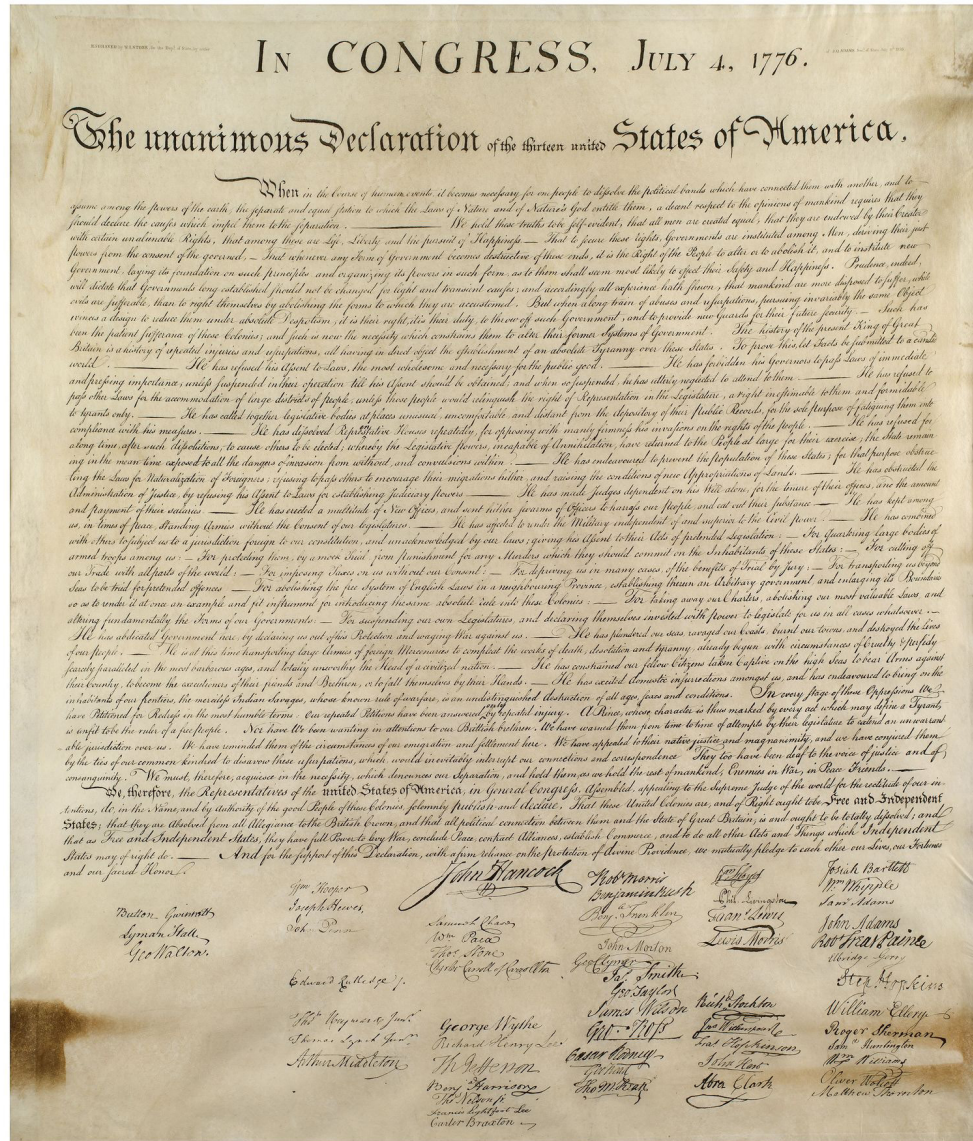


Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance, 1776–1954



The William Stone facsimile of the Declaration of Independence, printed in 1823 at the request of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00154.02).

The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the US Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance, 1776–1954

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, REVISED IN 2025)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVEL(S): 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One to four 45-minute class periods depending on grade level

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 sources. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

Over the course of four lessons the students will analyze text from three documents defining American democracy: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the United States Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Understanding these three texts is an essential part of understanding American ideals and rights. Students will closely analyze these sources and use textual evidence to draw their conclusions. You will assess their understanding through their responses to questions and their restatement of what the texts mean to them.

Students will be able to

- Analyze and summarize complex historical text (e.g., preambles of the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution)
- Demonstrate their understanding of historical texts through interpretive writing and the creation of illustrations

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What have politicians and influential public figures identified as common principles unifying Americans of different generations, regions, and political parties?
 - Grade 3–5 adaptation: Which values and rights do these documents suggest are most important to Americans?

- When have common principles seemed especially important, even necessary, for the preservation of national unity?
 - Grade 3–5 adaptation: When were these documents written, and what else was happening at the time?
- What have politicians and influential public figures suggested is the relationship between individual rights and national unity?
 - Grade 3–5 adaptation: What do these documents urge Americans to protect?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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.RI.5.1: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

MATERIALS

- Source 1: The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, printed by John Dunlap, Philadelphia, July 4, 1776, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2021667578/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667578/)
- Activity Sheet 1: The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, 1776
- Source 2: The Preamble of the United States Constitution, September 17, 1787, National Archives, [archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript)
- Activity Sheet 2: The Preamble of the United States Constitution, 1787
- Source 3: The Pledge of Allegiance from the US Code, Title 4, Chapter 1, Sec. 4, 2018 edition, [govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2018-title4/html/USCODE-2018-title4-chap1-sec4.htm](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2018-title4/html/USCODE-2018-title4-chap1-sec4.htm)
- Activity Sheet 3: The Pledge of Allegiance
- Activity Sheet 4: Ideals in the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 5: Ideals in the US Constitution
- Activity Sheet 6: Ideals in the Pledge of Allegiance

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Declaration of Independence, US Constitution, and Pledge of Allegiance

BY DENVER BRUNSMAN, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Declaration of Independence, US Constitution, and Pledge of Allegiance all represent critical commitments to American nationhood. Each text arose out of a time of national crisis to affirm the American people's commitment to union over division. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, adopted the Declaration of Independence. For twelve years the American colonies had resisted the policies of the British government that ruled them. By June 1776, the colonies had fought Britain in an open war for more than a year but still lacked the unity of a single nation. That month, Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution for independence. Rather than vote on the resolution, Congress created a committee to write a declaration explaining the reasons for American independence. Within the committee, Thomas Jefferson emerged as the lead author of what became the Declaration of Independence. The document far surpassed its original purpose to justify independence by articulating what it meant to be an American, particularly in its stirring words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Although Congress technically approved independence on July 2, 1776, by passing Lee's resolution, its adoption of the Declaration on July 4 marked the true creation of the American nation.

By the mid-1780s, despite defeating Britain in the Revolutionary War, division again threatened American union. Under the governing framework of the Articles of Confederation, each of the thirteen original states enjoyed sovereignty, or control, over their own affairs, but this power came at the expense of the national government, which remained very weak. Consisting solely of Congress, with no executive or judiciary, the national government could not raise revenue through taxes, regulate trade between the states, or even enforce a single currency. To address these problems, a group of elite leaders, including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, called for a convention to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787 to amend the Articles of Confederation. Lasting until September 17, 1787 (recognized today as Constitution Day), the meeting became known as the Constitutional Convention because it did not merely amend the Articles but created a new frame of government. The Constitution created a much stronger union with a national government composed of three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—that shared power with the individual states.

The Constitution held the American union together until differences over slavery split the nation during the Civil War (1861–1865). In the period following the war, known as Reconstruction, attempts to reforge connections between the North and the South included different pledges of allegiance to the United States and its flag. In 1885, George Thatcher Balch, a Union Army officer in the Civil War, wrote the first version of what later became the Pledge of Allegiance. In 1892, Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister, revised Balch's verse for a children's magazine. Bellamy's original words remain the foundation of the Pledge of Allegiance today: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." President Benjamin Harrison helped popularize the pledge by issuing a proclamation to make public-school flag ceremonies a centerpiece of Columbus

Day celebrations in 1892. In the decades that followed, schools across the country continued to make a brief recitation of the pledge a daily practice. In 1942, as the nation faced a new crisis with World War II, Congress officially recognized the Pledge of Allegiance for the first time and standardized its language. After the war, in 1954, Congress made a final change by adding the words “under God” as the country faced new threats during the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

The Pledge of Allegiance followed the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution by affirming American nationhood and union in times of crisis and possible division.

Denver Brunsman is an associate professor of history at George Washington University. He is the author of Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World and a co-author of the college and AP US History textbook Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People (2015).

PREAMBLE OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, 1776

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, REVISED IN 2025)

OVERVIEW

Students will investigate the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence's Preamble. You will assess their understanding by their restatement of each central concept of the Preamble.

MATERIALS

- Source 1: The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, printed by John Dunlap, Philadelphia, July 4, 1776, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2021667578/
- Activity Sheet 1: The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, 1776

PROCEDURE

1. The Historical Background (on page 4) has been provided as information for you. You may share specific content with students to provide context for the documents that they will be analyzing in this unit.
2. For this lesson, explain that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration in three parts: a preamble, a set of grievances against the king, and a conclusion that declared the country's right to be free and independent of Great Britain. Explain that a "preamble" is an introduction, so this preamble is an introduction to the Declaration of Independence and is meant to explain its purpose. The students will be examining the second part of the preamble.
3. Distribute Source 1, the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence.
4. "Share read" the text with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few lines while you continue to serve as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. Hand out Activity Sheet 1. It is helpful if you can project the activity sheet so the entire class can see it.

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

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 sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will analyze text from three documents defining American democracy: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the United States Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Students will closely analyze these sources and use textual evidence to draw their conclusions.

6. You will be the guide for this whole-group activity. The class will address one question at a time and reason out the best answer. This activity is designed to both build critical thinking skills and help students develop effective strategies when facing difficult texts. The vocabulary will be the most difficult barrier. Let students discuss possible meanings of the unfamiliar words, and only provide definitions or synonyms when they are truly stuck.
7. Show the students how to use the answers to the questions to construct a summary. This is done by rewriting the students' answers in order and then providing connector words and punctuation to create new sentences. For example, "It's obvious that people were created equal and that God gave them the right to live free and pursue their dreams. Governments were made by people to protect their rights and if the government won't protect those rights, then the people can make a new government. This new government must make sure that people are safe and happy. Don't throw out the government without a really good reason. People will put up with bad things just because they don't like to change what they're used to; but if the government keeps abusing people's rights, then you need a new government that can provide security for the future."
8. Collect the activity sheets or instruct students to keep them as a resource for Lesson 4.

THE PREAMBLE OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION, 1787

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, REVISED IN 2025)

OVERVIEW

Students will investigate the Preamble of the United States Constitution. They will demonstrate their understanding by analyzing the meaning of each central concept of the Preamble and then paraphrasing the text in their own words.

MATERIALS

- Source 2: The Preamble of the United States Constitution, September 17, 1787, National Archives, [archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript)
- Activity Sheet 2: The Preamble of the United States Constitution, 1787

PROCEDURE

1. You may share information from the Historical Background as necessary to provide context for the writing of the US Constitution. Explain that a “preamble” is an introduction, so this preamble is an introduction to the US Constitution and is meant to explain its purpose.
2. Hand out Source 2, the Preamble of the United States Constitution. Share read the text with the students as described in Lesson 1.
3. Hand out Activity Sheet 2. You may decide whether the students will complete the activity with the whole class, in groups, with partners, or individually. This activity is designed to both build critical thinking skills and help the students develop effective strategies when facing difficult texts. The vocabulary will be the most difficult barrier. Let students discuss possible meanings of the unfamiliar words and only provide definitions or synonyms when they are truly stuck.
4. Show the students how to use their answers to the questions to construct a summary. For example, “The people of the United States want to make a better country where it is fair and peaceful, everyone is

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

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 sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will analyze text from three documents defining American democracy: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the United States Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Students will closely analyze these sources and use textual evidence to draw their conclusions.

defended, and everyone can be free to choose who they want to be. We are doing this for ourselves and our children and their children. We promise to make this Constitution work for all Americans.”

5. Collect the activity sheets or instruct students to keep them as a resource for Lesson 4.

THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, 1892–1954

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, REVISED IN 2025)

OVERVIEW

Students will investigate the Pledge of Allegiance. They will demonstrate their understanding by analyzing the text and the specific vocabulary of the Pledge. You will assess their learning by how well students match the original language used in the primary source with a more modern substitute.

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

MATERIALS

- Source 3: The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag from the US Code, Title 4, Chapter 1, Sec. 4, 2018 edition, govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2018-title4/html/USCODE-2018-title4-chap1-sec4.htm
- Activity Sheet 3: The Pledge of Allegiance

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 sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will analyze text from three documents defining American democracy: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the United States Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Students will closely analyze these sources and use textual evidence to draw their conclusions.

PROCEDURE

1. You may share information from the Historical Background as necessary to provide context for the writing of the Pledge of Allegiance. Explain that a “pledge” is a promise.
2. Hand out Source 3, the Pledge of Allegiance, and share read the text with the students as described in Lesson 1.
3. Hand out Activity Sheet 3. You may decide whether the students will complete the activity with the whole class, in groups of three or four, with partners, or individually.
4. Show the students how they can use synonyms to paraphrase the Pledge of Allegiance. For example, “I promise loyalty to the symbol of our country and to the representative democracy that it represents, one country which believes in a supreme being, and cannot be divided, with freedom and fairness for everyone.”

AMERICAN IDEALS

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, REVISED IN 2025)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will demonstrate what they have learned in Lessons 1–3. This will be done in two ways, through student analysis of the primary sources and the creation of an illustration to reinforce the students’ conclusions.

MATERIALS

- Sources 1–3
- Completed Activity Sheets 1–3
- Activity Sheet 4: Ideals in the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 5: Ideals in the US Constitution
- Activity Sheet 6: Ideals in the Pledge of Allegiance

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

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 sources. Over the course of four lessons the students will analyze text from three documents defining American democracy: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the United States Constitution, and the Pledge of Allegiance. Students will closely analyze these sources and use textual evidence to draw their conclusions.

PROCEDURE

1. Hand out Sources 1–3 and the students’ completed activity sheets from Lessons 1–3 or ask the students to take them out, if they retained them.
2. Hand out Activity Sheet 4: Ideals in the Declaration of Independence.
3. As a whole-group activity, discuss what the students think is the most important ideal in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence. They should use the exact words from the Declaration that represent that ideal and write that phrase on the activity sheet. You may have to explain the difference between a phrase and a sentence.
4. On the next line they should write in their own words what they believe that phrase means.
5. In the box below they should draw an illustration that symbolizes that ideal.
6. For example, the students could decide that “all men are created equal” is the most important ideal. They then write that it means that “everyone should be treated the same.” In the box they might draw a picture of two people shaking hands.

7. Hand out Activity Sheets 5 and 6 and have the students work with partners or individually, following the same process for the Preamble of the US Constitution and the Pledge of Allegiance. If the students run out of time, this could also be completed as a homework activity.

Source 1: The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, 1776

. . . 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.

From The Declaration of Independence, printed by John Dunlap, Philadelphia, on July 4, 1776. (Library of Congress)

Activity Sheet 1: Preamble, Declaration of Independence, 1776

Answer the questions on the right based on the quotations from the Preamble on the left:

Quotations from the Preamble	Questions
We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal.	What fact was obvious, according to Thomas Jefferson and the Second Continental Congress?
Answer	
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,	Who had given people rights that cannot be taken away?
Answer	
that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.	What are those guaranteed rights?
Answer	
That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men,	How do we make sure we keep those rights?
Answer	

Quotations from the Preamble	Questions
deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed,	Who gives the government its power?
Answer	
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,	When a government does not protect the people's rights, what can the people do?
Answer	
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.	What should be the purpose of this new government
Answer	
Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes;	What should people be careful not to do?
Answer	

Quotations from the Preamble	Questions
and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable,	What has history shown that people are willing to endure?
Answer	
than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed.	What don't people want to do?
Answer	
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	What must people do when the government keeps taking away and abusing their rights?
Answer	
and to provide new Guards for their future Security.	What must a new government provide?
Answer	

Summary of the Declaration of Independence

Source 2: The Preamble of the United States Constitution, 1787

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

From the Constitution of the United States, September 17, 1787 (National Archives)

Activity Sheet 2: Preamble, US Constitution, 1787

Answer the questions on the right based on the quotations from the Preamble on the left:

Quotations from the Preamble	Questions
We the people of the United States,	Who wrote this document?
Answer	
in Order to form a more perfect Union,	Why did they write this document?
Answer	
establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility,	What did they want to guarantee?
Answer	
Provide for the common defence,	Who did they want to defend?
Answer	

Quotations from the Preamble	Questions
promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty	Who should get those good things and what might those good things be
Answer	
to ourselves and our Posterity,	Who would get those good things and how long would they last?
Answer	
do ordain and establish this Constitution	What did they promise to do?
Answer	
for the United States of America	Who was the Constitution for?
Answer	

Summary of the US Constitution

Source 3: Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

From the US Code, Title 4, Chapter 1, Sec. 4, 2018 edition

Activity Sheet 3: The Pledge of Allegiance

Replace the words of the Pledge that are on the left with a word or phrase from the Word Bank that means the same thing. The words in the Word Bank are not in the correct order.

Words from the Pledge	Word Bank (not in order)
I pledge	1. A representative democracy
allegiance	2. Freedom
to the Flag	3. Cannot be divided
of the United States of America,	4. For everyone
and to the Republic	5. Promise
for which it stands	6. Represents
one Nation	7. A country
under God,	8. The symbol of our country
Indivisible,	9. Loyalty
with liberty	10. Fairness
and justice	11. Belief in a supreme being
For all	12. The USA
Summary of the Pledge of Allegiance	

Activity Sheet 4: Ideals in the Declaration of Independence

What do you think is the most important ideal in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence? Copy the phrase on the line below:

What do you believe that phrase means in your own words?

Draw a picture that symbolizes that ideal (that shows what you believe that ideal means).

Activity Sheet 5: Ideals in the US Constitution

What do you think is the most important ideal in the Preamble of the US Constitution? Copy the phrase on the line below:

What do you believe that phrase means in your own words?

Draw a picture that symbolizes that ideal (that shows what you believe that ideal means).

Activity Sheet 6: Ideals in the Pledge of Allegiance

What do you think is the most important ideal in the Pledge of Allegiance? Copy the phrase on the line below:

What do you believe that phrase means in your own words?

Draw a picture that symbolizes that ideal (that shows what you believe that ideal means).