



## “When in the Course of Human Events:” Introducing 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 this lesson, students should be able to identify the specific arguments made for Independence. Students will assess the objectives of the Declaration and identify if and how the drafters may have fallen short of some of their stated goals.

### **Critical Engagement Question:**

What did the American colonists risk by declaring their independence from Great Britain? How did the Declaration of Independence justify this separation?

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

Students will use the Declaration of Independence as a resource to understand not only the reasons for American Independence, but also to learn how to construct a persuasive political argument to achieve a particular end.

As a warm up, students will review the major historical events leading to the Declaration’s drafting and signing. After reading the Declaration as a group, students will engage in a guided discussion designed to highlight specific features of the document’s argumentative structure and to enhance understanding of the historical context in which the document was drafted. By focusing on both the structure and content of the Declaration, students will not only learn more about American history, but will also learn one of many ways to advocate for political change.

### **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.
2. Students will understand that the power of the document comes not only from the argument it makes for independence itself, but also its structure.
3. Taking the perspective of the colonists, students will use elements of the Declaration to make their own arguments for independence.

## **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. Individual color images of the Declaration, as well as its transcription, found here: <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 6 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. Make sure that the students hit on key events, and that they connect the historical events leading to the Declaration’s drafting to the references made in the document. A timeline is included in **Appendix A**. Students should begin the lesson with an understanding that the Declaration was a result of, and a response to, these events. We recommend using this timeline if students have not yet learned the specific details of the American War for Independence, or if they need to refresh their memories about the specific 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\*

1. **Unalienable:** unable to be taken away from or given away by the possessor.
2. **Tyranny:** cruel and oppressive government or rule.
3. (to be) **Quartered:** as a soldier, to be stationed in a certain location.
4. **Abdicate:** to fail to fulfill a responsibility.
5. **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.
6. **Traitor:** a person who commits an act of treason by betraying his or her country.
7. **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's Instructions

As we read the Declaration of Independence, think about not only what's written, but also, why Thomas Jefferson, working with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, wrote the Declaration the way he did. What were the colonists trying to achieve through the Declaration? What does the Declaration say about the King and how Great Britain has treated the colonies, and what specific reasons does the Declaration use to make this argument? Would you have written a different document? Why?

### 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. Spend the first 10 minutes reviewing the lead-up to the Declaration, addressing the major events preceding its drafting and signing. If the students need assistance remembering the events, feel free to create a timeline on a chalk or white-board to establish a rough chronology.
  - a. **Note:** If you have not yet reviewed these items with your students, then we recommend splitting this lesson into two class sessions. The first class session should include an in-depth review and discussion of the major events leading up to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War based on the timeline presented in the **Appendix**.

3. Introduce the document by quoting a passage to emphasize the powerful, emotive language used in the Declaration. The document is filled with quotable statements. Some examples include
  - a. The opening passage of the Declaration, beginning with “When in the course of human events...” and ending with “they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”
  - b. Taken from the introduction, the passage beginning with “But when a long train of abuses and usurpations...” and ending with “the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government.”
  - c. From the concluding portion of the declaration, the following passage: “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.”
4. Show the linked clip of the History Channel documentary, “America: the Story of Us,” which discusses the Declaration of Independence. Ask the students to pay close attention to what the colonists risked by signing the Declaration. (5 minutes)  
**Link:** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb7MI8NQLoo>
5. Have the students read the Declaration in their small groups. As they move through the document, circulate around the room, asking them questions about the document as they reach certain passages. A few possible examples might be:
  - a. As students work their way through the Declaration’s introduction, ask them how they would evaluate the language used by the drafters. Was making the Declaration a decision that the drafters came to lightly? Does the language used reflect the gravity of the situation?
  - b. When students examine the portion of the Declaration concerning the “long train of abuses,” press them to connect the references made in the Declaration to the events described in the review at the beginning of class/the previous day’s lesson. Can they identify specific examples?
  - c. At the conclusion of the document, draw out students’ opinions about the importance of the Declaration to the colonists. What is at stake for the writers of the Declaration and the colonies at large after making the Declaration?

### **Homework:**

Taking note of the class discussion and specific passages of the Declaration that were compelling to the students, have them re-write the Declaration in their own words. Instruct them that evidence is just as important as language. Emphasize strong arguments: the “whats” of each student’s essay must be balanced out by “whys.”

### **Extension Activities:**

At the beginning of the next class, encourage a few students to share their essays and why they re-wrote the Declaration the way they did.

## 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:**  
**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 SAMUEL ADAMS, JOHN ADAMS, ROBT. TREAT PAINE, ELBRIDGE GERRY

Rhode Island STEPHEN HOPKINS, WILLIAM ELLERY.

Connecticut ROGER SHERMAN, SAMUEL 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.