

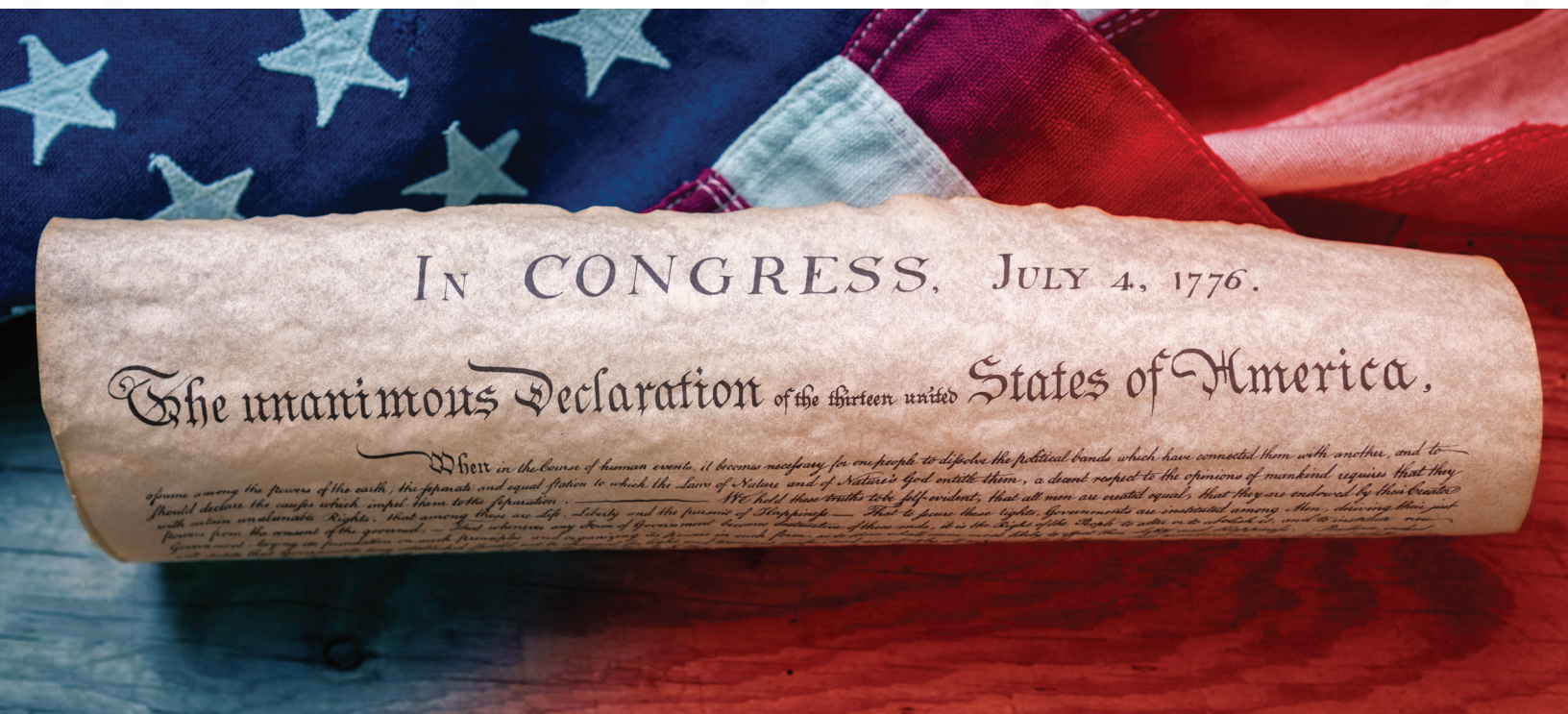


# Primary Source Examination *The Declaration of Independence*

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## Overview

Primary source materials such as the Declaration of Independence can be difficult for students to comprehend without intentional scaffolding and thoughtful discussion. Without an understanding of the language and historical context, a student's understanding of historically significant works can be impeded, thus obscuring connections between the past and present. Primary source materials, therefore, can feel abstract and obsolete for students today. However, such sources provide an important opportunity to build comprehension skills while allowing students to stretch their learning and connect the past to the present. The following lessons provide opportunities to build important historical background knowledge and break down language barriers, allowing students to examine and reinterpret this foundational document.



## Learning Objectives

- Deepen historical background knowledge of the Declaration of Independence
- Deliberately survey a primary source document
- Critically examine the document to make sense of unfamiliar language
- Carefully analyze the document to better understand its purpose and significance
- Discuss the application today of the principles of liberty outlined in the Declaration
- Rewrite the document in modern vernacular to bring it to life

## Essential Questions

- What is the argument outlined in the Declaration of Independence, why is it important, and what does it mean today?



## Lesson 1: Building Background

### OVERVIEW

To critically analyze a historical text like the Declaration of Independence, students first need to build background knowledge. This lesson provides historical context through video, class notes, individual investigations, and team collaboration.



### MEDIA/RESOURCES

- Class PowerPoint: Examining the Declaration of Independence
- Video Opener: “What Is the Declaration of Independence?”
- Website: [National Archives](#), The Declaration of Independence
- Butcher paper for concept map

### PART 1: OPENER

*Open class with the following quotation and prompt written on the board. Have students respond to the prompt on a sheet of notebook paper or in their journals.*

- **Quick write:** “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.” What does the quotation mean to you? What stands out? What elements of this quotation are new to you?

- **Timed pair-share:** Ask students to share what they wrote with a partner. Then bring the class back together and ask follow-up questions:
  - **Say:** What did you hear your partner say? What were similar ideas or questions you shared?

## **PART 2: MINI LESSON**

- **Video explainer**
  - **Say:** We're going to start building background knowledge with a video. As you watch, pay attention to how the document was written, its purpose, and its authors. Please record your thinking in your notebook.
- **Share out/class notes:** Invite one or two students to share what they learned from the video, then jump into class notes outlining the who, what, where, and why of the document (see slides).

## **PART 3: STUDENT APPLICATION**

- **Say:** *Now that you've had a bit of guided practice with building background knowledge, it's your turn to investigate and share your findings in teams. We will use the National Archives links for our investigation.*
- **Team investigation:** What does it say? How did it happen? How was it made?
- Read to students the following instructions:  
*Using the National Archives links, you will investigate these questions in teams. First, decide who will research which question. As you review the content on the appropriate page, record sketch notes in your notebook. You will be responsible for sharing what you learned about your question when the team reconvenes. **NOTE:** This investigation can be modified to meet student needs. You can assign all three questions to students, then have them reconvene, or you can jigsaw the activity by assigning one question to each student. Note that the last question has less material than the others, so you will want to be mindful of how you assign the questions.*

## **PART 4: TABLE CONCEPT MAP**

Ask students to reflect on and discuss the questions below. Then invite them to record their thoughts on butcher paper. As you move around the room listening to the discussions, be sure the following questions are displayed on the board:

- What was the purpose of the document, and who was its intended audience?
- How is the document broken down?
- Who wrote the document, and how does it relate to the Revolutionary War itself?
- Who signed it, and what did it come to represent?

## **PART 5: DEBRIEF**

Ask students to reflect on the activity with the following questions:

- **Reflect:** What makes this document important? Why should we examine it today?
- **Parking lot:** Invite students to record questions on sticky notes for tomorrow. What questions do we still have about the historical context for the document?



## Lesson 2: The Breakdown—A Critical Reading

### OVERVIEW

Now that students have built background knowledge on the historical circumstances surrounding the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, they will begin to examine the text itself. This close reading lesson will give students several opportunities to break down the contents of the document and discuss their questions along the way. This lesson uses a three-reads protocol and invites students to collaborate to make their thinking visible in a table-group brainstorm session.



### LEARNING TARGET

I can critically analyze a primary source document to deepen my understanding of its purpose, meaning, and legacy.

### MEDIA/RESOURCES

- Class Slides: Examining the Declaration of Independence
- Print out: Declaration of Independence ([National Archives](#))
- Butcher paper for table brainstorm (use the same piece from the previous lesson and invite students to use the other side)

## PART 1: OPENER

- **Recap:** Invite students to review their notes and team brainstorm sheet to recap the learning from the previous lesson.

## PART 2: MINI LESSON

- Use slides to review key ideas from yesterday. Then model annotations and invite students to annotate along with you.
- **Discuss:** Ask students, "Whom is this written for?"

## PART 3: STUDENT APPLICATION

Review the 3-reads protocol:

- **1st read:** Notice and note: sections, language, word gaps
  - Briefly review the three sections with the class.
  - **Say:** First, let's skim the document, making note of the sections, language, and any confusing words.
  - **Ask:**
    - What do we notice about how the document is organized?
    - Which words jump off the page?
    - What questions come up right away?
- **2nd read:** Skim for context
  - Discuss voice and tone.
  - **Ask:**
    - What is the narrative voice here?
    - How would you describe the author's tone?
- **3rd read:** Read aloud and annotate
  - Review "Annotation Strategies" slide.
  - **Say:** As we read the document in its entirety together, be sure to use our annotation strategies for informational texts.
  - Provide think-aloud to support students:  
**Example:** As you read the opening section, pause after the following line: "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."  
**Say:** *This word, "self-evident," is a little confusing. I'm going to circle it and add it to my word gaps. Same with "endowed" and "unalienable."*
  - Pause at each section for students to complete annotations and discuss with their partner.

#### **PART 4: TABLE BRAINSTORM**

Ask students to reflect on and discuss the questions below. Then invite them to record their thoughts on butcher paper. As you move around the room listening to the discussions, be sure the questions are displayed on the board.

- According to the Declaration, what are some of the rights that all people are said to have?
- Why did the colonists believe they had the right to break away from Great Britain?
- Explain how the authors of the Declaration justified their decision to declare independence. What evidence did they provide to support their argument?

#### **PART 5: DEBRIEF**

Now that students have had a chance to gain historical context and annotate the text, ask them to discuss how language has evolved over time. Share how the Founders lived in a different era from our own, and tell your students that their interpretation of words such as equality has changed over time. Have students read the document and reflect on the role and interpretation of language over time, as this will help them understand the argument outlined in the Declaration of Independence. Then have students watch the video linked below. Ask students to record important ideas in their notebooks.

- **Read:** Sphere's "[The Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)" section on equality.
- **Reflect:** Ask students, *"How has the evolution of language over time shaped the interpretation of the argument and principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence?"*
- **Ted-Ed Video:** "[What You Might Not Know About the Declaration of Independence](#)"
  - **Say:** *Before we wrap up for the day, we're going to watch the following video. As you listen, please record important ideas in your notebook. These ideas will launch our conversation tomorrow, so the more thoughtful you are, the more engaging our conversation will be.*



## Lesson 3: The Rewrite

### OVERVIEW

At this point, students have had a chance to build background knowledge for context, grapple with the document's challenging language, and engage in guided practice to break it down for its meaning. Now, you will invite students to share their thoughts and work collaboratively to rewrite the document using modern vernacular and lingo. This lesson is meant to provide students with a chance to make the Declaration relevant as they reinterpret it and make it their own.



### LEARNING TARGET

I can reflect on my learning and collaborate with peers to rewrite the Declaration of Independence.

### MEDIA/RESOURCES

- Class PowerPoint: Examining the Declaration of Independence
- Annotations: Declaration of Independence ([National Archives](#))
- Butcher paper for table brainstorm (use the same piece from the previous lesson and invite students to use the other side)



## PART 1: OPENER

Start the class by inviting students to whole-group discussion, where they will share how they define what a right is versus a privilege. Explore these definitions with students and outline the different types of rights, such as civil rights, political rights, or broader human rights. Students will notice significant overlap among the types of rights. Then have students express their ideas about the important rights they think people should have. Allow students to discuss in table groups by having them record rights on one sheet of paper (one right at a time) before passing it to the next person. Have the students go around as many times as they can in the given time. Then bring the class together to discuss their lists. This activity primes students for the critical analysis and rewrite they are about to do.

- **Table talk (round-robin):** *What are the most important rights for people to have?* List as many as you can think of. Then ask groups to highlight the TOP THREE.
- **Class discussion:** Invite table groups to share the top three rights they came up with and to record them on the board. Next, ask students what the three inalienable rights are according to the Declaration.
- **What's missing:** Invite students to recap what they discussed at the end of class yesterday.
- **Review:** Parking Lot questions and lesson objectives.

## PART 2: REFLECT

In a brief class discussion, call one or two students at a time to answer the following questions. Post the questions on the board to give students additional think time.

- **Discuss word choice:** When discussing word choice, be sure to ask students questions like the following. *"Why does language matter? Could this document be rewritten today in more modern language? Would it have the same message and effect? How does language affect our reading of the document? Why is it important to know about the writing and refining process the Declaration went through? Are there other principles based on rights you would include?"*
- **Present the challenge:** Give students an assignment in the form of a challenge. Prompt them with the following question: *"Can you rewrite in your own language the argument for the principles of liberty and their protections outlined in the Declaration of Independence?"* NOTE: It is worth mentioning that although Thomas Jefferson drafted the document, a committee collaborated through the framework of civil discourse and refined it. Encourage students to work together to find the right words to describe their collective understanding.

## PART 3: STUDENT APPLICATION—THE REWRITE

Now it's time for students to get creative! The rewrite process allows students to express complex words in their own terms and language.

- Have students work in groups to rewrite the Declaration of Independence.
- Use catch-and-release protocol to regroup and reorganize as needed:
  - Regroup after a few initial minutes to see how teams are dividing the work. Highlight teams that choose to have pairs work on different sections. Return to collaboration time.

- Regroup again to ask what's working for teams and what's not.
- A third catch-and-release could include a class brainstorm for tricky sections.

### **PART 3: DEBRIEF/SHARE OUT**

Students may be really excited to share their rewrite, so as you walk around the room, consider one or two teams to share. Be sure to save time for the final discussion and quick-write questions.

- **Share out:** Ask one or two teams to share their rewrites
- **Discuss:** What was the purpose of these lessons?
- **Quick write:** How did discussing the principles and grievances outlined in the document help us better understand the argument of the American Founding, past to present?