



Discussing the Declaration of Independence

Grade level: 9–12

Time estimate: 1 class period (50–70 minutes)

BY STACI GARBER

Lesson Overview:

Students will warm up in this beginning of unit lesson with an image analysis of a famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence before reading the document itself for important concepts or ideas. Students will then engage in whole-class civil discourse that will allow them to question their understanding of the Declaration of Independence, evaluate the importance of its ideals today, and assess the level to which the current country lives up to its founding principles. In this lesson, students will practice rhetorical listening skills and fair-minded critical thinking through civil discourse.

Objectives:

- Students will apply visual literacy skills to identify and analyze visual representation of concepts related to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
- Students will analyze the principles of liberty outlined in the Declaration of Independence.
- Students will evaluate and discuss the effect of the document on United States history, tradition, and politics.

Vocabulary:

- Equality
- Liberty
- Natural rights
- Consent of the governed

- Right to revolution

Materials:

- Warm-up painting of John Trumbull
- Note cards (2 per student)
- Civil discourse tracking form
- Declaration of Independence
- Self-reflection exit ticket

Prework:

This lesson assumes that students have some familiarity with the Declaration of Independence, so for students who have little experience with the Declaration, it may be best taught as the culmination of other lessons about the document. If students do not have familiarity with the document, this lesson will build understanding, but students may feel overwhelmed by the length and complexity of the piece. Therefore, it is recommended students review our [explainers](#) on the principles and grievances in the Declaration. Additionally, in order to engage in productive discourse about the Declaration, we recommend students learn about fair-minded critical thinking and active listening through the following lessons:

- [Fair-Minded Critical Thinking and Listening](#)
- [Rhetorical Listening](#)

Warm-Up:

- Have students view the John Trumbull painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and answer the questions below.
 - What do you notice about the people in the picture?
- Students usually notice the clothing and the wigs before they notice anything else. When they are reporting out, you can ask what these things indicate about the period or about the social class of the people in the room.
- Sometimes students notice that the people are all men or that they are all white or that they are all middle-aged or older. (The white wigs don't necessarily indicate age. They were in fashion and were a means of preventing lice, as men shaved their heads and then put wigs over their bald heads.)
- The document forged and signed by the people in the picture features a statement that "all men are created equal." Do you think the people in the picture think about equality the same way you do?

- Answers will vary, depending on experiences and perspectives.
- Many students might conclude that the people of the 1770s did not have the same concept of equality as people in 2025 do.
- Many students might conclude that the room lacks the kind of diversity that has become commonplace in the United States and that helps shape our concept of equality.
- As students report out, challenge their conceptions by digging into what kind of equality might be meant here. Equality of basic rights, equality of opportunity, equality of condition? There are many ways to think about equality.
- Do you think the people in the picture think about liberty the same way you do?
 - Discuss these concepts with students and let them know that you will be digging into the concepts in the Declaration of Independence and trying to determine how the Declaration has shaped America's history and modern experience.

Lesson Activities:

IDENTIFYING THEMES/VOCABULARY PREVIEW

- Distribute lined notecards.
- Liberty and equality
- Ask half of the class to write a definition for "equality" on the lined side of the notecard. Ask the other half of the class to write a definition for the word "liberty" on the lined side of the note card.
 - After a couple of minutes, have students pair with someone who defined the same word and compare their definitions.
 - Ask pairs if their definitions matched exactly. This is unlikely. If it happens, ask students to find someone whose definition does not match exactly.
 - Have pairs develop a compromise definition.
 - Have pairs report out their compromise definitions.
 - Note nuances of difference in the reported definitions.
 - Ask students why their definitions did not match exactly.
 - We use different words to capture the same concepts.
 - Sometimes our personal definitions of big concepts differ from individual to individual. This is going to be important as we interact with Founding documents.

- Consent of the governed/right to revolution
- Repeat process above.
- Results should be reasonably the same.
- Ask students to identify which rights they were born with. Which rights are inherent or natural human rights?
 - Note these on the board if possible.
 - Students often come up with a pretty exhaustive list. Often, this list can be categorized any way. You can do this on the board by creating symbols for each category.
 - Inform students that Locke, like Jefferson, discusses these rights (but not exhaustively) as some of those belonging to people by nature.
 - Jefferson changed "the pursuit of property" to "the pursuit of happiness," which was a classical concept about becoming a better person. Ask students what they think the change in framing means. To support discussion, please visit the [Sphere 250th Collection](#) for more information on the principles and argument of the American Founding.

TEXT ANALYSIS

- Distribute the Declaration of Independence.
- First read: Give students about 5 minutes to read through the Declaration and circle any words that are important for understanding the text.
- Second read: Underline important ideas or concepts in the text.
- Make sure that students are reading through the complaints as well as the prose text. There will be specific questions about the complaints during the civil discourse session.

Whole-class civil discourse session

- Place desks in a circle or rectangle that includes all students in the room.
- Distribute all four excerpts and have students quickly scan them and underline or circle words they think are important to understanding of the text in full.
- While students are reading, construct a diagram of the students in the room so that you can map the conversation that follows. A blank rectangle map with a key has been provided for you.
- Map the location of students around the room. Use student initials to mark their locations. When a student speaks, place a mark next to the student's initials. If the student (R)estates another student's argument, references the (T)ext, (D)isagrees

respectfully, asks a (Q)uestion, uses another student's (N)ame, or provides e(X)ternal evidence, note these instances as well. Draw a line from the first student who spoke to the next student to speak. This will give you a heat map of the conversation and allow you to encourage civility by recognizing positive civil behaviors.

- Establish norms.
 - Have a brief discussion with students to establish the standards for civil discourse. This is a good time to review general classroom rules, but it is also an opportunity to ask students for guidance on what a civil conversation looks and sounds like.
 - Some sample norms for civil discourse include the following:
 - One person speaks at a time.
 - Restate what the previous person has said before responding.
 - Use each other's names and disagree respectfully.
 - Assume positive intent.
 - Recognize that people have different experiences and perspectives.
 - Disagree respectfully.
 - Expect nonclosure.
 - Let students know that you will be modeling active listening skills and facilitating the discussion. The goal will be to create space for students to build the speaking and listening skills inherent to fair minded critical thinking through experience in class discussion.
- Have a sample round.
 - Ask students to choose one word from the Declaration that they think is the most important. They do not have to explain why. Students may choose the same word as previous students.
 - Patiently and respectfully have each student state only the word they have chosen. You may move around the circle in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction, but make the pattern simple and the expectation that every student will speak clear.
 - This is an important step in the process, because each student will have spoken once and will have had an answer accepted by the rest of the students in the circle.
- First round
 - Ask questions that are grounded in the text and allow students to take positions. These questions should be aimed at measuring student understanding of the text and allowing student collaboration in order to deepen and broaden understanding of the text.
 - After each question, recognize students who want to answer and keep a list of students in the order that they offer responses. Moderate the conversation and

attempt to refrain from intervening other than to enforce the norms. When conversation seems to have stopped, make a request for any final thoughts before moving on to the next question.

- Sample questions:
 - Which grievance was the most surprising? Why? (This allows for a range of answers and for students to disagree about which is most important.)
 - Which grievance was the most relevant to today? Why? (This should generate a range of answers that are grounded in the text.)
 - Which concepts have been most important to American history? Why? (This should provide a range of answers, depending on student understanding of history.)

- Second round

- Ask questions that challenge the text. This allows students opportunities for healthy disagreement. Acknowledge that they are reading only excerpts of a longer piece and that the full piece may have more information to address their concerns.
- Use the same norms you employed in the first round to keep the conversation moving appropriately.

- Sample questions:

- How does the Declaration of Independence define equality? Is this today's understood definition? (There is a lot of room for healthy and respectful **disagreement** here.)
- How does the Declaration of Independence define liberty? Is this today's understood definition? (The Declaration doesn't give a definition per se but does provide examples of the destruction of liberty. These shape our understanding, but many people disagree on the appropriate boundaries of liberty.)
- What do you think the "consent of the governed" meant to the Founding Fathers? In what ways was their definition similar to or different from a contemporary perspective? (This might require some historical knowledge, but students familiar with colonial models of government or of the Progressive Era will add richly to this question.)

- Third round

- Ask questions that are intended to allow students to dig into their own values while keeping conversation related to the text. This will allow diversity of thought in the

approaches students take in addressing the questions. It will also allow for thoughtful disagreement and nuance.

- Use the same norms you employed in the first round to keep the conversation moving appropriately.
- Sample questions:
 - Do you think the American government upholds the principles of the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?
 - Does the right of revolution necessarily involve violent, armed revolt, or can revolution be peaceful?

Self-reflection exit ticket

- Distribute exit tickets as follows. Answers to all questions will vary with the experience in your specific civil discourse session.
 - Did you reference the text during the civil discourse session? Why or why not?
 - Did you learn anything new about the Declaration from the civil discourse session that you did not learn from the reading? Why or why not?
 - Were multiple points of view represented in the civil discourse session? Why or why not?
 - Did you learn anything new about your classmates from the civil discourse session? Why or why not?
- Invite students to share their experiences.

Declaration of Independence Civil Discourse

Warm-Up

Directions: Look at the John Trumbull painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and answer the questions below. The painting hangs in the Capitol Rotunda. More information can be found at <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence>.



1. What do you notice about the people in the picture?

2. The document forged and signed by the people in the picture features a statement that "all men are created equal." Do you think the people in the picture think about equality the same way you do?

Declaration of Independence Civil Discourse

Declaration of Independence

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 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.

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. 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 endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations 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 harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

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 pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment 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 offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, 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 Legislatures, 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 endeavoured 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 attentions to our Brittish 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 of 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 the 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.

Declaration of Independence Civil Discourse

Civil Discourse Tracking Form

(TEACHER EYES ONLY)

Directions: Map the location of students around the room. Use student initials to mark their locations. When a student speaks, place a hash mark next to the student's initials. If the student (R)estates another student's argument, references the (T)ext, (D)isagrees respectfully, asks a (Q)uestion, uses another student's (N)ame, or provides e(X)ternal evidence, note these instances as well. Draw a line from the first student who spoke to the next student to speak. This will give you a heat map of the conversation and allow you to encourage civility by recognizing positive civil behaviors.

Key:

R = Restates or recaps another student's statement

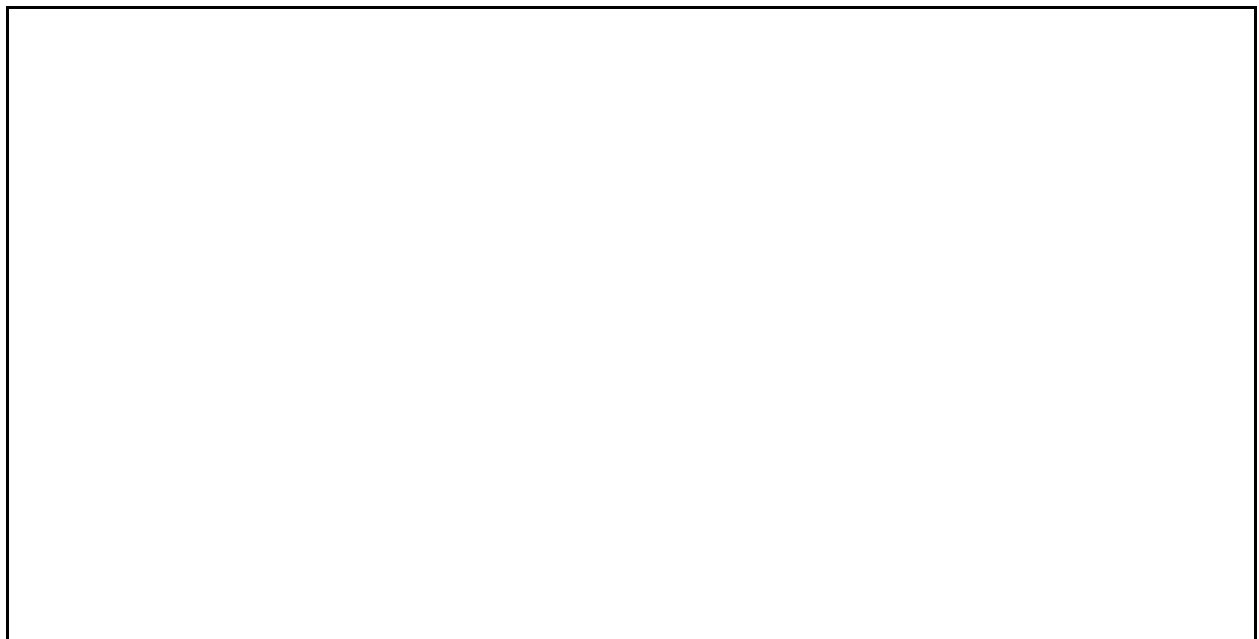
T = References the text

D = Disagrees Respectfully

Q = Asks a question

N = References another student by name

X = Provides external evidence



Declaration of Independence Civil Discourse

Self-Reflection Exit Ticket

1. Did you speak more than twice during the discourse session? Why or why not?

2. Did you reference the text during the civil discourse sessions? Why or why not?

3. Did you learn anything new about the Declaration from the civil discourse session that you did not learn from the reading? Why or why not?

4. Were multiple points of view represented in the civil discourse session? Why or why not?

5. Did you learn anything new about your classmates from the civil discourse session? Why or why not?
