



What Was Most “Revolutionary” about the Declaration of Independence?

Purpose of the Lesson:

This lesson will use a close reading of the Declaration of Independence to explore the American colonists’ reasons for separating from Great Britain. By the conclusion of the lesson, student will understand the role of the Declaration in encouraging support for American Independence, and in laying the groundwork for a new system of government and individual rights.

Critical Engagement Question:

What is most “revolutionary” about the Declaration of Independence? How does the Declaration use the idea of “rights” to justify its separation from the British Empire? What rights are a “free people” entitled to, and how did the King of England and his government infringe upon these rights?

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students will understand that the Founding Fathers used the Declaration of Independence to assert their rights as free people against the government of Great Britain.
2. Students will understand that the individual arguments in the Declaration function as references to the historical events leading to the War for Independence.
3. Students will observe that the Declaration was the starting point for a uniquely American idea of rights, and that the Declaration serves as the foundation for enduring American values.

Standards:

Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts, Literacy in History/Social Studies, 9-10 Grades

1. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
2. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3](#) Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them..
3. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.
4. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.5](#) Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

Materials:

1. **Print-off**
 - a. Individual color images of the Declaration, as well as its transcription, found in the ConSource.org library: <http://www.consource.org/document/declaration-of-independence-1776-7-4/>.
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 9 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 writing and signing, from taxation by Great Britain and the Boston Tea Party to the beginning of the Revolutionary war with the battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill. A timeline for this review can be found in **Appendix A**. In addition, a primer on the use of “rights” by the Declaration’s drafters is included in **Appendix B**.

Students should begin the lesson with the understanding that the Declaration was a result of, and a response to, these events. Additionally, to ensure that the students are familiar with the language used in the document, educators are encouraged to begin with a review of key terms (listed below).

Recommended Vocabulary Warm-up for Students:

Display these key terms on either a projected screen or on your classroom’s chalk – or whiteboard as you discuss the Declaration and prepare for the student activity.

1. **Tyranny**: cruel and oppressive government or rule.
2. (to be) **Quartered**: as a soldier, to be stationed in a certain location.
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

For the initial portion of this classroom session, students will keep their desks in their normal order, but let them know that they will eventually be moving them into a “horseshoe” shape for the “philosophical chairs” activity.

Student’s Instructions

As we read the Declaration, think about what makes this document truly “revolutionary.” What does the Declaration say? What “rights” do the Declaration’s drafters believe are held by all free people? How has the British government violated these rights? What promise does the Declaration hold for the newly united states?

Teacher’s Instructions

1. Distribute the copies of the Declaration and project a version of the [document found in the ConSource Library](#) on an overhead projection screen.
2. Introduce the document by quoting a passage to emphasize the powerful, emotive language used in the Declaration. Select a quote that you feel best exemplifies the concept of the rights of colonists.
 - a. A good example could be the passage beginning with “... that all men are created equal...” and ending with “... effect their safety and happiness.”
3. Spend the first 15 minutes reviewing and discussing the lead-up to the Declaration with the students, addressing the major events leading up to its drafting and signing.
4. Over the next fifteen minutes, divide the students into small groups of 3-5 students. Instruct the students to read the document, making note of how the British government violated the rights of colonists. Students should create two lists – one listing the rights of American colonists and the other listing violations made by the British parliament and crown. Circulate through the classroom, and ask students leading questions to help them better understand the concept of rights in the Declaration of Independence. Some example questions might include:
 - a. When students are examining the Declaration’s preamble:
 - i. What is an “unalienable” right? How had the British government kept the colonists from exerting these rights? Can you explain why the colonists felt their present circumstances were so dire?
 - b. When students are examining the “long train of [British] abuses:”
 - i. What are some examples, presented in the Declaration, of the ways in which the British government had infringed on the colonists’ rights?
 - c. When students reach the conclusion of the document:

- i. How did the Declaration change the circumstances of the American colonists? Do you think the Declaration’s drafters had an expectation that, if they won the war, their country would provide strong protection for the rights discussed?
5. Have the students arrange their desks in a “horseshoe” shape and explain the rules of “philosophical chairs” to them. Students will align themselves in either of the poles of the horseshoe or the middle to signify their agreement, disagreement, or neutrality on the question you present to them. Students will argue the merits of their position; instruct them that they may change their position at any time during the discussion. Appoint a student moderator to ensure that each student speaks at least twice, and that each speaker begins his or her argument by summarizing the previous speaker’s position.

Inform the students that the question they will be considering is: **“Is the Declaration of Independence a positive statement of rights, or is it instead simply a response to British tyranny?”** Position the students who agree with either statement at the poles of the horseshoe, and place the students who are undecided/find both statements persuasive in the middle of the horseshoe. Instruct students that there will be a time limit for the activity, and moderate the students’ conduct as necessary once the activity begins. (20 Minutes)

Homework:

Ask students to write an essay on what the concept of “rights,” as presented in the Declaration, means to them. Students should use passages from the Declaration in constructing their essays. Students should also be encouraged to discuss the structure of the Declaration of Independence, and evaluate the rights-based claims made in the document.

Extension Activities:

Begin the next class by asking students to break off into pairs to discuss their essays and impressions of the Declaration.

APPENDIX A:

Background of Events Leading to the Declaration of Independence

- 1765
 - **The Stamp Act:** Passed in February of 1765, this was a resolution imposing a high tax on colonists using stamps, legal documents, and other paper products. The British Government imposed the high tax rate as a means of paying of its war debts, resulting from military operations in the French and Indian War, the American theater of the global Seven Years' War. American colonists were outraged by the higher rates of taxation.
- 1770
 - **The Boston Massacre:** Although the citizens of Boston had not resisted the British Army's presence in their city to enforce British taxation in 1768, tensions had since then grown to a fever pitch. The Boston Massacre grew out of a street fight between British troops and colonists. Several colonists were killed when the British soldiers fired into the crowd. The event stirred nationwide outrage and laid the foundation for greater support for American Independence.
- 1773
 - **The Tea Act/The Boston Tea Party:** By 1773, several of the taxes placed on the colonies by the British had been either partially or fully repealed. However, Parliament continued in its attempt to exact more revenue from the colonies. The Tea Act tried to solve this issue by forcing the colonists to buy tea exclusively from the British East India Company, which they would have to pay tax on, as well. The colonists were again outraged, and in December of that year, the Sons of Liberty of Boston boarded three British ships in Boston harbor and dumped the ships' cargo of British India Company tea into the harbor.
- 1774
 - **The Intolerable Acts:** The Intolerable Acts were a series of punitive laws passed in Britain as a response to the Boston Tea Party. These Acts included closing the port of Boston, removing control of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from its citizens, and giving the British Royal governors the ability to house British soldiers in any building they chose.
 - **The First Continental Congress/The Association:** The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774 to try and form a united response to Great Britain's actions. Although the Congress' deliberations were somewhat inconclusive, the first Congress did set a second meeting. In addition, the Congress also created the Association, a non-importation pact among the colonies. By working together to boycott British trade, the Association enhanced the inter-colonial cooperation that would be vital for Independence.
- 1775
 - **The Battles of Lexington and Concord:** On April 17, 1775, the British sent troops out into the countryside of Massachusetts to seize weapons from the colonists. The troops were met in first Lexington, then Concord by groups of colonial militiamen, who fought the British in what would become the first battle of the war.

- **The Battle of Bunker Hill:** On June 16, 1775, American troops from the colonial positions surrounding Boston fortified Breed's Hill overlooking the city. The following morning, British troops attacked the hill en masse, taking heavy casualties. After Bunker Hill, the King declared the Colonies to be in revolt.
- **1776**
 - **The Revision and Adoption of the Declaration of Independence:** To respond to these developments, delegates met in Philadelphia again to consider their options. Settling on a Declaration of Independence from Britain, Congress debated Jefferson's original draft and made revisions from late June to early July. The document was adopted on July 4.

APPENDIX B: “Rights” Primer

The Declaration of Independence was both a bold statement of the colonists’ desire to separate from Great Britain and a statement of the rights that any free people naturally enjoy. The concept of “rights” that the Declaration established set a standard for how Americans from the 1700s to today would think of government and what being a citizen meant to them. Therefore, the Declaration not only gave cause for our nation’s independence, but also, by establishing the “unalienable rights” that Americans were entitled to, the Declaration created an “idea” of America.

The Founders articulated this idea, but a number of different sources influenced their thinking on this idea. Although the Declaration’s drafters read a variety of texts, including the Bible, as sources for the Declaration’s idea of rights, there were two writers in particular that influenced their thinking:

- **Baron de Montesquieu**
 - Montesquieu was a French political theorist, whose republican ideas were particularly popular with the drafters in the era from the 1760s to the 1780s.
 - His idea of the “**separation of powers**” was particularly influential in the formation of the Constitution. Montesquieu’s theory dictated that dividing governmental power amongst several branches, including the executive, legislative and judicial, was the best way to avoid tyrannical government.
- **John Locke**
 - John Locke was an English philosopher. Locke was most influential with the drafters of the Declaration as they worked to justify their separation from England.
 - Locke wrote his most influential works, *Two Treatises on Government* and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as a way to articulate his idea that free people held what he called “**natural rights.**”
 - Locke considered these “natural rights” to include the rights to **life, liberty, and the pursuit of property**. Governments, Locke argued, could not infringe on these rights, because of their basic nature. Therefore, if a government kept its people from exercising their rights, Locke believed that the “**Social Contract**” formed between the two ought to be broken. Locke’s concept of rights, and the idea that free people had the right to rebel if a government infringed on a people’s natural rights, were hugely influential on the drafters of the Declaration.

APPENDIX C:
The American Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776):

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.

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; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that 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, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly, for opposing, with manly firmness, his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the state remaining, in the mean time, exposed to all the dangers of invasions from without and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has obstructed the administration of justice, by refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made judges dependent on his will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies, without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power. He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; For protecting them, by a mock trial, from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; For cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; For imposing taxes on us without our consent; For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury; For transporting us beyond seas, to be tried for pretended offenses; For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these colonies; For taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; For suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here, by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow-citizens, taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has excited domestic insurrection among us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have we been wanting in our attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them, from time to time, of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity; and we have conjured them, by the ties of our common kindred, to disavow these usurpations which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too, have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our separation, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that, as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

[Signed by] JOHN HANCOCK [President]

New Hampshire JOSIAH BARTLETT, WM. WHIPPLE, MATTHEW THORNTON.

Massachusetts Bay SAML. ADAMS, JOHN ADAMS, ROBT. TREAT PAINE, ELBRIDGE GERRY

Rhode Island STEP. HOPKINS, WILLIAM ELLERY.

Connecticut ROGER SHERMAN, SAM'EL HUNTINGTON, WM. WILLIAMS, OLIVER WOLCOTT. New York WM. FLOYD, PHIL. LIVINGSTON, FRANS. LEWIS, LEWIS MORRIS.

New Jersey RICHD. STOCKTON, JNO. WITHERSPOON, FRAS. HOPKINSON, JOHN HART, ABRA. CLARK.

Pennsylvania ROBT. MORRIS
BENJAMIN RUSH, BENJA. FRANKLIN, JOHN MORTON, GEO. CLYMER, JAS. SMITH,
GEO. TAYLOR, JAMES WILSON, GEO. ROSS.

Delaware CAESAR RODNEY, GEO. READ, THO. M'KEAN.

Maryland SAMUEL CHASE, WM. PACA, THOS. STONE, CHARLES CARROLL of
Carrollton.

Virginia GEORGE WYTHE, RICHARD HENRY LEE, TH. JEFFERSON, BENJA.
HARRISON, THS. NELSON, JR., FRANCIS LIGHTFOOT LEE, CARTER BRAXTON.

North Carolina WM. HOOPER, JOSEPH HEWES, JOHN PENN.

South Carolina EDWARD RUTLEDGE, THOS. HAYWARD, JUNR., THOMAS LYNCH,
JUNR., ARTHUR MIDDLETON.

Georgia BUTTON GWINNETT, LYMAN HALL, GEO. WALTON.