

Lesson 3: The Declaration's Ideas

Overview

This two-day lesson (with an optional third day) examines the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the controversy surrounding slavery.

On day one, students read a short article on the declaration and engage in a discussion on its key ideas and the contradictions between its ideals and slavery.

On day two, working in small groups, students create a poster to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas expressed in the document and express why they think these ideas are important today. The practice of creating the poster will also introduce them to the type of project they will create for the History Experience.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Identify and describe the ideas of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Explain the contradictions between ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence and the institution of slavery.
3. Determine the most important ideas about government from the Declaration of Independence and discuss why these ideas are important today.
4. Create and present a poster to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence and to educate and persuade others of the importance of these ideas today.
5. Practice the skills needed for the History Experience project.

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 3A: The Declaration's Ideas — 1 per student.

Handout 3B: Posters of Democracy — 1 per student.

Supplies: Chart paper or poster paper and colored markers.

(Optional) Handout 3C: Vocabulary List — 1 per student.

Assign students look up the vocabulary before beginning the lesson 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 lesson.

Procedure

Day One

I. Reading and Discussion – The Declaration’s Ideas

- A. Explain that Jefferson got many of his ideas from other thinkers. Philosophers in Europe had thought of the idea that government had the purpose of protecting the rights of citizens. Jefferson read these philosophers’ books and believed strongly in their ideas.

Explain that one reason why the declaration was so historic was that it took all those philosophers’ ideas and put them into action. For the first time in history, a country was declaring itself independent based on the idea that the people should have basic rights and freedom.

- B. Tell students that they are going to read about the ideas in the Declaration of Independence. As they read, they need to look for:
- Key ideas that Jefferson put into the Declaration of Independence.
 - Key ideas regarding slavery in America.
- C. Distribute **Handout 3A: The Declaration’s Ideas** and explain that after they read, they will discuss the key ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the contradictions regarding slavery.
- D. When students finish reading, hold a discussion using the **For Discussion and Writing** questions at the end of the reading:
- John Locke influenced Jefferson’s writing. Explain Locke’s idea about the contract between government and the people.
The government agrees to protect the people’s rights. The people, in turn, agree to obey the law. But the more a government abuses (or denies) the people’s rights, the more right the people have to resist and even change the government.
 - What do you think slaves would have thought about the phrase “all men are created equal”?
Accept reasoned responses. Students might point out that slavery contradicted all men being equal and having unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. John Locke thought “property” included self-ownership. Jefferson agreed, and yet Jefferson owned slaves.
 - Do you see any differences between what people today believe and what they do? What are those differences? Why do you think they exist?

Accept any reasoned response. Students should state and support their answers.

Other questions to raise:

- Who was John Locke? What ideas did Jefferson learn from Locke?
John Locke was an English writer of the Enlightenment. Jefferson learned the basic ideas expressed in the declaration from Locke, such as “unalienable rights,” “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and that government should be based on the “consent of the governed.”
- What ideas about government does Thomas Jefferson write about in the Declaration of Independence?
The most basic idea is that government is run for the people, not for the rulers; it relies on the “consent of the governed.” Students should also note that government is supposed to protect people’s natural rights and that if government violates these rights, the people have the right to change the government. They even have the right to overthrow the government if government becomes too abusive.
- In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson said that government should protect people’s rights. Why do you think the protection of rights was so important to Jefferson’s ideas about government?
Jefferson believed that the goal of government was to ensure everyone’s freedom. Students should also note that one of the main reasons that the colonists went to war was because the British had abused their rights and Jefferson wanted to make plain that no government should do this.

Day Two

I. Small-Group Activity: Posters for Democracy

- A. Tell students that they are going to get a chance to think about the purpose of our government and the importance of individual rights. Tell them they will get to share their thoughts with others.

Explain that there is growing concern that many people today take for granted or don't even think about the ideas behind our democratic government. Distribute **Handout 3B: Posters for Democracy** and read the introduction to the activity with the students.

- B. Divide the class into small groups (three or four students each) and go over the steps the groups will complete to create and present their posters. Remind the groups how much time they will have to complete the assignment.
- C. Provide materials to each group: chart paper or poster paper and markers.

II. Group Presentations and Debriefing

- A. Ask each group to present its poster. After each presentation, engage the presenters and class in a discussion about the presentation. Raise questions such as:
 - Was the information they presented about the Declaration of Independence accurate?
 - What ideas did this group seem to think were most important?
 - How did the group decide what the most important ideas were?
 - What did this group do to try to make its poster persuasive? Interesting?
- B. After all groups have presented, engage students in a discussion on the ideas of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Raise questions such as:
 - What is the reasoning behind our government according to the Declaration of Independence?
Government is not for the rulers, but for the people. Government should protect the basic (natural, God-given) rights of the people. If a government does not respect the rights of the people, or does not represent their interests, the people should change the government.
 - If you were placed in the same position as Thomas Jefferson, trying to explain what a good government should be, are there other ideas you would include based on what we know about our society today? Are there any of Jefferson's ideas you would not include?
Students should state and support their opinions.
- C. **Day Three (Optional)**. Any additional time needed for students to present their posters or debrief the activity can take place during an optional third day.

D. **Poster Display.** To culminate this activity, students' posters may be displayed in your classroom and around the school.

III. History Experience Planner

This lesson provides students with another 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 3: Declaration of Independence Timeline** as homework. To complete the log students can review textbook or go to the [History Experience Research Links](#).

The Declaration's Ideas

Jefferson's key ideas broke from the past. According to Jefferson, the purpose of government was not to serve the rulers. It was to serve the people and uphold their rights. Where did Jefferson get these ideas?

Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment. This was a period during the 17th and 18th centuries. Thinkers turned to reason and science to explain the world. They thought that people could improve their lives by learning about the "laws of nature."

Jefferson did not invent the ideas that he used in the declaration. He said that he had adopted the views of the day. These ideas were, so to speak, "in the air."

Jefferson knew British history. He also knew British political thought. He had read the statements of independence by other colonies. He knew well the writings of Americans like Thomas Paine and George Mason. In writing the declaration, Jefferson followed the format of the English Declaration of Rights. This was written after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which had driven King James II off the English throne.

Jefferson modeled the most famous ideas in the Declaration of Independence on those of John Locke. Locke was an English writer. He wrote his book *Second Treatise of Government* in 1689, right after the Glorious Revolution. Locke's book explained why overthrowing a king could be the right thing to do.

Locke believed that long ago, before there were any governments, people lived in a state of nature. Even in the state of nature, people had rights. Locke wrote that all men are equal. They are born with natural rights that are "unalienable." Among these natural rights, Locke said, are "life, liberty, and property."

According to Locke, the state of nature could be dangerous. People might kill one another. They might steal from each other. So, people formed governments to protect their natural rights.

Locke wrote that the government and the people have a contract. The government must guard people's natural rights. In turn, the people must obey the law. But, Locke said, the government might break the contract with "a long train of abuses." If a government wrongs its people with those abuses, the people have the right to resist that government. They can change it. They can even get rid of it and create a new one.

Locke believed that life itself is a natural right. He said that people have both a right and a duty to save their own lives. Killers, however, lose their right to life since they don't respect the life of others.

Liberty was another natural right. Locke said that people should be free to decide how to live. But they must not hinder the liberty of others. Locke strongly believed in freedom.

By "property," another natural right, Locke meant more than owning things. He also meant owning oneself. This included a right to personal well being. He sometimes said people had a right to the "pursuit of happiness," too.

Jefferson adopted Locke's ideas. In the declaration, he spoke first about natural rights. He then went on to explain why the revolution was necessary in 1776. He next listed all the ways that King George had abused the colonists' rights. On that list, he accused the king of taxing the colonists without their consent. He accused the king of taking away the right of jury trials. In general, he said the laws were whatever the king wanted, and the colonists had no say in the matter.

How Could Jefferson Say That "All Men Are Created Equal"?

The Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal." This meant that everyone had the same God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But how could Jefferson and the other signers believe this? After all, slavery existed in the colonies. Many slave owners argued that slaves were not equal. But Jefferson, also a slave owner, did not agree.

From an early age, Jefferson hated slavery. But he saw no way to end it. If the slaves were freed all at once, Jefferson feared a bloody war. But if slaves were freed one by one, he worried they would have no way to survive.

Of course, Jefferson and other Southern plantation owners depended on slave labor. A plantation is a large farm. Plantations were key to the Southern economy.

Jefferson came up with a plan. He wrote that slave children should be taken from their parents and put in schools. There they would learn a trade. When they grew up, they would be moved to a colony somewhere. There they would be given tools and work animals to start a new life. They would be "free and independent people."

His plan never gained much support. Slavery in the United States lasted until 1865, when the Civil War ended. But even then, the equality promised in the Declaration of Independence was denied to black people, women, and others. It would take another 100 years for the United States to get close to the ideals in the declaration.

The Declaration of Independence is not law in the United States. It is not part of the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights. But its words state America's ideals. In the 19th century, abolitionists embraced the ideal of equality and worked to end slavery. The women's rights movement embraced the ideal, too. Women added "all men *and women* are created equal" to a famous declaration of rights in 1848. The civil rights movement of the 20th century urged America to honor the ideals of the declaration. The document still speaks to us today as it did in 1776.

For Discussion and Writing

1. John Locke influenced Jefferson's writing. Explain Locke's idea about the contract between government and the people.
2. What do you think slaves would have thought about the phrase "all men are created equal"?
3. Do you see any differences between what people today believe and what they do? What are those differences? Why do you think they exist?

Posters for Democracy



Attention, historians! The Thomas Jefferson History Society is giving you a very important task. Your task is to address a problem in America. The problem is that too many Americans don't think about the ideas behind our democratic government.

To address the problem you need to create a poster about the importance of the Declaration of Independence and its key ideas. It requires that the public learn more about these ideas. It also requires that the public learn why these ideas are important today.

Your team of historians will create a poster that teaches others about two points:

1. The important ideas about government shown in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Why these ideas are important to America today.

Steps

A. Discuss and agree on:

- What are the most important ideas about government in the declaration?
- Why are these ideas important to our lives today?

B. Create a poster to educate others on the two points above. Your poster should:

- Catch people's attention.
- Educate them about the two items above.
- Convince them that the declaration is important.

Everyone in your group should work together. Look at your work through the eyes of a historian:

- Is what we are saying factual? Is it accurate?
- Is our meaning clear? Can anyone who reads our message also understand it?
- Is our poster convincing that the ideas we've chosen are the most important?
- Is our presentation creative?
- Will it catch people's attention? Will they remember it?

C. Prepare to present your poster to others. Each member of your team needs to participate in the presentation. Be prepared to:

- Explain the important ideas your team decided to show in the poster.
- Explain why these ideas are important today.
- Answer questions about your team's decisions and about the way your poster presents the ideas.

Vocabulary List

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

contract _____

Enlightenment _____

equality _____

ideal _____

natural rights _____

plantation _____

property _____

slavery _____
