

## Lesson 11: The Declaration of Independence

### *Historical Career Assumed*

- Activist

### *Lesson Overview*

This is the final lesson of this unit on the causes of the American Revolution. This lesson examines the American Declaration of Independence, which was the official united stance taken by all thirteen American colonies to declare themselves independent from British rule. After understanding the structure and the basic intent of each section of the Declaration of Independence, students will work in groups to write their own Declaration of Independence to combat present day injustices such as racism, classism, sexism, underfunded and low-quality public education, and inequitable health care practices. Students will act as activists, examine these injustices and explain how and why they are perpetuated in the United States. Students will then write their modern-day Declaration of Independence to fight against those injustices and declare independence from them.

### *Content Questions*

- What events led to the American colonists writing the Declaration of Independence?
- What is the structure of the Declaration of Independence?

### *Topical Essential Question*

- What injustices persist today that were not mentioned in the Declaration of Independence?

### *Overarching Essential Question:*

- What are the causes of the American Revolution?

### *Learning Objectives*

- Students will be able to explain the structure and basic intent of the American Declaration of Independence.
- Students will be able to write their own modern-day Declaration of Independence to address the injustices and inequities that persist today.

### *Instructional Plan*

#### **Do Now:**

Make a list of major events that led to the American Revolution.

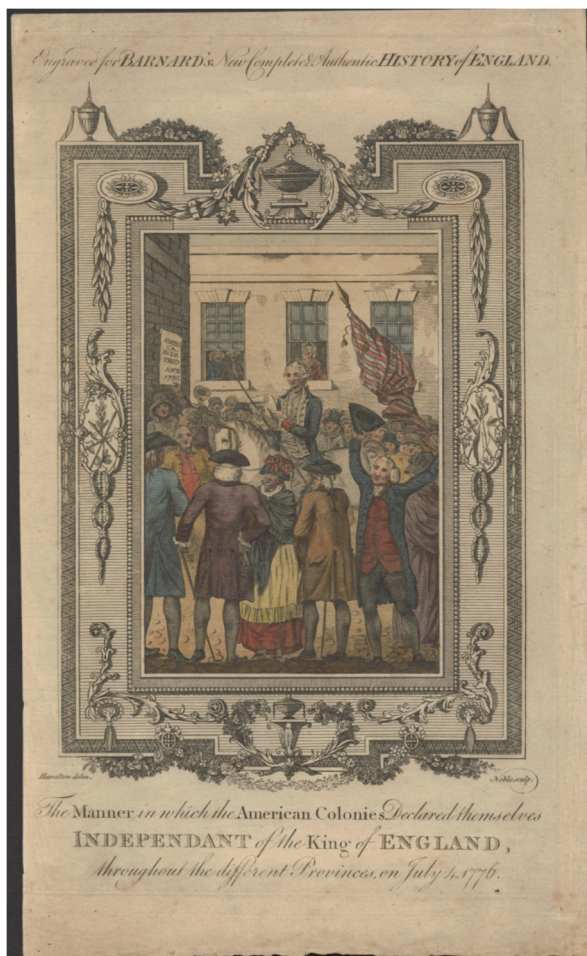
#### **Introduction:**

After students develop a list of the major events that led to the American Revolution, support them in adding those events to the timeline provided in their almanac. Students should make sure they include Mercantilism, the Navigation Acts, the French and Indian War, the Proclamation of 1763, the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, the Committees of Correspondence, the Tea Act, the Boston Tea Party, the Intolerable Acts, the First Continental Congress, Common Sense by

Thomas Paine, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and the Battle of Bunker Hill. Explain to students that this timeline will support them in starting their unit projects on the causes of the American Revolution.

**Declaration of Independence Background:**

Share that the American Declaration of Independence was written after many years of American colonists protesting and speaking out against British taxes and unfair treatment. The American Continental Congress adopted the declaration on July 4, 1776 which officially declared colonial independence from British rule. While there were informal battles between the colonists and the British before the declaration, this declaration officially marked the start of the American Revolution.



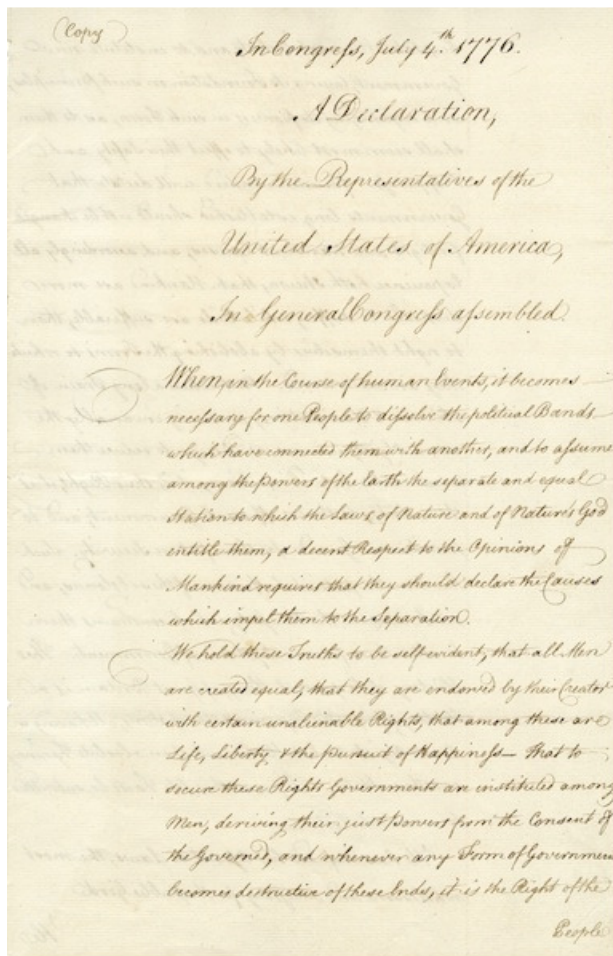
**Share the goals of today's lesson:**

Explain to students that today they are going to read excerpts of the American Declaration of Independence to understand its structure and basic intentions. After they know the general objectives of the declaration, they will act as activists to rewrite the Declaration of Independence by addressing the injustices and inequities that persist today.

## Who are activists?

Ask students who activists are. Have students list activists they know of or names of activism groups from the past or present to the class. Ask them what these people and groups have in common? Describe that activists promote reform with the intent to make changes in a society toward a greater good. Share that colonial leaders were in their own way activists, because they protested, resisted, and took arms against the injustices they believed were inflicted upon them, and attempted to officially reform them by writing the Declaration of Independence and engaging in war against Great Britain.

## The Structure of the American Declaration of Independence:



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  
Honors.

Signed by order and in behalf  
of the Congress,  
John Hancock, President.

Attest,  
Charles Thompson, Secretary.

Explain to students that the above images are from a copy of the American Declaration of Independence located at the Clements Library. Share that this copy belonged to George Germain who was a British Lord and was copied shortly after the original declaration was signed. It is really difficult to read the official copy because soon after it was written it traveled a lot with colonial leaders and was rolled and rerolled countless times. There were also “press copies” made of the Declaration by putting a damp sheet of paper on top of it so the ink would transfer. It was also exposed to sunlight, fluctuating temperatures, and humidity. Today, it is under essentially perfect conditions in the National Archives in Washington D.C.



Explain that because it is so difficult to read, that today we will be looking at a typed transcript of the document in their almanacs.

As a whole class, discuss the following features of the American Declaration of Independence:

- **Preamble:** the reason for writing the Declaration.
  - What was the reason the Founding Fathers gave for their decision to write the declaration?
- **Statement of beliefs:** the beliefs behind the document.
  - What beliefs did the Founding Fathers say they had?
- **List of complaints:** the complaints or transgressions that prompted the declaration.
  - What are some of the complaints?
- **Statement of prior attempts to redress grievances:** the ways the colonists previously tried to address the complaints.
  - In what ways did the framers claim to have already tried to address the complaints?
- **Declaration of Independence:**
  - What will change in the colonies as a result of the Declaration?
- **The signatures:**
  - Which signers do students recognize?

#### **Declaration activity:**

Split students up into small groups and have them choose a present-day injustice that they want to address together. They can choose injustices such as racism, classism, sexism, public school funding, health care costs, environment degradation, or anything else they are passionate about eliminating. In their groups, students will act as activists to write their own declaration, using the same format as the American Declaration of Independence. Specifically, students should include the following:

- **Preamble:** who are you sending your complaints to? Why? What reasons do you have to write your complaints?
- **Statement of Beliefs:** Why are your complaints worthwhile? Why should things be changed?
- **List of Complaints:** Develop a list of complaints and address the importance of each complaint and the events that inspired each complaint.
- **Prior attempts to redress grievances:** What actions have already been taken to mend this injustice? Why weren't those actions enough to eliminate the injustice?
- **Declaration of Independence:** What needs to happen right away to mend the injustice?
- **The Signatures:** Are you willing to sign your name to this list of complaints?

#### **Declaration Share Out:**

Have each group stand in front of the class to read their declarations out loud. Students from other groups can go in the front of the class to sign the presenters' declaration at the end of their speech.

#### **Exit Slip:**

What do you think was the most critical event that was the turning point for the start of the American Revolution?

**Lesson Sources:**

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/declare-causes-declaration-independence>

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>