



CLASSROOM MATERIALS

The Declaration of Independence An Analytical View

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...

Thomas Jefferson
The Declaration of Independence (1776)

Overview

Perhaps no document in history has undergone as much scrutiny as the Declaration of Independence. In this formal statement announcing the severed ties between the thirteen colonies and Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson wrote essentially of a new theory of government, in which the government itself was expected and required to protect “natural rights” of citizens.

Since Thomas Jefferson’s writing of the Declaration, many groups have interpreted the document to mean different ideas, and frequently, the Declaration has been used to justify other political and social movements. While the Declaration is an important historic document and incorporates many of America’s most basic beliefs, it has no effect of law in 21st Century America.

In this lesson, students will question the importance of the Declaration of Independence, its meaning during the time of the Revolution and its impact today.

Related Resources for the Lesson

In this lesson, students will use the following resources:

1. Episode #2 of *Liberty!*, entitled, “Blows Must Decide”. (Note: The segment of the episode that deals with the Declaration of Independence begins at the 44 minute mark in the video and runs until 53:35.)

2. An analysis of John Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government”, located at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>. Specifically, students will be looking at the following entries:
 - a. The Social Contract Theory (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/#3.3>)
 - b. Function of Civil Government (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/#3.4>).
 - c. The text of the Declaration of Independence, which can be found as part of the National Archives “Charters of Freedom” online exhibit (http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/declaration.html).
3. Question Sheet PDF (for students)
4. Question Sheet PDF (for teachers, with answers)

Relevant Standards

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>).

US History:

- Understands the creation of the Declaration of Independence (e.g., historical antecedents that contributed to the document and individuals who struggled for independence)
- Understands how the principles of the Declaration of Independence justified American independence
- Understands differences and similarities between the Declaration of Independence and other documents on government (e.g., the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” and John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government*)
- Understands contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and the institution of chattel slavery

Civics:

- Knows the essential ideas of American constitutional government that are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and other writings (e.g., the Constitution is a higher law that authorizes a government of limited powers; the Preamble to the Constitution states the purposes of government such as to form a more perfect union, establish justice, provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare)
- Knows major historical events that led to the creation of limited government in the United States (e.g., Magna Carta (1215), common law, and the Bill of Rights (1689) in England; colonial experience, Declaration of Independence (1776), Articles of Confederation (1781), state constitutions and charters, United States Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791) in America)

- Knows basic values and principles that Americans share (e.g., as set forth in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Gettysburg Address)
- Understands how the basic premises of liberalism and democracy are joined in the Declaration of Independence, in which they are stated as "self-evident Truths" (e.g., "all men are created equal," authority is derived from consent of the governed and people have the right to alter or abolish government when it fails to fulfill its purposes)

Strategy for the Lesson

The teacher may elect to begin this lesson by having students discuss what they see as the advantages and disadvantages of declaring independence from Britain. The teacher might open this discussion by noting that the Continental Congress did not consider independence for more than a year after the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord. Ask students to speculate or discuss what other options were being considered to reconcile the colonists with the British.

The teacher should write student responses (or designate a student as the "secretary") regarding the advantages and disadvantages of independence on the chalkboard or on an overhead transparency.

Suggested answers include:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Possibility of foreign aid from France	Might lose friends in England who supported cause of colonists in regard to representation in Parliament but not independence
Legitimacy in the world community	Might cause division within the colonies
Captured soldiers treated as POWs not spies or rebels	If Revolution failed, the and leaders might be tried and executed as traitors.
Independence might unite different Areas of the colonies	Colonies were poorly prepared for war Fighting the largest military power in the world
Stating for the word the ideological Basis of this new country	No weapons nor manufacturing to make them

Freedom from subservience to the King

Dependent on England for elements needed to fight a war.

Chances of winning the war were slim.

Colonists would be cutting themselves off from the biggest, freest empire in the world.

Sentimental attachment to homeland.

Once the students have finished brainstorming, the teacher and class should overview the immediate situation and conditions that prompted colonists to declare independence, either through the textbook or using the *Liberty!* Web site. The teacher should remind students that the idea of independence was not necessarily embraced by all colonists, and that while many believed the British had violated the colonists' basic rights, the violation was not enough to warrant a rebellion.

Students may also wish to research some of the issues or questions brought up by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* during their brainstorming.

Next, the teacher should either direct students to access the Declaration of Independence online or distribute copies in handout form. Once students have their copies, it is suggested that the teacher help students divide the Declaration into three basic parts and define those terms.

Those parts include:

1. The *preamble*: A preamble is a preliminary statement, especially the introduction to a formal document that serves to explain its purpose. In this instance, Jefferson used the preamble to discuss the basic rights of man. It has since become the most famous part of the document.

The Preamble of the Declaration runs from Jefferson's opening of the Declaration to the words, "To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world."

Note: Jefferson derived many of his ideas for the preamble from the Virginia Declaration of Rights written by his friend George Mason as well as from his own draft preamble to the Virginia Constitution, which in turn were based upon Locke but much more "radical".

2. A list of *grievances* against King George III: A grievance is
 - a. An actual or supposed circumstance regarded as just cause for complaint
 - b. A complaint or protestation based on such a circumstance

The list of grievances runs from “*He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.*” to “*He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured 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.*”

Note: In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson listed several complaints against King George, in which he hoped to lay the foundation for the case supporting independence.

3. A formal declaration of war, in which the colonists pledged their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor.”

The formal declaration includes the rest of the document.

Next, the teacher should distribute the question sheets to the class. Allow sufficient time for students to complete the questions. Once students have completed the questions, the teacher should evaluate them according to the depth of answer desired, the amount of time allowed for the assignment as well as any other criteria established by the teacher, such as spelling and grammar.

Extension Activities:

1. Ask students to evaluate other political documents in regard to the influence of the Declaration on their creation. Two documents that students might evaluate include:
 - a. French “Declaration of Rights of Man”
(<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/rightsof.htm>), written in 1789
 - b. Seneca Falls Conference “Declaration of Sentiments”
(<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/Senecafalls.html>), written in 1848
2. Ask students to compare these documents with the Declaration (the teacher may wish to substitute other documents if they are available) and in chart form, show specific instances where the authors of these documents borrowed from Jefferson. Have students compare the final draft of the Declaration of Independence with Locke’s writing and George Mason’s documents.

Question Sheet for the Declaration Activity (with answers)

1. Jefferson chose to begin the Declaration with the words, “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” Do you feel this was necessary? Why or why not? Could the 13 colonies have declared independence if they were not unanimous? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Most students might note that it was necessary for Jefferson to prove that the Continental Congress presented a united front to the world in order to prove that independence was the true goal of the colonies. Others may state that since each state provided signers to the document, it was obvious that all thirteen colonies accepted it.

As to the question of whether the 13 colonies could have declared independence if they weren’t unanimous, answers will vary. Most students might state that independence would be difficult without the support of all thirteen colonies, but some might say independence without consensus was still possible. For instance, colonies that objected could be absorbed into Canada or find a way to peacefully co-exist with those that seceded.

2. How does Jefferson explain the reason for a formal declaration of independence? Why do you think it was necessary for Jefferson to state the “causes which impel them to the separation”?

Answers will vary. However, some students may note that other nations, such as France and the Netherlands, also had colonial interests in North America and may have been concerned if British colonists declared independence for groundless reasons. Also, because of Jefferson’s background as a lawyer, it might have also been true that he was building his case for independence before the world community, similar to what he might do if he were pleading a case before a jury.

3. Next, review the two sections of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. In your own words, how does Jefferson use Locke’s ideas in the preamble of the Declaration?

Students will note similarities between Locke’s thoughts on natural rights and Jefferson’s mention of “inalienable rights, including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” They may also note Jefferson’s view that “all men are created equal.”

4. According to Jefferson, what was the purpose of government? What does Jefferson suggest should happen whenever government becomes “destructive of the ends for which it was created?” According to Jefferson, how do governments derive their powers?

Jefferson would note that the purpose of government was to protect the “inalienable rights” that man received from “their Creator.” In his view, if government became “destructive,” it was the right of the citizens to “alter or abolish” that form of government and replace it with a better one. Jefferson believed that governments derived their power “from the consent of the governed.” In other words, the citizens of the nation permitted the government to rule.

5. Jefferson noted that “all men are created equal,” suggesting that this was “selfevident.” Speculate as to what he meant by that statement. What sorts of conflicts and misconceptions may have stemmed from this statement?

Answers will vary as to what Jefferson meant by the “all men are created equal” statement. Some students may note that Jefferson made this statement as a slave owner and had no intention of granting citizenship status or equality to his black slaves. Other students might speculate that Jefferson believed in a literal interpretation of this phrase and had no intention of granting equality or the right to vote to women. Also, students may note that some white men (if they were not property owners) did not have the right to vote.

6. Next, look at the list of grievances that Jefferson lists as reasons that the King has violated the natural rights of the colonists. Below, list the three grievances that you feel are the worst violations. Explain why you believe them to be important. Also, note that Jefferson points to King George III in his list of grievances despite the fact that Parliament passed the acts and approved the taxes that led to the colonists calling for independence. The King, on the other hand, was a monarch with limited power. Why would Jefferson blame the King for the problems leading to the Declaration? Explain your view.

Answers will vary. Based on their study of the American Revolution and viewing of the series, many students may point to grievances that allowed the British military occupation of colonial cities (for example, the Boston Massacre), imposing taxes without consent (a grievance that is typically mentioned in textbooks), grievances that limit selfgovernment and possibly grievances that caused insurrections of Native Americans. Most students would probably note that it would be easier for the colonists to focus their anger on one individual, King George, than on the Parliament. His likeness was on colonial money, so he was known by all the colonists, while most members of Parliament were not known to the average colonist. Focusing anger and displeasure on one individual could provide a great psychological boost to the independence movement.

7. In the summer of 1776, Jefferson may not have recognized that his declaration would be studied and revered by generations. However, the Declaration *has* gained that status over time. Write a paragraph that explaining your view of why that has happened. If you do not feel that the Declaration is revered, explain why.

Many students who feel that the Declaration is revered will probably note that Jefferson’s statements regarding fundamental rights are representative of our government’s foundation today. In addition, they may also note that the Declaration is displayed in a similar manner (and in a similar location) as the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights, thereby giving it the same status. Other students may note that the document helped unite various factions in the Continental Congress, paving the way for independence.

Some students may note that in 21st Century America, the Declaration has no legal “force,” and therefore while it is an important historic document, its importance is significantly overstated.

8. The colonists had been fighting British soldiers for over a year before the Declaration was written and the formal declaration of war against Britain was announced. Why do you feel it took so long for the colonists to formally announce a declaration of war against the British?

The length of time between the fighting at Lexington and Concord and the actual declaration of war probably occurred because most colonists (and many delegates to the Continental Congress) hoped for some sort of reconciliation with Britain. They felt that a declaration of war might antagonize the British and make reconciliation difficult, if not

impossible.

Answers will vary.

9. John Locke died in 1704, over 70 years before Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. In your estimate, would Locke be happy with the way Jefferson used his *Two Treatises* to justify independence from Britain, which was Locke's native country? Below, either write a fictitious letter from Locke to Jefferson critiquing his use of *Two Treatises* in the Declaration of Independence or a fictitious letter from Jefferson to Locke explaining how he adapted Locke's theory in writing the Declaration.

Answers will vary.



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Question Sheet for the Declaration Activity

As directed by your teacher, use the related resources from John Locke, as well as the Declaration of Independence, to answer the following questions.

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2. How does Jefferson explain the reason for a formal declaration of independence? Why do you think it was necessary for Jefferson to state the “causes which impel them to the separation”?
3. Next, review the two sections of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. In your own words, how does Jefferson use Locke’s ideas in the preamble of the Declaration?
4. According to Jefferson, what was the purpose of government? What does Jefferson suggest should happen whenever government becomes “destructive of the ends for which it was created?” According to Jefferson, how do governments derive their powers?
5. Jefferson noted that “all men are created equal,” suggesting that this was “selfevident.” Speculate as to what he meant by that statement. What sorts of conflicts and misconceptions may have stemmed from this statement?
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