

Lesson 2: Writing the Declaration of Independence

Overview

This two-day lesson examines the Declaration of Independence and the key ideas behind it.

On day one, students first explore the purpose of government as they react to the question: Why does government exist? Next, they read an article on the reasons behind the Declaration of Independence and engage in a discussion on it.

On day two, students review the previous session, and then they work in pairs to put the historic second paragraph of the document into their own words.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Define key vocabulary terms found in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Determine the purposes of government and give examples.
3. Explain the context for the Declaration of Independence and why it became a necessity.
4. Examine key ideas in the language of the historic second paragraph of the declaration.
5. Paraphrase and rewrite key ideas found in the Declaration of Independence in their own words.

Standards Addressed

California History Social Science Standard
8.1

California's Common Core State Standards

RH.6–8.1

RH.6–8.2

RH.6–8.6

Civic Education Connections to Common Core Standards.

The Rise of Democratic Ideals

Preparation and Materials

Handout 2A: Writing the Declaration of Independence — 1 per student.

Handout 2B: In Your Own Words — 1 per student.

(Optional) Handout 2C: Vocabulary List — 1 per student.

Assign students look up the vocabulary before continuing to Part 2 below or you can make a chart of the vocabulary terms on the board or on poster paper and fill in the chart as the class participates in the discussions throughout Lessons 2 and 3.

Procedure

Day One

I. Focus Discussion

A. Engage students in a discussion to get them thinking about the purpose of government. Questions to raise:

- Why does government exist? What do you think its purpose is?
Look for: Establish order, protect people from foreign attack and domestic violence, provide services, protect people's rights, and raise money for these functions.
- How can people show they disagree with what their government is doing?
Accept reasonable responses, which may include voting for different representatives, organizing protests, and signing petitions.
- What is revolution? When is it all right to revolt against the government?
Revolution means to change the government completely, or to create a new system of government, usually by force. As to when it is all right to revolt, accept reasonable answers.

B. Historical Context for the Declaration of Independence. Remind students that in early American history, the colonists had to make some difficult decisions about government. One of the most important decisions they had to make was whether to continue to be governed by the British Empire.

Explain that many laws passed by the British Parliament were viewed as unfair by the colonists. The British also sent soldiers to intimidate the colonists and threaten force against any open protest. For these reasons, the colonists eventually thought it was necessary to rebel against their government. They thought they had no other way to change the laws and make them fair.

Explain that they went even further than rebellion. They declared themselves a new and independent nation. The Declaration of Independence is a document written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. The declaration would be sent to King George III and Parliament and the governments of other nations to notify the world that the American states would no longer be governed as British colonies.

II. Reading and Discussion — Writing the Declaration of Independence

- A. Let students know that they are going to go behind the scenes when America was deciding to declare independence from England. They will discover why the Declaration of Independence has become one of our most important historical documents. In it, Jefferson expressed key ideas about the purpose of government.
- B. Tell students that they are going to read about Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. As they read, they need to look for:

- Key ideas about why Americans decided to break away from England.
- Key ideas about what the declaration was.

C. Distribute **Handout 2A: Writing the Declaration of Independence** to students and explain that after they read, they will have a conversation about why Americans decided to break away from England.

D. When they finish reading, hold a discussion using the **For Discussion and Writing** questions:

1. In 1775, most members of Congress did not want to break away from England. What happened to change their minds?
Congress appealed to the king, but the king responded with force (sending troops and warships). Also, very persuasive people like Jefferson argued for independence.
2. Why did Jefferson say Congress “mangled” his writing? Do you agree?
Congress removed about 25 percent of his original words. Accept reasoned responses to the second question. Look for: Removing Jefferson’s attack on the slave trade seemed to go against the idea that “all men are created equal.”
3. At the end of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” What would you pledge your life, fortune, and honor to support today? Why?
Accept any reasoned response. Students should state and support their answers.

Other questions to raise:

- What was Parliament?
The elected government in England. Parliament ruled alongside the king.
- What in the reading shows you that independence was important to the American colonists?
By 1776, there were many declarations of independence. Most colonies had their own declarations even before the most famous Declaration of Independence.
- Why was Jefferson chosen to write the Declaration of Independence?
He had been a respected leader in Virginia, and Virginia elected him to the Continental Congress. The others on the committee to write the declaration were too busy to write it.
- What did Jefferson write it was “necessary” for the Americans to do?
To break away from England. The declaration says to “dissolve the political bands” between America and England.

- What did Jefferson say the people have the right to do?
They have the right to change the government when it abuses their rights.
- How did Jefferson describe the government of England in the declaration?
He described the king as an “unfit” ruler. He also said that Parliament had been destroying Americans’ rights.
- Why was it such a big step for Congress to approve the declaration on July 4, 1776?
It gave the American colonies no choice now but to fight the English troops and warships sent by King George. England would not accept the declaration without a fight.

Day Two

I. Focus Discussion

A. Review with students what they learned in the last session. Questions to raise:

- Why did Americans decided to break away from England?
Look for: British Parliament passed many laws that the colonist thought were unfair, the British sent soldiers to intimidate colonists and threaten with force against any open protest.
- What was the Declaration of Independence?
It was a document, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, sent to King George III and Parliament notifying them that the Americas will no longer be governed as British colonies.

B. Tell students that now they are going to take a closer look at the words of the Declaration.

II. Paired Activity — In Your Own Words

A. Distribute **Handout 2B: In Your Own Words**. Read aloud the text from the declaration on the handout:

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. . . .

B. Hold a discussion by asking these questions:

- What rights does Jefferson write about in the Declaration of Independence? What does each of these rights mean?
The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life is the right to live, liberty is the right to be free, and the pursuit of happiness means freedom of opportunity (to choose your own way in life) and the duty to help those in need.
- Jefferson said these rights were “unalienable.” What does this mean?
They cannot be taken away from anyone or even sold or given away.
- Jefferson wrote that “all men are created equal.” What did he mean by this? Explain.
“All men are created equal” means that everyone has equal rights.

C. Divide the class into pairs of students and explain that each pair will discuss what the words in this paragraph means to them today. The important terms are highlighted in bold on the handout. They will then rewrite the key ideas in this historic paragraph in their own words for a contemporary audience. Give students 20 minutes to discuss and rewrite the paragraph in their own words.

D. After they have rewritten the paragraph, select a few to read their work to the class.

E. Debrief the activity by asking these questions:

- Why it is important to talk about the declaration in your own words?
Accept any reasonable responses. Possible responses may include: We still have rights today. Even though we don’t have a king over us today, the government should not be able to take away our rights. Our democracy is still based on the ideas in the declaration.
- Do you think most Americans today know what the key terms in the Declaration mean? Why or why not?
Accept any reasonable responses.

III. History Experience Planner

The projects students create for the History Experience must be related to a yearly theme. This year’s theme is the Declaration of Independence. This lesson and Lesson 3 provides students the opportunity to explore the Declaration of Independence and its importance in history, which will help them decide on a topic for their projects.

Assign students **Log 2: Declaration of Independence Overview** as homework. To complete the log, students can review Handout 2A or go to the [History Experience Research Links](#).

Writing the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. Delegates came from each colony. (A delegate is a person chosen to meet with others to make decisions.) The Revolutionary War had just broken out. The British and the colonists had fought in battles. But most in Congress did not want to break away from England. They wanted the colonies to remain English.

The Americans had sent appeals to England. They had many complaints about what the British government was doing. Colonists also wanted the British people to elect new members of Parliament. They hoped that would change the way the British treated them. But British voters did not do this. They continued to support members of Parliament who opposed colonial rights.

Parliament and King George did not want to bargain with the colonists. In August 1775, King George declared that the Americans were in open revolt. A few months later, Parliament passed a law that allowed seizing American ships. It also allowed burning colonial towns.

King George sent warships and troops to stop the revolt. The king's governor of Virginia offered to free slaves who joined with the British. All these actions angered Americans. More people joined the revolution.

What Is the Declaration of Independence?

Independence was important to the colonists. By 1776, most colonies already had declarations of independence. Many towns, counties, and even private groups made their own declarations, too. The declarations listed British abuses of power. They demanded self-rule.

On June 8, 1776, Congress voted to write a declaration of independence. It named men to form a writing committee. One of these men was Thomas Jefferson. He was a lawyer from Virginia. He was a respected leader there. Virginia had elected him to be a delegate to Congress. The others on the committee were too busy with the revolution to work on the declaration. So, Jefferson wrote it alone.

He finished the writing in just a few days. The declaration's opening words were "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . ." Jefferson went on to say that breaking from England was a serious step. It needed an explanation.

In the second paragraph of the declaration, Jefferson stated his key ideas. He wrote that "all men are created equal." And they have "unalienable rights." In other words, every person has the same God-given rights. And these rights should never be taken away.

Jefferson wrote that these rights are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Other writers had used the phrase “pursuit of happiness” before. It meant that all persons should be free to find their own way in life. It also meant that they had a duty to help those in need.

Jefferson wrote that governments should protect these rights. Governments get “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In other words, the people run the government. The goal of government should be to guard everyone’s freedom.

In the rest of the declaration, Jefferson listed the ways the king had abused Americans’ rights. He claimed that the king was “unfit to be the ruler of a people.” He blamed the king for the slave trade, too. He called slavery “cruel.”

Jefferson also attacked the British people. He said that they had voted for a Parliament that was destroying the colonists’ rights. He said they were “deaf to the voice of justice.”

Jefferson stated that the colonies were now “Free and Independent states. . . .” He ended the declaration with these words: “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.”

Jefferson gave his draft to Congress on June 28. Congress did not change much in the first two paragraphs. Today, they are the most famous parts of the Declaration of Independence.

The members did cut out most of Jefferson’s attack on the British people. They took out all of his attack on slavery and the slave trade. Members who owned slaves wanted this part removed. In all, they took out about 25 percent of Jefferson’s words.

Jefferson was angry. He watched while members debated his words. He later wrote that the Congress “mangled” his writing.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. On the Fourth of July, it approved the Declaration of Independence. There would be no turning back now.

For Discussion and Writing

1. In 1775, most members of Congress did not want to break away from England. What happened to change their minds?
2. Why did Jefferson say Congress “mangled” his writing? Do you agree?
3. At the end of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” What would you pledge your life, fortune, and honor to support today? Why?

Vocabulary List

Look up each word and write a short definition for each.

appeal _____

consent of the governed _____

Declaration of Independence _____

government _____

life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness _____

Parliament _____

Philadelphia _____

revolution _____

Second Continental Congress _____

unalienable _____
