Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the structure, purpose, and significance of the Declaration of Independence. Focusing on the most famous phrases of the Declaration from the Introduction and the Conclusion, students will analyze the concepts of inalienable rights and government by consent. Finally, students will begin to understand the philosophical foundations of America's constitutional government.

*The object of the Declaration of Independence...* [was] *not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. ... it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.*

–Thomas Jefferson, 1825

*On the distinctive principles of the Government ...of the United States, the best guides are to be found in...the Declaration of Independence, as the fundamental Act of Union of these States.*

–James Madison, 1825

**Critical Engagement Question**

What does the Declaration of Independence reveal about American ideals?

**Objectives**

Students will:

- Examine the famous phrases of the Declaration of Independence.
- Understand the purpose and structure of the Declaration of Independence.
- Analyze the concept of inalienable rights.
- Analyze the concept of the social compact and government by consent.
- Appreciate the American ideals of liberty and government by consent.

**Standards**

CCE (5-8): IA2, IB1, IIA1, IIC1, IID1
CCE (9-12): IA2-3, IIB1, IIA1, IID1
NCHS (5-12): Era 3, Standard 1B
NCSS: Strands 2, 5, 6, and 10
Background/Homework

10 minutes the day before

Cut out and distribute **Handout A: Declaration Scavenger Hunt Slips**. For homework, have students find out how the person, idea or item on their slip was/is related to the Declaration of Independence.

Warm-up

10 minutes

A. Have students share their responses to the **Declaration Scavenger Hunt Slips** as a large group.

B. Divide the class into pairs or trios. Distribute **The Declaration of Independence** (Appendix A) and **Handout B: The Structure of the Declaration** to each group. Assign each group one section of the Declaration to focus on; additionally, all groups should do the signature section. *Note: You may wish to divide the Indictment section in half between the groups because of its length.* Have students skim their sections of the Declaration and record the key ideas for their sections on the Handout. (See Answer Key for suggested responses.)

Lesson Plan

30 minutes

A. Put up an overhead of **Handout B** and ask students to share their responses. Once the chart is complete, ask students:

- What is the purpose of each section?
- Why include a long list of grievances?
- What was the reason for pointing out that the colonists had tried to get the King to change the way he treated them?
- Which do you believe is the most important section? Why?

B. Tell students you will now focus on some of the most famous phrases of the Declaration of Independence. Distribute and put up an overhead of **Handout C: Key Excerpts**.

C. Have students read the excerpt individually or in small groups, and ask them to underline what they believe are key terms and/or phrases. Then discuss the questions as a large group. (The Answer Key contains suggested responses.)
Wrap Up

10 minutes

Ask students to share their personal responses to the Declaration by discussing as a large group the following questions:

- As Americans, should we be proud of this document?
- What does the Declaration tell the world about the United States?
- Are the ideals expressed in the Declaration outdated, or are they still true today?
- Do these ideals matter to you? If so, how and why?

Homework

A. Have students read Handout D: A Note on the Signers and answer the critical thinking questions.

B. Using Handout B as a guide, have students draw an illustration for each section of the Declaration of Independence. Illustrations should symbolically represent the section’s content and purpose.

C. Have students select a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Have them research the person’s biography and prepare that person’s resume to share with the class. Students can begin their research at: http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/Teach/Founders/default.asp

Extensions

1. Have students work in groups of three to investigate ways the Declaration of Independence has been embraced by later individuals throughout American history. How have leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others referenced the Declaration as they worked to expand the blessings of liberty? Groups should create a Declaration Timeline to highlight historical documents and events in which the Declaration played a part.

2. Have students use the style and substance of the Declaration to write their own “declaration of independence” from their parents.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thomas Jefferson</th>
<th>The Committee of Five</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural Rights</td>
<td>Continental Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Lee Resolution</td>
<td>Spirit of ‘76</td>
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<td>Common Sense</td>
<td>Treason</td>
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<td>King George III</td>
<td>Charles Thomson</td>
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<td>John Hancock</td>
<td>National Archives</td>
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<td>John Locke</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln</td>
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<td>George Mason</td>
<td>Martin Luther King, Jr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revolutionary War</td>
<td>July 2, 1776</td>
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<td>Government by Consent</td>
<td>Sacred Honor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dunlap Broadsides</td>
<td>Engrossing</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Taxation Without Representation</td>
<td>Social Compact</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Directions:** The Declaration of Independence is made up of six sections. Skim over the Declaration with your group members. Don’t worry if you don’t understand every word. While you skim it, take note of what kinds of words, phrases and ideas are contained in each section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Title</th>
<th>Contents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> Introduction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>When, in the course of human events...</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>2</strong> Preamble</td>
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<td><strong>We hold these truths to be self-evident...</strong></td>
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<td><strong>3</strong> Indictment</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>He has refused...</strong></td>
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<td><strong>4</strong> Indictment (cont.)</td>
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<td><strong>For quartering large bodies of troops...</strong></td>
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<td><strong>5</strong> Denunciation</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Nor have We been wanting...</strong></td>
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<td><strong>6</strong> Conclusion</td>
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<td><strong>We, therefore, the Representatives...</strong></td>
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<td><strong>7</strong> Signatures</td>
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</table>
**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 [rights] 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.

1. What do you think “unalienable rights” (or “inalienable rights”) means?
   According to the document:
   2. Where do unalienable rights come from?
   3. What is the purpose of government?
   4. From where does government get its power?
   5. Are the powers given to the government by the people limited or unlimited?
   6. When should government be changed?
   7. How could the Continental Congress approve this document when so many of its
       members owned slaves?
   8. Does the fact that many of these men owned slaves mean these ideas are wrong or less
       important?

**Vocabulary**
- Endowed: given or furnished
- Instituted: set up or established
- Deriving: receiving
- Abolish: put an end to
- Effect: bring about
Fifty-six individuals from each of the original 13 colonies participated in the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Pennsylvania sent nine delegates to the congress, followed by Virginia with seven and Massachusetts and New Jersey with five. Connecticut, Maryland, New York, and South Carolina each sent four delegates. Delaware, Georgia, New Hampshire, and North Carolina each sent three. Rhode Island, the smallest colony, sent only two delegates to Philadelphia.

Eight of the signers were immigrants, two were brothers, two were cousins, and one was an orphan. The average age of a signer was 45. The oldest delegate was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was 70 when he signed the Declaration. The youngest was Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina, who was 27.

Eighteen of the signers were merchants or businessmen, fourteen were farmers, and four were doctors. Forty-two signers had served in their colonial legislatures. Twenty-two were lawyers—although William Hooper of North Carolina was “disbarred” when he spoke out against the Crown—and nine were judges. Stephen Hopkins had been Governor of Rhode Island. Although two others had been clergy previously, John Witherspoon of New Jersey was the only active clergyman to attend—he wore his pontificals to the sessions. Almost all were Protestant Christians; Charles Carroll of Maryland was the only Roman Catholic signer. Seven of the signers were educated at Harvard, four each at Yale and William & Mary, and three at Princeton. John Witherspoon was the president of Princeton and George Wythe was a professor at William & Mary, where his students included the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson.

Seventeen of the signers served in the military during the American Revolution. Thomas Nelson was a colonel in the Second Virginia Regiment and then commanded Virginia military forces at the Battle of Yorktown. William Whipple served with the New Hampshire militia and was one of the commanding officers in the decisive Saratoga campaign. Oliver Wolcott led the Connecticut regiments sent for the defense of New York and commanded a brigade of militia that took part in the defeat of General Burgoyne. Caesar Rodney was a Major General in the Delaware militia and John Hancock was the same in the Massachusetts militia. Five of the signers were captured by the British during the war. Captains Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, and Arthur Middleton (South Carolina) were all captured at the Battle of Charleston in 1780; Colonel George Walton was wounded and captured at the Battle of Savannah. Richard Stockton of New Jersey never recovered from his incarceration at the hands of British Loyalists and died in 1781.

“We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”
Colonel Thomas McKean of Delaware wrote John Adams that he was “hunted like a fox by the enemy—compelled to remove my family five times in a few months, and at last fixed them in a little log house on the banks of the Susquehanna . . . and they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians.” Abraham Clark of New Jersey had two of his sons captured by the British during the war. The son of John Witherspoon, a major in the New Jersey Brigade, was killed at the Battle of Germantown.

Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Francis Lewis's New York home was destroyed and his wife was taken prisoner. John Hart's farm and mills were destroyed when the British invaded New Jersey and he died while fleeing capture. Carter Braxton and Thomas Nelson (both of Virginia) lent large sums of their personal fortunes to support the war effort, but were never repaid.

Fifteen of the signers participated in their states’ constitutional conventions, and six—Roger Sherman, Robert Morris, Benjamin Franklin, George Clymer, James Wilson, and George Reed—signed the United States Constitution. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts attended the federal convention and, though he later supported the document, refused to sign the Constitution.

After the Revolution, thirteen of the signers went on to become governors, and eighteen served in their state legislatures. Sixteen became state and federal judges. Seven became members of the United States House of Representatives, and six became United States Senators. James Wilson and Samuel Chase became Justices of the United States Supreme Court. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Elbridge Gerry each became Vice President, and John Adams and Thomas Jefferson became President. The sons of signers John Adams and Benjamin Harrison also became Presidents.

Five signers played major roles in the establishment of colleges and universities: Benjamin Franklin and the University of Pennsylvania; Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia; Benjamin Rush and Dickinson College; Lewis Morris and New York University; and George Walton and the University of Georgia.

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Carroll were the longest surviving signers. Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Carroll of Maryland was the last signer to die—in 1832 at the age of 95.

Matthew Spalding, Ph.D. is the Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at the Heritage Foundation. This piece was originally published in response to a widely circulated but factually inaccurate account of the lives of the Declaration’s signers. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Comprehension and Critical Thinking Questions

1. Who were the signers? What kinds of men signed the Declaration?

2. What happened to the signers as a result of their affirmation of the principles outlined in the Declaration?

3. Who made the greatest sacrifices for the principles embodied in the Declaration?

4. How do the sacrifices made by these men and their families demonstrate the importance of courage and integrity?