

**Topic:**

The Declaration of Independence

**Time:**

1 ½ to 2 class periods

**Historical**

**Period:**  
1776

**Core:**

US I 6120-0501  
US II 6250-0102  
Gov. 6210-0102

**Objectives:**

Students will understand the rights of citizens and the role of government as these rights and functions are explained in the Declaration of Independence.

**Procedure:**

1. Have the class read through the words to the Declaration of Independence.
2. Distribute to all students Handout 2 which outlines the Declaration of Independence.
3. Divide the class into three groups and assign one part of the Handout to each group.
4. Explain that students are to take the roles of delegates to the Continental Congress that is meeting on July 4, 1776, to review and discuss the Declaration of Independence.
5. The students are responsible for reviewing and discussing among themselves the part they are assigned, including the questions.
6. Have each group make a ten-minute presentation to the rest of the class on the meaning of their part of the Declaration.
7. If all groups agree with the principles of the Declaration, they can ratify the document.
8. Review with students the copy of the original, edited Declaration and discuss possible reasons for word changes.

**Handouts/Worksheets:**

1. The Declaration of Independence
2. Outline of the Declaration of Independence

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this activity is to encourage students to examine and understand the words and phrases of the Declaration of Independence--a document often quoted and even memorized by students, but seldom dissected. Also, the earlier version of the Declaration can illustrate and impress upon students that the language was carefully chosen to be clear and specific.

## HANDOUT 1

### **THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

In Congress, July 4, 1776

### **THE UNANIMOUS DECLARATION OF THE THIRTEEN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind, required 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 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 shewn 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 invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for the 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 Legislature.

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 pretend Legislation.

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock trial, from Punishments 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 neighboring Provinces, 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 Legislature 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, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & 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 insurrections amongst 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 attention 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 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 Authority of these 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 to 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.

## HANDOUT 2

### OUTLINE OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

#### I. STATEMENT OF WHAT COLONISTS BELIEVED

##### A. Beliefs about men's rights

1. All men are created equal.
2. God has given all men some basic rights, and these cannot be taken from them.
3. Some of these rights are the rights to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness.

##### B. Beliefs about government

1. The job of the people who run the government is to protect the rights of the people.
2. The powers held by the people who run the government have been given to them by the people they represent.

##### C. Beliefs about changing the government

1. When the people who run the government take away the rights of the people, the people may:
  - a. Change their government, or
  - b. Get rid of the old kind of government and set up a new kind based on the ideas they think will be best for the safety and happiness of the people.
2. Government should not be changed for small or unimportant reasons.
3. The people will put up with very bad conditions if they can, rather than change the kind of government to which they are accustomed.

4. When rights are taken from the people for a long time, and when there is a danger that the people who govern the country are trying to take all the power, then the people have the right to
  - a. Throw out these rulers, and
  - b. Make new laws and a new government.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What is meant by the right to liberty? What is meant by the right to the pursuit of happiness?
- Where did the colonial leaders believe that the men who ran the government got their power? Is it true today? Why?
- With which of the beliefs in Part I of the Declaration do you agree? With which do you disagree? Why?

#### II. CHIEF WRONGS DONE TO THE COLONISTS BY THE KING

- A. The king did not let the colonists make all the laws they needed for their own good.
- B. When colonial assemblies voted in a way the king did not like, he did away with them.
- C. The king got the judges to decide cases as he wanted.
- D. The king kept armies in the colonies even when there was no war.
- E. The king would not let colonists trade with other countries.
- F. The king taxed the colonists without letting them vote in Parliament on the taxes.
- G. Many times a person was not allowed the right to a trial by jury.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What is a tax? Why did the colonists complain about being taxed? Was this a fair complaint? Why?
- Which wrongs listed by the colonists do you think are the worst? Do you think people in England felt the same way as the colonists about the king's actions? Why?
- If a ruler did all these things today, would he be the fit ruler of a free people? Why?



### III. DECISION OF THE COLONISTS TO FORM A NEW GOVERNMENT

The words in the outline below are very much like the words in the real Declaration. But they have been changed a bit to make them easier to understand.

- A. We, the representatives of the United States of America, by the power given to us by the people in these colonies, say that these united colonies are, and have the right to be, free, and independent states.
- B. We say that these states are no longer under the rule of England and its king.
- C. We say that because we are free states, we have the power to make war, to make peace, to make agreements with other countries, to trade with other countries, and to do all of the other things that a free country can do.
- D. With God's protection, we all pledge to support this Declaration with our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Where did the colonial leaders say they got their power to make this Declaration?
- In your own words, what do you think "Declaration of Independence" means? What line or lines in Part III show that this is a "Declaration of Independence"?
- What powers were the new states to have as a free country?

