

**LESSON ONE: THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

**Overview**

**OBJECTIVES**

- Students will be able to:
- Identify and describe elements of the philosophy of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence.
  - Explain the contradictions between ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence and the institution of slavery.
  - Discuss and determine what are the most important ideas about government from the Declaration of Independence and why these ideas are important today.
  - Create and present a public service announcement to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence and to educate and persuade others of the importance of these ideas today.

**PREPARATION**

**Handout 1A: The Declaration of Independence and Natural Rights**—1 per student

**Handout 1B: “This Message Has Been Brought To You By ...”**—1 per student

This lesson examines the Declaration of Independence and the key ideas behind it. First, students explore the purpose of government as they react to the question: “What if there were no government?” Next, they read an article on the Declaration of Independence and engage in a discussion on it. Then, working in small groups, students create a public service announcement to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas expressed in the document and express why they think these ideas are important today.

**Optional writing activity:** Students write on a historical event linked to one of the “injuries” listed in the Declaration of Independence.

**STANDARDS ADDRESSED**

**National U.S. History Standard 6: Understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement, and reasons for the American victory.** Level III (Grade 7–8) (2) Understands contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and the institution of chattel slavery. (6) Understands the creation of the Declaration of Independence (e.g., historical antecedents that contributed to the document, individuals who struggled for independence).

**California History–Social Science Standard 8.1:** Students understand the major events preceding the founding of the nation and relate their significance to the development of American constitutional democracy. (2) Analyze the philosophy of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence, with an emphasis on government as a means of securing individual rights (e.g. key phrases such as “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”).

## Vocabulary

consent of the governed

government

life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

Parliament

philosophy

Second Continental Congress

Declaration of Independence

Jefferson

natural rights

Philadelphia

revolution

unalienable

## Procedure

### A. Focus Discussion

1. Engage students in a discussion to get them thinking about the purpose of government.

Questions to raise:

- What if you got up tomorrow morning and learned that there was no longer any government in our country. What would it be like having no government at all?

Q&L: *There would be no laws, courts, police, public schools, armed forces, government benefits for needy/elderly. Chaotic, dangerous.*

- If what you say is true, then what do you think the purpose of government is? Why does government exist?

Q&L: *Establish order, protect people from foreign attack and domestic violence, provide services, raise money for these functions.*

2. Remind students that in early American history, the colonists had to make some difficult decisions about government. One of the most important decisions they had to make was whether or not to continue to be governed by the British empire. Tell students that today they are going to go behind the scenes during the time that America was deciding to declare independence from England.

### B. Reading and Discussion—Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

1. Explain that the Declaration of Independence is a document written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. Jefferson was part of a committee assigned by Congress to write this declaration, which would be sent to the king and parliament putting England on notice that the American states would no longer be governed as British colonies.

Explain that the others appointed to the committee were too busy with other matters, so Jefferson wrote the document by himself. The Declaration of Independence has become one of our most important historical documents because in it Jefferson expressed key ideas about the purpose of government.

2. Tell students that today they are going to read about Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. As they read, they need to look for:
  - Key ideas about the philosophy of, or reasoning behind, our government.
  - Key ideas about what Americans then, and today, value.
3. Distribute **Handout 1A: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence** to students and explain that after they read, they will have a conversation about the key ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

4. Engage students in a discussion based on the reading to determine if they understand the key ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the contradictions associated with slavery. Questions to raise:

- What ideas about government does Thomas Jefferson express in the Declaration of Independence?

*Q&L: The most basic idea is that government is run for the people, not for the rulers; it relies on the “consent of the governed.” Students should also note that government is supposed to protect people’s basic rights and that if government violates these rights, the people have the right to change the government.*

- In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson said that government should protect people’s rights. Why do you think the protection of rights was so important to Jefferson’s ideas about government?

*Q&L: Jefferson believed that the goal of government was to ensure everyone’s freedom. Students should also note that one of the main reasons that the colonists went to war was because the British had abused their rights and Jefferson wanted to make plain that no government should do this.*

- What rights does Jefferson mention in the Declaration of Independence? What does each of these rights mean?

*Q&L: The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life is the right to live, liberty is the right to be free, and the pursuit of happiness means freedom of opportunity and the duty to help those in need.*

- Jefferson said these rights were “unalienable.” What does this mean?

*Q&L: They cannot be taken from a person or even sold or given away by a person.*

- Jefferson wrote that “All men are created equal.” What did he mean by this? Explain.

*Q&L: All men are created equal means that everyone has equal rights.*

- What contradictions do you see between the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and slavery, which existed in America at the time?

*Q&L: Students should point out that slavery contradicted all men being equal and having unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

- How do you think people made sense of these contradictions?

*Q&L: Accept reasoned responses. Students may point out that some people did not believe that slaves should have equal rights. Others, like Jefferson, did believe in equal rights, but did not think that slavery could be ended easily.*

- Do you see any contradictions in what people today say they believe in and what they do?

*Q&L: Students should state and support their opinions with reasons.*

### **C. Small-Group Activity—“This Message Has Been Brought To You By . . .”**

1. Tell students that they are going to get a chance to really think about the purpose of our government and the importance of individual rights. Tell them they will get to share their thoughts with others.

Explain that there is growing concern that many people today take for granted or don't even think about the ideas behind our democratic government. Distribute **Handout 1B: "This Message Has Been Brought To You By . . ."** and read the introduction to the activity with the students.

2. Divide the class into small groups and go over the steps the groups will complete to create and present their PSAs. Remind the groups how much time they will have to complete the assignment.

#### **D. Group Presentations and Debriefing**

1. Ask each group to present its PSA. After each presentation, engage the presenters and class in a discussion about the presentation. Raise questions such as:

- Was the information they presented about the Declaration of Independence accurate?
- What ideas did this group seem to think were most important?
- How did the group determine what the most important ideas were?
- What did this group do to try to make its PSA persuasive? Interesting?

2. After all groups have presented, engage students in a discussion on the philosophy of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Raise questions such as:

- What is the philosophy of, or reasoning behind, our government according to the Declaration of Independence?

*Q&L: Government is not for the rulers, but for the people. Government should protect the basic (natural, god-given) rights of the people. If a government does not respect the rights of the people or does not represent their interests, the people should change the government.*

- If you were placed in the same position as Thomas Jefferson, trying to explain what a good government should be, are there other ideas you would include based on what we know about our society today? Are there any of Jefferson's ideas you would not include?

*Q&L: Students should state and support their opinions.*

### **Optional Writing Activity**

Remind the students that the Declaration of Independence was written in response to some specific problems the colonists were having with the British. Explain that one of the jobs of historians is to make connections between events. Tell students that they are going to test their skills as historians as they make connections between the events leading to the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the words in the document.

Ask the students to take a look at the Declaration of Independence. It is on the site of Constitutional Rights Foundation ([www.crf-usa.org](http://www.crf-usa.org)). (Click on Links, click on Project History Links, and click on the Declaration of Independence.) Have students select one of the "injuries" from those listed in the document and write an essay that makes a direct connection between Jefferson's words and a historical event or situation that the American colonies experienced.

# Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. Delegates came from each colony. The Revolutionary War had just broken out, and battles had begun between the British and the colonists. Even so, most members of Congress did not want to break away from England. They wanted the colonies to remain English.

For more than a year, the Americans had sent appeals to England. They had complained about the actions of the British government. Colonists had also urged the British people to elect new members of Parliament. They hoped a change in Parliament would bring a change in British policy. But British voters continued to support members of Parliament opposed to colonial rights.

Neither Parliament nor King George wanted to bargain with the Americans. In August 1775, King George declared that the Americans were in open revolt. A few months later, Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act. It allowed seizing American ships and burning colonial towns. King George sent war ships and troops to put down the revolt. The king's governor of Virginia offered freedom to slaves who joined the British cause. All these actions angered Americans and caused more people to join the revolution.



## What Is the Declaration of Independence?

By 1776, most colonies had already made their own declarations of independence. So had many towns, counties, and even private groups. The declarations listed British abuses of power and demanded self-rule.

On June 8, 1776, Congress voted to write a declaration of independence. It named a committee to do the writing. One of its members was Thomas Jefferson, a lawyer from Virginia. He had been a leader in Virginia, and Virginia had elected him to the

Continental Congress. The others on the committee were too busy with the revolution to work on the declaration, so Jefferson wrote it alone.

He finished the document in a few days. The declaration's opening words were "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . . ." Jefferson went on to say that breaking from England was a serious step. It required an explanation.

The second paragraph argued that people had the right to change a government when it abused their rights. This paragraph set out Jefferson's most important ideas about government.

In the rest of the declaration, Jefferson listed 20 examples of when the king had abused the rights of Americans. He claimed that the king was "unfit to be the ruler of a people." Jefferson also blamed the British people. He said that they had voted for members of Parliament who had helped destroy the rights of the colonists. Jefferson ended by stating: "We . . . do . . . declare . . . these . . . Colonies . . . to be Free and Independent states. . . . 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 Honor."

Jefferson gave his draft to Congress on June 28. The members spent little time changing his first two paragraphs. Today they are the most famous parts

of the Declaration of Independence.

The members did cut out most of Jefferson's attack on the British people. They took out all of Jefferson's attack on slavery and the slave trade. Members from the slave states in the South wanted this part removed. In all, they took out about 25 percent of Jefferson's words.

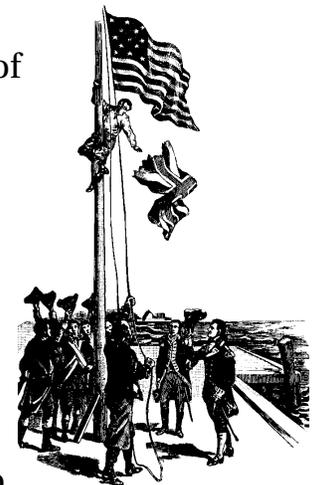
Jefferson became angry over the changes. He later wrote that the Congress had "mangled" his writing.

On July 2, 1776, Congress voted to declare independence. On the Fourth of July, it approved the Declaration of Independence. There would be no turning back now.

### **Jefferson's Ideas in the Declaration**

In the second paragraph of the declaration, Jefferson stated his key ideas. He wrote that "all men are created equal." And they have "unalienable rights." These rights are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He wrote that governments are set up to protect these rights. And that governments get "their just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, the people run the government. The goal of government should be to guard everyone's freedom.

These ideas broke from the past. According to Jefferson, the purpose of



## Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence

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. . . .

(These words are from the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.)

government was not to serve the rulers. It was to serve the people and uphold their rights. Where did Jefferson get these ideas?

Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment. This was a period during the 17th and 18th centuries. Thinkers turned to reason and science to explain the world. They thought that people could improve their lives by learning about the “laws of nature.”

Jefferson did not invent the ideas that he used in the declaration. He said that he had adopted the views of the day. These ideas were, so to speak, “in the air.”

Jefferson knew British history and political thought. He also had read the statements of independence by other colonies. He knew well the writings of fellow Americans like Tom Paine and George Mason. In writing the declaration, Jefferson used the format of the English Declaration of Rights. This was written after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which had driven King James II off the throne.

Jefferson modeled the most famous ideas in the Declaration of Independence on those of the English writer John Locke. Locke wrote his book *Second Treatise of Government* in 1689, right after England’s Glorious Revolution. Locke’s book gave reasons why overthrowing a king could be the right thing to do.

Locke believed that long ago, before there were any governments, people lived in a state of nature. Even in the state of nature, people had rights. Locke wrote that all men are equal. They are born with “unalienable” natural rights. In other words, they have God-given rights that should never be taken away. Among these natural rights, Locke said, are “life, liberty, and property.”

According to Locke, the state of nature could be dangerous. People might kill one another and steal from each other. So people formed governments to protect their natural rights.

Locke wrote that a contract exists between the government and the people. The government must guard people’s natural rights. In turn, the people must obey the law. But, Locke

said, if a government wrongs its people with “a long train of abuses,” the people have the right to resist that government. They can change it or even get rid of it and create a new one.

Locke believed that life itself is a natural right. He said that people have both a right and a duty to save their own lives. Killers, however, lose their right to life since they don’t respect the life of others.

Liberty was another natural right. Locke said that people should be free to decide how to live. But they must not hinder the liberty of others. Locke strongly believed in freedom.

By “property,” another natural right, Locke meant more than owning things. He also meant owning oneself. This included a right to personal well-being. In place of “property,” Jefferson used another phrase from Locke—“pursuit of happiness.” Locke and others had used this phrase to mean the freedom of opportunity and the duty to help those in need.

Jefferson adopted Locke’s ideas. In the declaration, he spoke first about everyone’s natural rights. He then went on to explain why the revolution was necessary in 1776. He next listed how King George had abused the colonists’ rights.

### **How Could Jefferson Say That “All Men Are Created Equal”?**

The Declaration of Independence stated that “All men are created equal.” This meant that everyone had the same God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But how

### **Jefferson’s Gravestone**

These are the words on Thomas Jefferson’s gravestone:

**Here was buried  
Thomas Jefferson  
Author of  
the Declaration  
of  
American Independence  
of the  
Statute of Virginia  
for religious Freedom  
& Father of the  
University of Virginia**

Thomas Jefferson chose these words. He wanted “not a word more.” He did not care to mention that he was governor of Virginia and U.S. president, vice president, secretary of state, and ambassador to France. Nor did he want to say that he was a man of many talents: a lawyer, architect, scientist, musician, linguist, and inventor. Most of all, he wanted to be known as the author of the Declaration of Independence.

could Jefferson and the other signers believe this? After all, slavery existed in the colonies. Some slave owners argued that slaves were not equal. But Jefferson, also a slave owner, did not agree.

From an early age, Jefferson had hated slavery. But he saw no way to end it. If the slaves were freed all at once, Jefferson feared a bloody war. He worried that if slaves were freed one by one, they would have no way to survive. Of course, Jefferson and other

Southern landowners depended on slave labor.

Jefferson came up with a plan. He wrote that slave children should be taken from their parents and put in schools to learn a trade. When they grew up, they would be moved to a colony somewhere. There they would be given tools and work animals to start a new life. They would be “free and independent people.”

His plan never gained much support, and nothing ever came of it. Slavery in the United States lasted until 1865, when the Civil War ended it. But even then, the equality promised in the Declaration of Independence was denied to black people, women, and others. It would take another 100 years for the United States to get close to the ideals in the declaration.

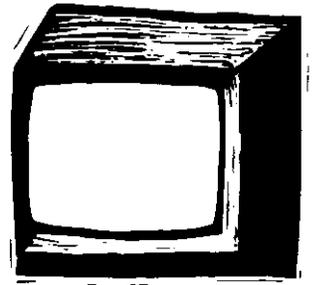
The Declaration of Independence is not law in the United States. It is not part of the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights. But its words state America’s ideals.

In the 19th century abolitionists asked Americans to live up to the ideal of equality and get rid of slavery. The women’s rights movement used the language of the declaration, adding that “all men *and women* are created equal.” The civil rights movement of the 20th century urged America to honor the ideals in the declaration. The document still speaks to us today about the rights of Americans, as it did in 1776.

## For Discussion and Writing

1. What ideas about government does Thomas Jefferson express in the Declaration of Independence?
2. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson said that government should protect people’s rights. Why do you think the protection of rights was so important to Jefferson’s ideas about government?
3. What rights does Jefferson mention in the Declaration of Independence? What does each of these rights mean? Jefferson said that these rights were “unalienable.” What does this mean? Jefferson wrote that “All men are created equal.” What did he mean by this?
4. What contradictions do you see between the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and slavery, which existed in America at the time?
5. How do you think people made sense of these contradictions?
6. Do you see any contradictions in what people today believe and what they do? Explain.

# **“This Message Has Been Brought To You By . . . ”**



You have been awarded the Thomas Jefferson Public Education grant to address a growing problem in America. The T.J. grant provides funding to better educate the public about the principles and ideals of our democracy.

This year’s T.J. grant requires that the public learn more about the key ideas in the Declaration of Independence and why these ideas are important today. To get these messages to the public, the grant provides funding for public service announcements (PSAs) to be created and shared with the public coast-to-coast. The PSAs can be in the following formats:

- 30-second television spot
- 30-second radio spot
- billboard
- full-page newspaper ad

**You will join a team of historians, artists, and writers to create a PSA that educates others about two points:**

1. The important ideas about government expressed in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Why these ideas are important to America today.

**Once you are in your groups, you’ll complete the following steps:**

1. Discuss and agree on what are the most important ideas about government in the document. Write what you agree on.
2. Discuss and agree on why these ideas are important to our lives today. Write what you agree on.

3. Choose the format for your PSA: 30-second television spot, 30-second radio spot, billboard, or full-page newspaper ad.
4. Create your PSA to educate others on the two points above. Your PSA should:
  - Catch people’s attention.
  - Educate them about the two items above.
  - Convince them it’s important.

Everyone in your group should work together. Look at your work through the eyes of:

Historians: Check for accuracy. Is what we are saying factual and historically accurate?

Writers: Check for clarity and persuasiveness. Is our meaning clear? Does our PSA convince people to think these ideas and messages are important?

Artists: Check for high interest. Is our presentation interesting and creative? Will it catch people’s attention? Will they remember it?

5. Prepare to present your PSA to others. Be prepared to explain how your group decided what the most important ideas in the Declaration of Independence are and why these ideas are important today. Be prepared to answer questions about your decisions and the way you presented your ideas in the PSA.