

Drafting the Declaration of Independence, 1776

A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

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 a new and separate station~~ ^{assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal} station to
which the laws of nature & 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 ~~that~~ ^{the} separation.

We hold these truths to be ^{self-evident}, that all men are
created equal ~~that from that equal creation they derive~~ ^{they are endowed by their creator with equal}
~~unalienable~~ ^{unalienable} rights, that among ^{these} are ~~life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness~~
life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ^{rights}, go
vernments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from
the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government
~~shall~~ becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter
or to abolish it, and to lay a new foundation on

Thomas Jefferson, "Original Rough Draught," Declaration of Independence, June 1776 (Library of Congress)

Drafting the Declaration of Independence, 1776

BY NATHAN McALISTER (WRITTEN 2017, REVISED 2025)

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: The unit is structured for one to two 45-minute class periods.

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

This lesson explores two versions of the Declaration of Independence. Students will also read an essay by a historian about Thomas Jefferson, the Continental Congress, and the drafting process. You will assess students' understanding through activity sheets and a student presentation.

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source and secondary source documents
- Evaluate and summarize the differences between texts
- Explain the historical significance of the Declaration of Independence

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What process resulted in the Declaration of Independence?
- How did the final draft of the Declaration of Independence differ from early drafts?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.5: Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.5: Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

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

- Historical Background: “The Declaration of Independence” by Katlyn Marie Carter, Associate Professor of History, University of Notre Dame
- Activity Sheets 1–4: Comparative Analysis of the Draft and Final Version of the Declaration of Independence with excerpts from
 - Thomas Jefferson, “Original Rough Draught,” Declaration of Independence, June 1776, with transcription of crossed-out text by Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, 1760–1776 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 243–247. Available from the Library of Congress website, loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html.
 - Continental Congress, Declaration of Independence, printed by John Dunlap, Philadelphia, July 4/5, 1776, National Archives, catalog.archives.gov/id/301682

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the class read the Historical Background essay by Professor Katlyn Carter or share some of the information with the class.
2. If you choose to distribute the Historical Background, you may “share read” the essay with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
3. Discuss briefly what they learned from the essay or how it confirmed what they already knew.
4. Place students in groups of 3 or 4. Tell students they will be learning how the Declaration of Independence changed from Jefferson’s first draft in June 1776 through the printed broadside version published on July 4, 1776. Students will discover these differences as they compare a passage from the draft with a passage from the printed document.
5. Provide each group with the four Comparative Analysis activity sheets. Depending on the time available and the size of the class, you may have all groups complete all the activity sheets or (especially if you have four or eight groups), have each group complete one activity sheet and then share out their findings for the other groups.
6. As a class, read through the instructions.

7. Model one of the differences.

Examples from Activity Sheet 1:

- a. “advance” in the draft changes to “dissolve” in the final version.
 - b. “People” is capitalized in the draft but lower case in the final version.
8. Allow student groups to work through the activity. Circulate through the room to assist them.
 9. Pay particular attention to Activity Sheet 3. This section was deleted altogether from the final version. Its removal should generate significant discussion.
 10. Wrap-up: When groups have finished their work, have them share out their findings. If you assigned one activity sheet per group, make sure that all the groups take careful notes on the passages they did not work on.
 11. Upon completion of each group’s presentation, have the groups take questions from other students.
 12. Lead a class discussion that facilitates a deeper understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and the significance of changes from Jefferson’s draft to the final printed version.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

by Katlyn Marie Carter, University of Notre Dame

By the spring of 1776, Americans in the thirteen colonies had been protesting British taxes and policies for a decade. Mounting tensions even led to military clashes in 1775, starting with the battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. Many colonists felt that the time had come to leave the British Empire and establish independence, though others remained unsure.

When delegates from each colony met at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, they, like the broader population of the colonies, were divided on the question of independence. The delegates were sent by colonial assemblies or conventions from up and down the eastern seaboard. Known as the Second Continental Congress (the first one met in 1774), this assembly first convened in May 1775 and functioned as a union to coordinate a response to British policies and to organize economically and militarily.

Especially after the publication of Thomas Paine's viral pamphlet *Common Sense* in January 1776, there was growing popular pressure to declare independence. Paine appealed to regular people and argued that the empire and monarchy were absurd. In many places, local clubs, committees, and conventions began to ask their congressional delegates to support independence.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, the delegates continued to debate. Some had actually been sent with instructions not to support independence, while others were convinced that severing relations with the British was overdue. On June 7, Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution for independence and Congress appointed a committee to begin drafting a declaration. Yet there were other colonies that still refused to endorse independence; Pennsylvania, for example, only resolved to support the move once an interim government had been formed.

As Congress continued to seek popular support, a committee made up of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman began to draft a formal statement. The Declaration needed to do four important tasks: tell the governments of Great Britain and other countries that the colonies were leaving the British Empire and should be considered sovereign; justify that decision; appeal to the British public to get them on the colonists' side; and urge Americans to support the coming struggle.

The declaration's primary author was Thomas Jefferson, but the delegates collectively edited and voted on the final version. One major edit to the list of grievances against the king removed mention of the slave trade.

Most dramatically, the preamble declared that "all men are created equal" and identified the primary purpose of government as securing rights such as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The colonists asserted the principle that government must be based on consent of the governed. Believing that this was no longer the case within the British Empire, they justified their independence and asserted their right and duty to establish a new government.

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted to become independent of Great Britain, and on July 4, they adopted the Declaration of Independence. Twelve state delegations agreed, and New York first abstained and then voted in favor on July 9. Starting on August 2, delegates from all thirteen states, eventually 56 in total, pledged "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor" by signing an official, engrossed, handwritten copy.

Even before being signed, the Declaration was printed by John Dunlap as a broadside to be distributed throughout the colonies. It was written to be read aloud and it was, at public gatherings up and down the eastern seaboard; George Washington ordered it to be read to assembled troops in New York City. The declaration was accompanied by the destruction of royal symbols in the colonies, marking the end of an imperial relationship. But it also represented a beginning and has continued to take on new meaning throughout American history as a cornerstone of national identity.

Katlyn Marie Carter is an associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and the author of Democracy in Darkness: Secrecy and Transparency in the Age of Revolutions.

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Activity Sheet 1: Comparative Analysis of the Draft and Final Version of the Declaration of Independence

Read the passages on the left and the right from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence. In the box below, identify the three key differences your group believes are most significant. Be prepared to present and justify your findings to the class.

DRAFT	FINAL
<p>When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained, & to assume among the powers of the earth the equal & independant station to which the laws of nature & 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 change. . . .</p>	<p>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. . . .</p>
<p>1.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>3.</p>	

The changes made in the text of the Declaration of Independence might have changed the Declaration's meaning. Explain why the differences your group identified are either significant or insignificant.

Select a sentence or passage from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence that remained the same. What is the meaning of that sentence or passage?

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Activity Sheet 2: Comparative Analysis of the Draft and Final Version of the Declaration of Independence

Read the passages on the left and the right from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence. In the box below, identify the three key differences your group believes are most significant. Be prepared to present and justify your findings to the class.

DRAFT	FINAL
<p>We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it. . . .</p>	<p>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. . . .</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 	

The changes made in the text of the Declaration of Independence might have changed the Declaration's meaning. Explain why the differences your group identified are either significant or insignificant.

Select a sentence or passage from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence that remained the same. What is the meaning of that sentence or passage?

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Activity Sheet 3: Comparative Analysis of the Draft and Final Version of the Declaration of Independence

Read the passage on the left from the draft of the Declaration of Independence. In the box below, identify three key details of the passage, which was deleted in the final version of the Declaration. Be prepared to present and justify your findings to the class.

DRAFT	FINAL
. . . he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. this piratical warfare, the <u>opprobrium</u> of <u>infidel</u> powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold. . . .	[this section was deleted in the final version of the Declaration]
1.	
2.	
3.	

Explain why it is significant that this paragraph was excluded from the final version of the Declaration.

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Activity Sheet 4: Comparative Analysis of the Draft and Final Version of the Declaration of Independence

Read the passages on the left and the right from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence. In the box below, identify the three key differences your group believes are most significant. Be prepared to present and justify your findings to the class.

DRAFT	FINAL
<p>We therefore the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled do, in the name & by authority of the good people of these states, reject and renounce all allegiance & subjection to the kings of Great Britain & all others who may hereafter claim by, through, or under them; we utterly dissolve & break off all political connection which may have heretofore subsisted between us & the people or parliament of Great Britain; and finally we do assert and declare these a colonies to be free and independant states. . . .</p>	<p>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 . . .</p>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; padding: 10px;"> <div>1.</div> <div></div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; padding: 10px;"> <div>2.</div> <div></div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; padding: 10px;"> <div>3.</div> <div></div> </div>	

The changes made in the text of the Declaration of Independence might have changed the Declaration's meaning. Explain why the differences your group identified are either significant or insignificant.

Select a sentence or passage from the draft and final versions of the Declaration of Independence that remained the same. What is the meaning of that sentence or passage?
