



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Books, the Declaration of Independence, and the Founding of the American Mind

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Overview

In this lesson, students will explore and better understand the role that books and, more specifically, reading played in the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Through a series of activities, students will explore how the things that people pay attention to—the books they read, the ideas they think about—affect their written expression. This exploration will lead students to be able to explain the reciprocal relationship that reading has to the act of meaningful writing. By engaging in this lesson, students will be positioned to cognitively empathize with the Declaration's writers while maintaining a critical lens as they consider their own perspectives and the perspectives of the Declaration's writers.



Essential Questions

- How can approaching literature like traveling help us understand how people in different historical periods interpreted, responded, and wrote about their societies?
- What skills do readers need to develop to travel to an author's world and understand the author's point of view rather than judge the author's work by contemporary standards?
- What does it mean to read with historical empathy while maintaining analytical rigor?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the perspectives of the writers of the Declaration of Independence, understanding how their historical context influenced their writing.
- Identify themes from two texts: the Declaration of Independence and excerpts from "A Founding Father's Library."
- Make connections between the values identified in two texts and the values they observe in modern life.
- Construct arguments about the relationship between reading and writing, using evidence from relevant literature and historical texts.

Materials

- Sphere Education Initiatives: Core Principles of the Declaration of Independence
- Copies of the Declaration of Independence
- Copies of excerpts from "A Founding Father's Library"
- Optional graphic organizer
- Excerpts Graphic Organizer (at the end of the lesson)

Warm-Up

Post the following quotations on the board. Have students choose a quotation and write about it on a physical or digital document.

- "Books permit us to voyage through time, to tap the wisdom of our ancestors."
— Carl Sagan
- "Books help to form us. If you cut me open, you will find volume after volume, page after page, the contents of every one I have ever read. . . . I am the unique sum of the books I have read. I am my literary DNA."
— Susan Hill

- “To know a man’s library is, in some measure, to know a man’s mind.”
— Geraldine Brooks
- “A capacity, and taste, for reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems.”
— Abraham Lincoln

After students have had a chance to write for 5–10 minutes, ask them to share their thoughts with a partner.

Lesson Activities

As you transition to the learning activities, ask students the following questions. Have them share their thoughts with a partner, or ask a few students to share their thinking with the whole group.

- What connections do you see between these quotations?
- What do these quotations say about the value of reading?
- Which quotation resonates most with you as a reader or writer? Why?

PREPARE

Explain the goal of today’s lesson to students. Share with them the idea that reading and writing are intertwined—so much so that who we are as readers greatly influences the ways we think of and write about the world we inhabit. Why? Because when we read—particularly when we read deeply—we pay attention to particular ideas and thoughts. As [William James](#) said, “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind. . . .”

READ CLOSELY

STEP 1

Tell students to keep the William James quotation in mind (you might write or project it onto the board to encourage this) as they read the Declaration of Independence. Then hand out physical copies of the Declaration and ask students to individually read and annotate the text. Specifically, students should pay attention to particular words, phrases, or passages that stand out to them.

STEP 2

After students have read and annotated the text, give them the following prompt.

Prompt:

Choose a passage (1–2 sentences in length) that stands out to you. Write an explanation of what it is about this passage that intrigues you. You might choose to discuss the word choice, figurative language, or way an idea or thought is written. You might also choose to

discuss the way this passage connects to your own experiences or thinking. Be ready to share your work with a partner.

Declaration of Independence Graphic Organizer

To scaffold this activity for learners, you may use the following optional graphic organizer.

Passage (written out in its entirety)	Why It Is Intriguing or Thought-Provoking

STEP 3

When all students have finished writing their passages and explanations, divide them into small groups of 3 or 4. Group members should share their work with their small group. After every person has had a chance to share, each group should discuss the following questions:

- Did any of your group members choose the same passage? If so, why do you think you and the other person/people paid attention to it? If not, why do you think everyone in your group chose a different passage to write about?
- What are some themes that emerged from the passages your group members chose? Why do you think those themes emerged?
- Thinking about the passages your group chose and the themes that emerged, what values and beliefs seem important to your group, as a whole? How is this different from or similar to the values and beliefs of the individuals in your group?

STEP 4

Debrief with students and ask them what they learned about the similarities and differences of their group members. Help students see how their own experiences, learning, and reading affect the ways they read, interpret, and explain a text. The next activity will ask them to take those insights and apply them to the Founders.

BUILD BACKGROUND

Explain to students that the authors and many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were extremely literate, valued reading, and read widely. To emphasize this

point, you might share the following daily schedule of study that Jefferson suggested in a [letter to his friend](#) who aspired to be a lawyer.

Tell students that just as their experiences and what they've read played a role in how they interpreted the Declaration—the passages they chose and their written explanation of why they chose those passages—the Founders' experiences and readings likewise played a role in writing the Declaration. Then revisit the quotation by William James: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind. . . ." Explain that in the next activity they will consider how the things that the Founders attended to (what they read and thought about) shaped not just their minds, but also the mind of America.

STEP 1

Before you begin, prepare copies of the Founding Father's Library excerpts, which you will find at the end of this lesson. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4. Give each group 1 of the excerpts from "[A Founding Father's Library](#)." As seen in the link, historian Forrest McDonald wrote this essay in 1978.

Students should grapple with the language in the excerpt and take the initiative to look up the books cited in their excerpt for deeper understanding. The following list presents brief summaries about each excerpt for teacher use:

- **Excerpt 1:** The Founders valued reading about history and its practical implications. This type of reading highlighted history's lessons on civics, government, and moral character for later generations.
- **Excerpt 2:** Literate, well-educated people in the 18th century read classical texts about the ancient world. This subject was popular in all of educated society and found in public libraries, not just among the collections of the Founders.
- **Excerpt 3:** A popular subject of study was English history, particularly that of the Anglo-Saxons. These texts conveyed ideas that would have appealed to some colonists' sense of ancestry and allowed readers to understand more about the history of English governance.
- **Excerpt 4:** The Founders were not only interested in history but also in scientific works by well-known scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton. Although science was not studied as seriously as other subjects, many well-known Americans (including some of the Founders) were clearly interested in its progress.
- **Excerpt 5:** Many people were very interested in international law, particularly after the moment when America declared itself a nation. Of particular note is the idea of "natural law" by authors who were pioneers in their field—such as Hugo Grotius, who wrote *The Rights of War and Peace*.
- **Excerpt 6:** Learned people, such as the Founders, were expected to know about figures such as Plato and Aristotle, although they usually were cited only for show, and there were disagreements about how useful their ideas were. Most of the authors that the

Founders relied upon were from the 17th and 18th centuries—particularly John Locke and his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*.

STEP 2

Have students read their excerpt with their group. While they are reading, students should identify 2 pieces of information.

- According to your excerpt, what books and subjects did the Founders read?
- Why do you think these books and subjects were read? Explain your thoughts by using what you know about this period and what is said or implied in the passage.

STEP 3

Hand out the following Excerpts Graphic Organizer. Every student should have a copy of the table and write their group's responses to their excerpt.

Excerpt	Response
Excerpt 1	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:
Excerpt 2	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:
Excerpt 3	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:
Excerpt 4	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:
Excerpt 5	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:

Excerpt 6	Books and subjects read: Why I think the Founders read these books and subjects:
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STEP 4

Ensure that the students in each group are well-versed in their group's response and have written it in their graphic organizer. Then re-form the groups so that each group is made up of students who represent each excerpt.

STEP 5

In their new groups, each student will share their group's conclusions about their excerpt with other people in their group. By the end of this step, all students should have a completely filled-in graphic organizer.

DEBRIEF

Debrief about the previous activity by asking students to share out themes they have noticed about what the Founders were "paying attention" to as they worked on writing the Declaration of Independence. Write these themes on the board.

Some themes that might emerge are as follows:

- Valued the reading of history and historical context as a source of wisdom
- Valued reading for practical experience more than for theory or philosophy
- Greatly influenced by reading ancient or classical literature
- Affected by reading about historical struggles for liberty and independence
- Influenced by reading about international and natural law
- Interested in reading about scientific progress
- Not afraid to critique or express skepticism against certain philosophical ideals

SYNTHESIZE

Have students revisit their copy of the Declaration of Independence. Then divide students into pairs or small groups and ask them to choose 2 themes on the board. Tell them they are going to reread the Declaration of Independence in light of their chosen themes. Then students in each pair/group should discuss the following questions about each theme:

- How is this theme reflected or expressed in the Declaration of Independence?
- What specific words or passages reveal this theme?
- How does knowing more about how reading affected the writers of the Declaration affect your own understanding of the text? How is your understanding similar to or

different from your understanding at the beginning of the lesson (from your 1st reading of the Declaration)?

After pairs/groups have had a chance to discuss, facilitate a whole-group discussion about the different themes and how the perspectives of the writers of the Declaration contribute to a more meaningful understanding of the document.

WRITE

Give students the following essay prompt and ask them to write their response on a physical or digital document. *Note: This essay will be a way for you to assess their ability to both cognitively empathize and critically analyze through writing.

Essay Prompt:

Reflect on the quote by William James: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind." Consider how the backgrounds and experiences of the writers of the Declaration of Independence influenced the content and meaning of this foundational document.

Instructions

- Write a well-organized essay in response to the prompt, using either a physical or digital document.
- Your essay should demonstrate your ability to engage in cognitive empathy and critical analysis regarding the perspectives of the writers and the historical context of the Declaration of Independence.

Considerations

- Think about how the writers' personal histories and societal influences shaped their ideas.
- Analyze specific language and passages from the Declaration to uncover the writers' intentions and beliefs.
- Reflect on your own experiences and how they inform your understanding of the document.

Closing

In closing, ask students to reflect on how understanding the influences on the Declaration's writers can deepen their appreciation for both their own literary experiences and historical texts. If there is time, allow a few students to share their thoughts with the class.

Declaration of Independence Graphic Organizer

Passage (written out in its entirety)	Why It Is Intriguing or Thought-Provoking

Reading Excerpts for Students

Note: The following are the excerpts to give the student groups in Build Background, Step 1.

Excerpts from “A Founding Father’s Library”	
Excerpt	Response
Excerpt 1	Thanks to the industry of bibliographers and intellectual historians, we now know a great more than we once did about what the Founding Fathers read. Contrary to what we used to believe, the Fathers were not especially attuned to the French Enlightenment and not much given to reading theoretical philosophy, political or otherwise. Rather, as an empirical, practical, essentially nonideological people, they belittled speculative theorizing, preferred experience as a teacher, and treasured history as experience writ large. Thus John Dickinson spoke a common American attitude when, in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, he said that “Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us.” It has been tabulated that in the Convention, while references to philosophers were relatively infrequent, the delegates made nearly 400 references to history to justify their positions. Nor was history an abstract subject to them; rather, it was to be studied with a practical civic purpose. Americans quoted with approval Bolingbroke’s aphorism, “history is philosophy teaching by example”; they shared Locke’s belief that history was “the great Mistress of Prudence, and civil Knowledge.” Jefferson and Adams insisted that history on true principles was indispensable to the statesman, and Franklin said that “Good History” could “fix in the Minds of Youth deep Impressions of the Beauty and Usefulness of Virtue of all kinds.”
Excerpt 2	Every educated American was exposed to the ancient world in the originals—Virgil, Cicero, and Tacitus in Latin, Thucydides in Greek—but most preferred translations and popularizations. For instance, Charles Rollin’s two-volume <i>The Ancient History</i>, an abridgement in translation of Greek and Latin authorities, was widely read in America, as were David Langhorne’s edition of <i>Plutarch’s Lives</i> and James Hampton’s 1762 translation of <i>The General History of Polybius</i>, which went through four editions. Equally popular were works on ancient history by seventeenth and eighteenth century writers. Among these were Walter Moyle’s <i>The Whole Works</i> (1727), Edward Wortley Montagu’s <i>Reflections on the Rise and Fall of Ancient Republics</i> (1759), and Oliver Goldsmith’s <i>The Roman History</i> (1769). Jefferson owned copies of all these, as did many public and private libraries.

Excerpt 3	It was English history, however, that most Americans studied, and especially the history of the Anglo-Saxons prior to the Norman Conquest. Probably the most widely read author on the subject was, curiously enough, the Frenchman Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, whose five-volume <i>History of England</i> (English translation by Nicholas Tindal, 1732–1747, reissued in part in Boston, 1773) was commonly found in American libraries. Rapin depicted the early Anglo-Saxons as the direct descendants of Tacitus's noble Germans, and carried the English story down to the early eighteenth century. Other words popular in America that told the same story, with variations, included Nathaniel Bacon's <i>Historical Discourse of the Uniformity of the Government of England</i> (2 vols. 1647–1651); John Jacob Mascou's <i>History of the Ancient Germans</i> (translated by Thomas Lediard, 1737, with the title <i>The History of Our Great Ancestors</i>), Henry Care's <i>English Liberties</i> (1680), and Henry Home, Lord Kames's <i>British Antiquities</i> (1763). Another book, eagerly read in America on the eve of the Revolution, was Obadiah Hulme's <i>Historical Essay on the English Constitution</i> (1771). John, Lord Somers' <i>The Judgment of Whole Kingdoms and Nations</i>, first published in 1710 but reprinted in cheap editions in Philadelphia in 1773 and Newport in 1774, was even more widely read.
Excerpt 4	History and historicized legal works were, of course, by no means all that the Founding Fathers read. Throughout the century, for instance, there continued to be a considerable American interest in science. Sir Isaac Newton's <i>Principia Mathematica</i> was to [be] found in most good American libraries, and two popularized versions of Newtonian science circulated even more widely: Oliver Goldsmith's <i>History of the Earth and Animated Nature</i>, of which a thousand copies were sold in Virginia alone in one year, and W.B. Martin's <i>Philosophica Britannica, or a New and Comprehensive System of the Newtonian Philosophy</i> (1747). George-Louis Leclerc Buffon's <i>Natural History</i> (1749–1783) also had a considerable American circulation, if only because Buffon's denigration of all things American so outraged his readers. Moreover, quite a number of eminent Americans were enthusiastic students of science or at least followers of its progress—especially the American Philosophical Society's “circle,” which included Jefferson, Franklin, Benjamin Rush, David Rittenhouse, Charles Willson Peale, and later the celebrated English-American scientist Joseph Priestley. By and large, however, science was a matter that Americans were willing to give lip service to but not seriously pursue.

Excerpt 5	There was considerably more interest in international law, which might be regarded as a bit surprising in view of the fact that the subject was of little practical concern to Americans prior to nationhood. In any event, a large number of colonial Americans became astonishingly well versed in international law, as is attested by the depth of learning they displayed after independence, when the subject suddenly became quite relevant. Judging from the citations and comments made by Alexander Hamilton—who became the nation's most learned expert on international law—the crucial works on the matter were those of four authors, each of them a pioneer in the field of “natural law.” The earliest was Hugo Grotius, professor of law at Groningen, whose three volume <i>The Rights of War and Peace</i> was originally published in Paris in 1625–1626, the first English edition appearing in 1654. The best edition, in Hamilton's view, was that of 1738 (reissued 1749) with notes by Barbeyrac. Hamilton observed that though “this celebrated work contains many excellent precepts,” it was “neither methodical nor comprehensive.”
Excerpt 6	All gentlemen were supposed to be able to cite Plato and Aristotle, but when they did so, it was usually by way of oratorical flourish rather than out of [genuine] appreciation, approval, or even knowledge. Rush and Rittenhouse thought Aristotle a “tyrant” and his works utterly useless—an opinion shared by Jefferson and Adams. As to Plato, Jefferson raged against the “whimsies, the puerilities and unintelligible jargon” of <i>The Republic</i> as being the “sophisms, futilities, and incomprehensibilities of a foggy mind.” Adams said he learned only two things from reading Plato: one was where Franklin had plagiarized some of his ideas, and the other was “how to cure the hiccups.” By contrast, a goodly number of Americans read Machiavelli, though few found it expedient to cite him. Overwhelmingly, the political works the Fathers really read, absorbed, and incorporated into their own thinking included those of no more than a dozen or so authors, almost all of them seventeenth and eighteenth century British writers. Several leading Americans made lists of authors they regarded as indispensable, and between them the field is fairly well covered. On everyone's list was John Locke's <i>Second Treatise on Civil Government</i>, for that work said simply and persuasively something that Americans devoutly wanted to hear on the eve of Independence. As Madison said, in justifying England's Glorious Revolution, Locke had written a work “admirably calculated to impress on young minds the right of nations to establish their own governments and to inspire a love of free ones.”

Excerpts Graphic Organizer

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