

Beyond "*All men are created equal*"

Teaching the Understanding of the Declaration of Independence



A Fifth Grade Lesson Plan

Respectfully Submitted by
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Typically in American elementary classrooms, the Declaration of Independence is celebrated as a document written by Thomas Jefferson that was signed on July 4, 1776, our nation's birthday. American children are directed to recognize the truth that we hold to be obvious, "the all men are created equal." However, children question the statement recognizing that slavery was a huge part of the American fabric in 1776. They have even been taught about the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s. Then how could "all men be created equal?" One of the misinterpretations with the Declaration of Independence becomes the focus on words within the Declaration of Rights and not the overall purpose of the document nor its significance.

Massachusetts State Standards

History and Geography 3 Observe and identify details in cartoons, photographs, charts, and graphs relating to an historical narrative.

5.15 Explain the reason for the French and Indian War, how it led to an overhaul of British imperial policy, and the colonial response to these policies. Sugar Act, Stamp Act, Townsend Duties, Tea Act, Intolerable Acts. "no taxation without representation," Stamp Act Congress, Sons of Liberty, Boston Tea Party.

5.16 Explain the meaning of the key ideas on equality, natural rights, the rule of law and the purpose of government contained in the Declaration of Independence.

5.18 Describe the life and achievement of important leaders during the Revolution and the early years of the United States. (John Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Washington, Hamilton, King George III)

Lesson Objectives

Students will...

- recognize why the colonies felt it was necessary to declare independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain i.e. purpose of government.
- identify the committee that was responsible to write and edit the document that was presented to the Continental Congress.
- understand “equality” in the state of nature vs. a state of law.
- establish a personal position on Congress’ decision to declare independence. Would the student be signers or not? Identify the alternative.

Time Frame

Three class periods and two homework assignments.

Background

As tensions began to rise in colonial America over the disagreement between the rules of government, the rights of citizens, and self-rule, Britain and her American colonies were destined for war. The spark for American independence quickly turned into a flame with the support of patriotic leaders like Patrick Henry, Ben Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Paine, each exciting the causes for liberty.

It is too simplistic to say the source of the problem was “no taxation without representation,” as the American colonies were just one group of Englishman without representation. The problem lies within a fundamental difference of understanding in the role of government. The English Parliament felt that they were looking out for the rights of all. Manchester, England itself for example did not have representation in Parliament, and they felt their rights were protected. The American colonists disagreed and recognized the need for taxation, but

taxation should only be initiated by local government with local control (Berkin, 2008). This would limit the power of a strong central government and lead to a greater emphasis on self-rule.

Through the Declaration of Independence, Americans today can gain an understanding of the rationale used by the founding fathers to separate from England. The document can be divided into four main parts, the Preamble, Indictment, Denunciation, and Conclusion. Upon signing and delivering the Declaration of Independence, American colonies clearly presented to Parliament and King George III a list of governmental violations imposed on American colonists. This document proved to be a changing force in the world both in 1776 and today.

Additional background support:

- A Time Line of Events
- Copy of the Dunlap Broadside fact sheet
- Edited copy of Jefferson's original draft
- Copy of the typed Declaration of Independence
- John Trumbull's Declaration of Independence

PROCEDURES

Day One – Making Connections

Step 1: Homework

Students are to identify a rule which they **MUST** abide by that they feel is unfair. The rule can be from home, in school, a social organization, or any personal setting. Students need to identify who imposed the rule, enforces the rule, and why they feel this rule is unfair. *Caution students to be realistic, they must do homework and go to school!

Step 2: Class

Discussion: share unfair rules from previous night's homework

Guiding question: How can you change an unfair rule?

Provide students with a writing rubric

Write out your feeling in three parts

1. describe **who** imposed this rule and their relationship to you
2. Clearly list **why** you feel the rule is unfair
3. State your **intentions**, describe your options for changing the rule

Day Two - The Document

Step 1: Class

Guiding question: How is the Declaration of Independence like your writing assignment?

Display copy of John Trumbull's depiction of the Declaration of Independence

Read the Declaration of Independence to students (Fink's *The Words That Made America*). Students are to have a typed copy of text

As we read the document students are to separate the document into meaningful sections listening for the "who, why, and intentions."

Interpret language in the document and focus on WHY the need for separation.

Explain "all men are created equal" in the context of 1776, state of nature vs. state of law. No man is a God given king. In a slave state could all men have equal rights?

Step 2: Homework

Provide students with a copy of Ben Franklin's poem *We Have an Old Mother*. Students are to rewrite the poem in their own words while maintaining its original meaning.

Day Three – Apply Your Knowledge

Step 1: Class

Watch School House Rock's *No More King* and *Fireworks!*

Step 2: Value text and writing process, share edited version of Jefferson's first draft. Reinforce a committee as described in the forward of Fink's *The Words That Made America* and the editing process.

Step 3: Guiding question: What was the reaction to the Declaration of Independence from varying perspectives?

Divide students into 5 groups: patriots, British soldiers, loyalists, slaves on a plantation, Royal governor appointed by King George III

Activity: Have students create a Broadside responding the Declaration of Independence from their assigned point of view.

Rubric:

Accurate position from point of view 20 pts

Position supported with historical accuracy/facts (minimum of 4) 40 pts

Possible solutions or alternatives to separation 20 pts

Spelling and Presentation/neatness 20 pts

Endnotes

Allow for a possible fourth class period for the completion of the Broadside and group presentations.

Final Assessment

Provide students with an ORQ (open response question).

Based on your knowledge of the colonial period from the French and Indian War to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, would you have been a signer of the document? Explain your support of or rejection to the document using historical facts from the period.

Bibliography

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Scott Foresman *The United States*, Pearson Education, 2005

Humes, James C. *The Wit & Wisdom of Benjamin Franklin*, New York, HarperCollins, 1995

Maier, Pauline *American Scripture*, New York, Vintage Books, 1997

Marsh, Carole *Quit Bossing Us Around* Gallopade International, 2005

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Web Sites

<http://www.archives.gov>

<http://www.constitutioncenter.org>

Declaration of Independence:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e4/Declaration_of_Independence_%28U...

Declaring Independence: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/declara2.html>

John Trumbull, Declaration of Independence:

<http://americanrevolution.org/artmain.html>

Wikijunior: United State Charters of Freedom/Declaration of Independence:

http://en.wikibooks.org/w/index.php?title=Wikijunior:United_States_Charters_of_Freedom/