different train cars.** The state of Louisiana argued that it was legal to have different train cars as long as the accommodations were the same, coining the phrase “**Separate but Equal.**” With *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court was considering not only the legality of the original law, but also the legality of segregation as well. The Court decided in favor of the Louisiana law, and segregation continued to legally spread.
- **Brown v. Board of Education (1954):**
  - In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court once again considered whether or not “separate but equal” accommodations were constitutional. With this case, the plaintiffs had sued the school board of Topeka, Kansas, saying that the racial basis of “**separate but equal**” was **unjust and against the equal protection offered under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.** In a unanimous decision, the Court ruled against segregation and for the plaintiffs.
- **Civil Rights Act of 1964:**
  - Although the **Civil Rights Movement** had not made much headway against segregation in its earliest years, by the mid 1950s, the fight for equality was gaining ground. The movement used this power to politically influence the Federal Government. **The Civil Rights Act of 1964** was one result of this process.
  - **The Civil Rights Act mandated the end of segregation by striking down Jim Crow laws in general and specifically protecting the right of all Americans to vote.** Additionally, the Civil Rights Act made it **illegal to discriminate against people in public accommodations.**