

Lesson on the Declaration of Independence for FPRI by Paul Dickler

Grade Level:

High School

Time:

Two to three classroom periods.

Standards:

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:

Thematic Strand Index:

- Standard #2: Time, Continuity and Change
- Standard #6: Power, Authority and Governance
- Standard #9: Global Connections
- Standard #10 Civic Ideals and Practices

United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

- Primary Emphasis: Era 3 Revolution and the New Nation: Standard 1

Common Core State Standards for English Lang. Arts & Literacy in History/Social Science, 6-12

Key Ideas and Details

- RH/SS.2—determine and summarize central ideas and themes
- RH/SS.3—analyze text related individuals, events or ideas

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- RH/SS.9—analyze and/or compare primary/secondary sources

Comprehension and Collaboration

- SL.1—prepare and participate effectively in a range of conversations.
- SL.2—integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

- SL.4—present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Objectives:

1. Analyze the meaning of the Declaration of Independence.
2. Assess the impact of the Declaration of Independence on the United States today.
3. Explain the impact of the Declaration of Independence on other countries such as Haiti, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Israel.

Procedures:

1. Ice Breaker/ Anticipatory Set: Ask students to say any words or lines that they know from memory of the Declaration of Independence. Make a list on the board and talk about what they mean and why they are well known.
2. Have your students carefully read the Declaration of Independence and review the LESSON INFORMATION below.
3. Divide the class into three groups of students. Each group will correspond to one of the three objectives above. Students should be given a day in class and time at home, to do their research and discuss their findings. Teachers should determine the scope of the write-up and length of the report to the class.
4. Students should report to the class their findings. This can range from three to ten minutes, depending on the time teachers want to spend on the Declaration of Independence. After the

reports, the class should assess the overall importance of the Declaration of Independence on the United States.

Grading can be based on the student research, class presentations, and class discussions.

(LESSON INFORMATION)

The Declaration of Independence

An FPRI Primer:

What Did the Declaration of Independence

Declare? By Ronald J. Granieri

“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....”

So begins one of the most famous documents in world history, the American Declaration of Independence. Drafted by a committee that included **Thomas Jefferson** as the primary author as well as **John Adams** and **Benjamin Franklin**, the Declaration was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in the summer of 1776, signed first by **John Hancock**, the President of the Congress, and eventually by **55 of his colleagues** as well.

That much everyone knows, but students of American History have some basic questions that need explanation, most importantly:

- Why was such a Declaration necessary?
- What did it declare?

The first question is important when you consider that by the summer of 1776, the American colonies had been locked in a political conflict with Great Britain for more than a decade, and the two sides had been involved in a shooting war for more than a year. Ever since the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, the colonists had complained about the efforts by the British government to levy new taxes on the colonies. Those complaints had even swelled into spasms of violence, from the riot that led to the **Boston Massacre** in 1770 to the **Boston Tea Party** in 1773, even before the April 1775 showdown between the **Minutemen and the Redcoats at Lexington and Concord**, and the **Battle of Bunker Hill** later that summer.

The colonists had also made previous statements—official and unofficial—announcing their displeasure with the British government and claiming their rights as Englishmen. Jefferson had even written an earlier document, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, for the First Continental Congress in 1774, which had announced that parliament had no rights to enforce laws or taxes on the American colonies. Even then, Jefferson had suggested the colonies were independent, but as the title suggested, his emphasized the rights of British America within the empire. If anything, most American rebels wanted to appeal to King George III to rein in parliament, and perhaps agree to an

arrangement where the American colonies could have some form of home rule while maintaining the King as their sovereign.

By 1776, however, as the reality of armed conflict set in (colonial forces had invaded Quebec in the summer of 1775, and the British began sending fresh troops to New York by the late spring of 1776), the colonists faced a difficult choice. It was not likely that **King George III** was going to take their side against **parliament**—indeed, the new **soldiers coming over the Atlantic** were living proof that the King was as determined to bring the colonists to heel as his government. But who would be willing to say that the breach was irreparable?

In early 1776, **Thomas Paine** provided the intellectual nudge that so many colonists needed. In his pamphlet *Common Sense*, Paine stripped away the argument that the King would provide a unifying force. Indeed, he argued that monarchy itself was the problem. If the colonists hoped to be free, they needed to separate themselves from the Old World altogether. Paine's pamphlet became a bestseller and provided the right argument at the right time, helping to convince many patriots that the future of their rebellion depended on their willingness to embrace complete independence.

As Paine wrote: “In short, monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes. . . . In England, a King hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which, in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.”

In addition to the intellectual revolution urged by Paine, independence offer practical advantages as well. As long as the colonies were merely rebellious parts of the British empire, they could not expect any assistance from other European powers. As independent states, however, the colonies could pursue a foreign policy and seek allies. Merely declaring independence would not be enough to get that assistance, but it was a necessary first step.

Not everyone agreed, however. Some of the representatives to the Continental Congress recoiled at the thought of a final break with Britain—either because they hoped that reconciliation was possible, or at least they wanted to put off that drastic step for as long as possible.

Much depended on the text that Jefferson and his colleagues delivered, which ended up overwhelming any lingering Congressional resistance.

The Declaration can be divided into three main parts:

- The introduction, in which Jefferson provides the philosophical grounds for the declaration—that government exists to secure the inalienable rights. Citizens

- should respect their government as long as it does so, but when it clearly fails to do that, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”
- A long list of actions by the King—not Parliament, but the King—that justified the decision to break ties with him. As Jefferson put it: “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.”
 - All of which builds to the conclusion, stating the ultimate the purpose of the document: “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 to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do...”

And just to reinforce what a dramatic step this was, the Declaration concluded: “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.”

Those were not empty words. The members of the Continental Congress took an enormous risk by signing and publishing the Declaration. Although the document eventually became iconic, inspiring similar declarations in places as diverse as Haiti, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Israel, their immediate prospects were not so certain. They had no sure way of knowing how the war would go, or whether the “opinions of mankind” would look favorably upon their rebellion, and they had just committed treason against the only ruler they had ever known. It was a step into an uncertain future—with their lives at stake, and a new nation to win.

Modifications:

Teachers can choose to limit the scope of this lesson to one or two of the three objectives. Research can also be assigned as homework by individuals rather than in groups.

Extensions:

The lesson can be expanded to include the relationship of the Declaration of Independence to additional countries’ declarations of independence.

References:

FPRI:

The Declaration of Independence: An FPRI Primer.

The Declaration of Independence. National Archives.

www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration

The Declaration of Independence.US History.org has extensive information and the text.

www.ushistory.org/declaration/

ORBIS—FPRI's Journal of Foreign Affairs. Numerous articles throughout its publishing history concerning the Declaration of Independence.

Declaration of Independence at history.com

www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/declaration-of-independence

50 Facts About the Declaration of Independence (The one about the signing date is wrong!)

<https://www.landofthebrave.info/declaration-of-independence-facts.htm>

Declaration of Independence. Office of the Historian, Dept. of State.

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration>

Venezuelan Declaration of Independence.

<http://scholarship.rice.edu/jsp/xml/1911/9253/1/aa00032.tei.html>

Haiti's Declaration of Independence from Wikipedia. Declaration in French.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian_Declaration_of_Independence

Vietnam's Declaration of Independence in Vietnamese from Wikipedia.

http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuy%C3%AAn_ng%C3%B4n_%C4%91%E1%BB%99c_l%E1%BA%ADp_

(Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam_D%C3%A2n_ch%E1%BB%A7_C%E1%BB%99ng_h%C3%B2a)

Israel's Declaration of Independence in Hebrew and English.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Declaration_of_Independence