

Breaking down the Declaration of Independence

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Grade Level: 5-8

Themes:

Declaration of Independence

founding fathers

Independence Day

Objectives:

The student will know the three parts of the Declaration of Independence.

The student will know what the founding fathers believed regarding rights.

The student will understand the grievances.

The student will know the basic reasons the Colonists felt the DOI was necessary.

Intro Set:

Each day will have its own anticipatory set.

Day 1-2

On July 4th, Americans celebrate Independence Day. This is the day, in 1776, that the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. However, the Revolutionary War lasted until 1781. Why do you think we celebrate Independence Day on July 4, when at that time America was essentially not independent?

The students will spend two or three minutes answering the question on their paper.

Then, the students will get into groups of two or three and discuss their answers. Finally, the whole class will have a very short discussion of the students' answers.

Day 2-3

Would you be a patriot or a loyalist? Why do you think the patriots were justified in breaking away from the British crown or why were the loyalists right to remain loyal to the crown? Use one paragraph minimum with at least two reasons for your decision.

Material:

Middle school American History text

Computer equipped with PowerPoint (optional)

Process:

This is a 2-3 day lesson plan. The students will analyze the Declaration of Independence.

Day 1-2

On July 4th, Americans celebrate Independence Day. This is the day, in 1776, that the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. However, the Revolutionary War lasted until 1781. Why do you think we celebrate Independence Day on July 4, when at that time America was essentially not independent?

The students will spend two or three minutes answering the question on their paper. Then, the students will get into groups of two or three and discuss their answers. Finally, the whole class will have a very short discussion of the students' answers.

The class will then read a section of the text as a group. I will use the OPS American History text, Holt's A Call to Freedom, Beginnings to 1914. The section that we will read discusses the committee formed to write the Declaration and the three sections of the document. Any text should have this information. The reason for reading the text is merely to provide some context and a bit of background information. Each student will receive a copy of the Declaration of Independence. The students will look through their copy and divide it into the three sections, natural (unalienable) rights, grievances, and the colonists' solution (breaking away.)

After the students have divided the document into the three sections, divide the students into groups of two or three. Give each group a section of the document to read, think about, and write in their own words. This section of the lesson will probably last into the next class period. The teacher should check with each group to make sure that each group is on the right track, prodding them back on track, if necessary.

When the groups have finished (each student should write out their group's "translation" in their own notebook), go around the class, in order, and have each group's spokesperson give the group translation. Write the translations on large paper and post for the remainder of the unit. At the end, the class will have a Declaration of Independence translated into their own language.

Extension activity: To introduce the students to PowerPoint (or the practice the skill), create a class PowerPoint. Show the students how to set it up, then have each group put their section as well as their "translation" on a slide. Let the students be creative.

Assessment: Decide what was the worst (most valid) grievance. Tell what it is and why you chose it as the worst. Use one paragraph minimum.

Day 2 (3)

Would you be a patriot or a loyalist? Why do you think the patriots were justified in breaking away from the British crown or why were the loyalists right to remain loyal to the crown? Use one paragraph minimum with at least two reasons for your decision.

After they are finished with their paragraphs, ask the class to examine their copy of the Declaration and make a list of the founding fathers' beliefs. This list could get quite long, so the teacher should not be so worried about a complete list as which beliefs are listed.

The objective here will be to engage the students in a discussion about "all men are created equal"—are they? are women included? and/or "they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" what does endowed mean? Unalienable? Are there rights given to you just for being born?

Assessment: After the discussion, talk again about how the DOI can be divided into three sections, natural (unalienable) rights, grievances, and the colonists' solution (breaking away.) Give the students three categories to fill in: This is what we believe. These are the unacceptable things that the crown has done to the colonies. This is what we are going to do about it. For each of the categories, the students should write 2-3 sentences. They may work individually or in groups of two or three.

Day 4

The students will use their copy of the DOI and they will receive a copy of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

Advice:

This lesson requires lots of student writing. My classes often have very low readers and writers, and I consider this when grading. The important part to this lesson is the content. Also, when asking the students to share their work, I find it is better to let them share in a small group first, and then to the whole class. The student has the opportunity to "iron out" any problems and get other opinions before he/she shares in front of a large audience.

Summary:

: This lesson is designed to provide an overview and some general understanding. It does not deal with dates or timelines. Any important dates, names, etc. should be covered in a separate lesson.

Activities:

Assessment is included in the lesson activities.

Day 1-2

Assessment: Decide what was the worst (most valid) grievance. Tell what it is and why you chose it as the worst. Give at least three reasons your grievance is the worst, and compare it to at least one other grievance.

Day 2-3

Assessment: After the discussion, talk again about how the DOI can be divided into three sections, natural (unalienable) rights, grievances, and the colonists' solution (breaking away.) Give the students three categories to fill in: This is what we believe. These are the unacceptable things that the crown has done to the colonies. This is what we are going to do about it. For each of the categories, the students should write 2-3 sentences. They may work individually or in groups of two or three.

Notes:

Extension activity: To introduce the students to PowerPoint (or to practice the skill), create a class PowerPoint. Show the students how to set it up, then have each group put their section as well as their "translation" on a slide. Let the students be creative.

Books:

Holt A Call to Freedom, Beginnings to 1914

Internet:

www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html

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