



Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Lesson on the Declaration of Independence

Course | US History, US Government (AP or non-AP), Civics, Grades 11–12

Length | This lesson is designed for a 60-minute class period. Extension activities are included at the end of the lesson.

Objective | Students will be able to: understand the meaning and central ideas of the Declaration of Independence; cite textual evidence to analyze this primary source; and analyze the structure of the document.

Common Core Standards Addressed | Literacy in History/Social Studies, Grades 11–12:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

Materials Included | Each student should have a copy of the Declaration of Independence to read for homework. Included is a copy of Jefferson’s letter to Henry Lee for the extension activities.

Teacher Background Information | On July 4, 1776, two days after it adopted the Lee Resolution that declared the united colonies’ independence from Great Britain, the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), which explains that decision by “declar[ing] the causes which impel them to the separation.” These causes are laid out in the bill of particular charges against the king, the listing of which constitutes the bulk of the Declaration.

But in addition, the opening paragraphs of the Declaration provide the first and most authoritative statement of what we might call “the American creed.” For in separating from Great Britain, the united

colonies ground their claim to political independence in a teaching about individual human rights—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to which rightful freedoms all human beings are said to be equally entitled.

In articulating the four self-evident truths (natural equality, inalienable individual rights, government founded on the consent of the governed, and the people’s right of revolution) and compiling the list of the king’s abuses, Jefferson claims to have done nothing more than “place before mankind the common sense of the subject.” “It was,” he explained years later, “intended to be an expression of the American mind.”

Even so, this birth announcement of the American Republic reveals that it is the first nation anywhere to be founded not on ties of blood, soil, or lineage but on a set of philosophical principles for which the document—and the nation—are justly celebrated.

Class Activity

Student Preparation | Instruct students to read the Declaration of Independence, underlining meaningful word choices and defining words they do not know. Students should summarize in the margins the meaning, central ideas, and key themes of each section of the document.

Warm-Up (5 minutes) | Students will have read the Declaration of Independence for homework, so they should be familiar with the list of grievances in the document. Have students review this list, then ask:

- Which ones strike you as the most egregious, and why?
- Which one would most grieve you personally? Politically?

Students may spend a few minutes jotting down their answers; then have them share with the class.

Textual Analysis & Class Discussion (40 minutes) | Project the questions below on the board. Instruct the students to work with a partner or small group to answer the questions. Then, discuss the answers as a class, giving each group an opportunity to share their responses and add on to other groups’.

Careful study of the text will attend to both the *universal principles* and the *particular grievances*, as well as to the question of the relation between them.

- What, according to the Declaration, makes the American colonists a distinct “people,” entitled to a “separate and equal station” among the peoples of the world?
- What is meant by the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God, and how are these related to our “peoplehood”?
- What is a “right,” and where do individual rights come from?

- What does it mean to say that a right is “unalienable”?
- What is the meaning of the right of “life”? Of “liberty”? Of “the pursuit of happiness”?
- What is a “self-evident” truth, and in what self-evidently true sense can we say that “all men are created equal”?
- How does the Declaration understand the relation between the individual and the collective? Between our rights and our responsibilities (or duties)?
- Review carefully the list of grievances. To what do they all add up?
- Why does the document emphasize the deeds of the King, downplaying the complicit role of Parliament?
- What is the relation between these grievances and the philosophical principles stated earlier?
- Are you persuaded that revolution was in fact justified?
- Do we Americans today still hold these truths [in the Declaration] to be self-evident? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Wrap-Up Activity (15 minutes) | Instruct students to reflect on the following questions that tie the Declaration of Independence back to their lives:

- What does the Declaration of Independence mean to you?
- Can you imagine yourself “declaring independence”? From what, and why?
- What would it mean for you to be independent, personally and politically?
- In the name of what would you strive—or risk your life—for independence?

After students share their responses with their classmates, ask students to think about the following:

- What are the challenges when it comes to a *people* declaring independence versus an *individual*?
- Were your classmates’ declarations of independence similar to yours or different? Why?
- What might have been some of the challenges that our Founding Fathers faced when declaring independence *as a people*?

Extension Activities | 1. Write an essay response to one of the following questions:

- Imagine yourself in Philadelphia in July 1776. Would you have pledged your Life, Fortune, and sacred Honor to support this Declaration?
- Would you—and in the name of what?—make such a pledge today to support the American Republic, should comparable support be needed?

2. Read Thomas Jefferson's letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825. In this letter, he reflects on the sources of the Declaration of Independence. Reflect on what this letter has taught you about Jefferson's intentions and the views of other patriots, when Jefferson wrote the declaration.

3. Read the Declaration of Sentiments from the Seneca Falls Convention and write an essay comparing and contrasting it to the Declaration of Independence. Take note of the structure of the document in addition to its meaning.

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 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 harass 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 and 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 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 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.

John Hancock
Samuel Chase
Wm. Paca
Thos. Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton
George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Th. Jefferson
Benj. Harrison
Thos. Nelson Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton
Robt. Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benj. Franklin
John Morton
Geo. Clymer
Jas. Smith
Geo. Taylor
James Wilson
Geo. Ross
Caesar Rodney
Geo. Read
Thom. Kean
Wm. Floyd
Phil. Livingston
Arthur Middleton
Button Gwinnett

Fran. Lewis
Lewis Morris
Rich. Stockton
Jn. Witherspoon
Fra. Hopkinson
John Hart
Abra. Clark
Josiah Bartlett
Wm. Whipple
Saml. Adams
John Adams
Robt. Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry
Step. Hopkins
William Ellery
Roger Sherman
Saml. Huntington
Wm. Williams
Oliver Wolcott
Matthew Thornton
Wm. Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn
Edward Rutledge
Thos. Heyward Jun.
Thomas Lynch Jun.
Lyman Hall
Geo. Walton

Thomas Jefferson's Letter to Henry Lee

In a letter to Henry Lee, dated May 8, 1825, Jefferson reflected on the sources of the Declaration of Independence:

That George Mason was the author of the bill of rights, and the constitution founded on it, the evidence of the day established fully in my mind. Of the paper you mention, purporting to be instructions to the Virginia delegation in Congress, I have no recollection. If it were anything more than a project of some private hand, that is to say, had any such instructions been ever given by the convention, they would appear in the journals, which we possess entire. But with respect to our rights, and the acts of the British government contravening those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American whigs thought alike on these subjects. When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. 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. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, 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. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c. The historical documents which you mention as in your possession, ought all to be found, and I am persuaded you will find, to be corroborative of the facts and principles advanced in that Declaration. Be pleased to accept assurances of my great esteem and respect.