

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Declaration of Independence

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this two-day lesson, students read and interpret the Declaration of Independence as well as some of the philosophical writings that influenced it. Students discuss the Declaration of Independence using a Socratic Seminar format.

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

- Read, interpret, and discuss writings that influenced Jefferson in writing the Declaration of Independence
- Read, interpret, and discuss the Declaration of Independence
- Identify the ways in which the ideas of other writers influenced the Declaration of Independence

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What major ideas are imbedded within the Declaration of Independence? Where did those ideas originate?
- What justifies rebellion against authority?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Conflict
- Democratic Citizenship

VOCABULARY

- declaration
- inalienable
- preamble
- grievance
- endowed
- rebellion

GROUPING

- Whole Class
- Large group discussion circle(s)

STUDENT HANDOUTS

- **8.1:** Seminar Preparation Readings
- **8.2:** Declaration of Independence
- **8.3:** Discussion Ticket
- **8.4:** Discussion Norms (alternately, this could be posted in the classroom rather than copied and distributed to students)

Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3	Goal 4	Goal 5
Conflict	Democratic Citizenship	Historical Inquiry & Historiography	Historical Empathy	Discussion & Deliberation
X	X			X

Procedures

INTRODUCTION/HOOK

Read the following quote to the students:

“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 . . .”

Ask if students have ever heard these words before. Do they know what they mean? Do they know who wrote them? Briefly discuss.

Tell students that over the next two days they will be learning about the Declaration of Independence and the big ideas in it. These words and ideas inspired the Colonial troops and generations of people after them who have sought freedom and equality.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Day 1: Seminar Preparation

Remind students that historians seek primary sources to be able to understand a historical event. In this case, Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence is vital in any analysis. Other people were also part of the event. Many other political thinkers of Jefferson’s day and long before wrote about ideas that were very influential in the declaration and on public opinion at the time.

Hand out the seminar preparation readings. (8.1) Ask students to read them silently or direct them to take turns reading aloud. Alternatively you may choose to read them aloud and ask students to follow along. Ask them to circle any vocabulary they do not understand.

Teacher Notes

- ✓ Before the Seminar, create a large poster with the Seminar Norms (or put up on whiteboard or smartboard) along with discussion phrases for students to refer to during the discussion.
- ✓ It’s all right if students don’t know the meaning of these words. Assure them that by the end of this lesson, they will understand them.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

Use these document analysis questions:

- *Who are the author(s) of these documents?*
- *What are the authors responding to?*
- *What do these documents tell us about the events in the Colonies and in Great Britain and the perspective of the authors (Evidence)?*
- *What do we learn from this evidence?*
- *What are the limitations of this evidence? What else do we want to learn / know?*

Explain that this analysis will help us prepare for the Socratic seminar that we are going to participate in tomorrow. Follow the reading with a brief class discussion, including any words that were confusing.

Say:

Tomorrow you will participate in a seminar on the Declaration of Independence. A seminar is a discussion group in which well-informed people talk about an event or an issue in order to understand it more thoroughly, especially the issues, values, and ideas presented in the reading

Although people may have different interpretations or opinions, the purpose of a seminar is not to debate but rather to put together the collective understanding of the group. We can learn from each other as we discuss the issue and our understanding of them. In a seminar there are no right or wrong answers.

To be well informed, you must prepare ahead of time. That means you will need to do some work and come to class with your “ticket,” that is, your preparatory notes on the reading

Usually when we have discussions I lead them, but in a seminar you all are responsible for the discussion. I will only be here to facilitate, to keep things going but not to ask the questions.

Because you will be in charge of the discussion, you will need to prepare very well. If you are not prepared you will have to sit out and not be part of the discussion.

Our seminar will be about the events that occurred in 1776. So let’s begin the preparations.

✓ Students who come unprepared should work on an alternative assignment.

✓ Emphasize the purpose for the seminar – to develop good discussion skills and gain a better understanding of the issues, ideas and values of the text.

✓ It is also important to remind students that the skills they are developing are authentic for the roles outside of school as citizens.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

Give students a copy of the Declaration of Independence (8.2) and the discussion ticket (8.3). Read the Declaration of Independence.

You may choose to use the PowerPoint version of the declaration, which breaks the text into parts (preamble, statement of beliefs, list of grievances, attempts to redress grievances, and the declaration) to guide students through the document.

Once students understand the basic parts and the general meaning of each, ask them to focus most closely on the first portion of the documents (the preamble) for their analysis.

Ask students to mark up the text with questions, identify unfamiliar words, or chart initial reactions. You may want to show the example of your own marked up text as a model.

Review the Seminar Ticket with the students and instruct them to read the text again before starting their work. Encourage them to work with a partner or in small groups.

Direct students to complete their preparations for homework.

DAY 2: Socratic Seminar on the Declaration of Independence

To prepare the students and the classroom for the seminar, arrange students in a circle facing one another. This is done so that all students are on an equal plane for the discussion.

If the group is larger than 20, you may want to have two circles, an inner circle and an outer one. The inner circle engages in the discussion and the outer circle is given a directed listening assignment, such as monitoring the participation of the group members in the inner circle or recoding what was said.

✓ Have students make a note on their copies of the Declaration so they remember to focus on the Preamble for their analysis.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

Have groups identified prior to class. Group heterogeneously or have the most talkative students in one group and less talkative in the other. If two circles are used, have students from the outer circle exchange seats with those in the inner circle midway through the discussion.

Introduction

Ask students to talk with the person next to them as a warm up for the discussion, sharing one of their responses to the questions on the Seminar Ticket as well as some of their vocabulary words.

Focus Lesson

As a class, discuss what questions would be good seminar questions and put together a list on the board. Limit the number of questions and indicate that these will be helpful if they need prompts to maintain the discussion.

Socratic Seminar

Go over the norms for Socratic Seminar (8.4).

Pose the opening question. Don't forget to provide wait time. Encourage participants to address the group and not you. You may want to use the basic follow-up questions (see Teacher Notes) to encourage students to explain their thinking.

Use the following guidelines for facilitating discussion:

1. When discussion starts to taper off or you feel you have gone far enough on a particular topic, pose another question.
2. Let students lead the direction of the discussion.
3. Invite others to participate if several students are dominating or to help summarize the students' main points.
4. Allow the questions to veer away from the list if the discussion is productive.
5. Seek quality of responses, not quantity. It is not necessary to get through the list of questions.
6. Allow time for a summary question.

✓ At this time, be sure to check for student preparedness and assign alternative assignments to students who are unprepared for seminar.

✓ Possible Opening Questions:

- What is the purpose of this document?
- Who is the intended audience of this document?
- What do the authors mean by unalienable rights?
- How do the authors justify the "Right of the people to alter or to abolish" their government and form a new one?
- Where can you see the ideas in the documents we examined yesterday (Locke, Paine, etc.) in the Declaration itself?

✓ Basic Follow-Up Questions:

- Can you say more about that (or please explain)?
- Where do you see that in the text?
- What do other people think about that?

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

A good seminar leaves students with more to say on the topic and more ideas to include in the seminar. Don't expect a neat closure. Hopefully students will continue discussing these ideas on their own.

Debriefing:

Last Word – have students turn to their partner and share any ideas or thoughts they did not get a chance to share.

Discussion Debrief - ask students: How do you think seminar went today? What did we do well? How can we do better next time? Students can pass if they have nothing to add or if what they were going to say was already said.

Assign a seminar response activity (choose one or have students choose):

1. What do you think is the most important idea in the Declaration of Independence? Why?
2. Do you believe that the arguments laid out in the Declaration of Independence justify the Colonies' break with England? Why or why not?

✓ The discussion debrief is key to developing the skills needed to successfully discuss issues in a seminar format. Be sure to be as specific as possible about class strengths and areas to improve for next seminar.

✓ The response activity could be assigned for homework or completed in class.