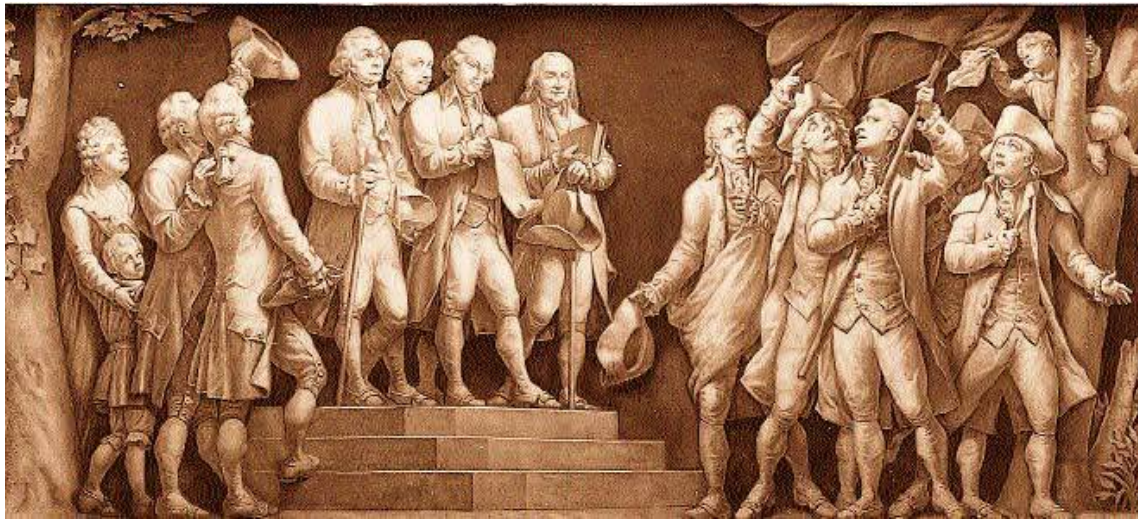


# Declaration of Independence

W.M. Akers



There are a few pieces of the Declaration of Independence which most Americans know by heart. "When in the course of human events...", "...all men are created equal," "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," are pieces of a philosophy that explain the very foundation of the American government. But a close reading of the most important document in the early history of the United States can tell us more about what kind of government the founding fathers wanted. The entire history of the colonies is contained in its 1300 words.

In a way, the Declaration of Independence is like a break-up letter, or an email sent to a boss after a long time working a hated job. "I quit!" it says. "And here's why." The Declaration is an interesting document to read, even more than two centuries after it was written, and it is only lightly concerned with philosophy. Most of it is given over to practical matters—everyday concerns that would have more meaning to ordinary people than any longwinded explanations of governmental philosophy.

The intellectual foundation of the Declaration is explained in just a few sentences in the second paragraph. "All men are created equal," writes author Thomas Jefferson. And everyone has basic rights that cannot be taken away, including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Any government that tries to deny those rights to its people is a government that should not deserve to exist. Perhaps the most revolutionary idea in this paragraph comes in the statement that a government's power derives "from the consent of the governed." To make such a statement to England's King George III, who believed that his right to rule came from God, is quite a bold move.

In the 18th century, this was cutting edge philosophy, the sort of thing that French intellectuals like Voltaire and Rousseau might have discussed in Parisian coffee houses, and may have been boring to ordinary American colonists. So Jefferson spends only a few lines on these matters before moving on to the nitty-gritty: a list of complaints which he refers to as "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations." Reading over them is a good reminder that the colonists were not breaking away from the English crown because of intellectual reasons. They were angry, and after decades of colonial rule, they weren't going to take it anymore.

Many of these dozens of complaints are general. The king "has refused his Assent to Laws," Jefferson complains, and charges the crown with "imposing Taxes on us without our Consent." But most of the complaints are very specific, and give insight into the sort of things bothering the Patriots in 1776. Let's look at a few specific lines and think a little bit about what they mean.

In one of the first complaints, the king is accused of holding legislative meetings "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" from their ordinary locations. This is a reference to specific occasions in Massachusetts and Virginia where regular legislative meetings had grown so raucous, the English governors began to fear for their safety. The meeting places were changed to locations so inconvenient that most of the angry lawmakers could not make the journey. If they did make the long trip, they would be too tired to argue with unjust decision making. "Fatiguing them into compliance with [the king's] measures," writes Jefferson, was the "sole purpose" for moving these public meetings around.

The right for people to watch their government in action has been an important part of American democracy ever since. This is why local city council meetings are generally open to the public, and why even small government decisions—the altering of a school district, for instance—must be preceded by a public hearing. When a citizen goes to speak at such a hearing, they are following in the footsteps of the colonists who demanded that public meetings be held in convenient locations.

Most of the first part of the list above concerns similar bureaucratic complaints. The king controlled the appointment and payment of judges making them more likely to rule in his favor. He passed laws making it difficult for new colonists to immigrate. When colonial lawmakers complained about such injustices, he would dissolve their "Representative Houses...for opposing with manly firmness" his policies. These are all important complaints, but the list does not kick into high gear until about halfway through when Jefferson mentions the continued presence of the king's soldiers in the colonies.

After the end of the French and Indian war in 1763, the British armies were not dissolved. Instead, they remained in the colonies. A "standing army" was maintained to supposedly guard against French or Indian aggression, though the colonists suspected it was intended to limit their freedom. Several entries in the middle of the list of grievances are taken up by complaints about the presence of these soldiers, and it is here that Jefferson's anger begins to show through.

"He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power," Jefferson writes—a way of saying that it was like the colonies had been converted to a military dictatorship because the king's armies were not under the control of local governments. Then it gets worse. Jefferson blasts the king "for Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us," a reference to the Quartering Acts of 1765 and 1774, which required local governments to house and feed British soldiers.

As the Patriots saw it, these protections given to the British army were not just a matter of money or privacy, but of justice. Because of the Administration of Justice Act of 1774, popularly known as the "Murder Act," British officials accused of crimes in the United States could be tried in Britain. This meant that a British soldier could kill a colonist and escape trial by local jury, instead being tried in front of a more friendly English court. In his next complaint, Jefferson refers to this as "a mock trial."

The Patriots were so incensed by the Quartering Act that after the Revolutionary War was finished, they wrote a special amendment to the new Constitution to prevent such a law from ever being passed in the United States. It read: "No Soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." This was so important to the founders they made it the Third Amendment, following only the freedom of speech and the right to bear arms.

Only at the end of Jefferson's list does the full extent of his rage shine through. When the Declaration of Independence was written and ratified in the summer of 1776, the Revolutionary War had already begun. The Battle of Bunker Hill had occurred the year before, upon which the king declared the colonies in open rebellion. He sent his army and navy to contain the revolt and hired Hessian mercenaries from Germany to supplement his forces. The response to these actions concludes Jefferson's list, and it is here his strength as a writer becomes most apparent.

He accuses the king of "waging War against us," saying that "he has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of the people." The hiring of the Hessians draws even sharper comment, as Jefferson refers to "large Armies of foreign Mercenaries [coming] to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation."

Although a written document, the Declaration of Independence was intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies as a way of inciting frustrated citizens to rebellion against their king. For this reason, it makes sense that it starts slowly, introducing the intellectual argument calmly, before steadily rising to a fever pitch of rage and indignation. It is not hard to imagine a speaker in Boston or Philadelphia reading this list in front of a crowd. Even those listeners unmoved by the opening passages—the famous ones—would be excited by this talk of death and destruction and tyranny.

The Declaration of Independence was not solely meant to serve as a nation's founding document. It was to be used to raise an army, to protect a rebellion that had just barely begun.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. With what does the Declaration of Independence begin?

- A an angry tirade against the King
- B a list of complaints
- C a philosophical argument
- D the history of the colonies

2. What does the passage describe?

- A the impact of the Declaration of Independence on the war efforts of the American colonists
- B the organization of the Declaration of Independence and the historical context in which it was written
- C the reaction of the British monarchy to the Declaration of Independence
- D the French and Indian War and its impact on the relationship between the colonists and the British monarchy

3. Thomas Jefferson was not afraid to make daring statements in the Declaration of Independence. What evidence from the text best supports this conclusion?

- A Jefferson stated that a government's power derives "from the consent of the governed."
- B Jefferson began the Declaration of Independence with an intellectual argument, then listed specific bureaucratic complaints.
- C Jefferson claimed that public meetings were being moved around on purpose.
- D Jefferson complained about the presence of the king's soldiers in the colonies.

4. How did Thomas Jefferson intend for the colonists to feel after hearing the Declaration of Independence read aloud?

- A indifferent and bored
- B outraged and eager to act
- C sympathetic and guilty
- D disappointed and hopeless

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A The Declaration of Independence was full of cutting edge philosophy and a reminder of the intellectual reasons the colonists broke from the crown.
- B The Declaration of Independence contains the entire history of the colonies and gives a detailed account of what was happening at that time period.
- C The Declaration of Independence listed various complaints against the British crown that led the colonists to break from the British government.
- D The Declaration of Independence showed how enraged Thomas Jefferson was at the many laws that were unfairly imposed on the colonists.

6. Read the following sentence: "This is a reference to specific occasions in Massachusetts and Virginia where regular legislative meetings had grown so **raucous**, the English governors began to fear for their safety."

As used in the passage, what does the word "**raucous**" most nearly mean?

- A disorderly
- B productive
- C quiet
- D spirited

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The Quartering Act greatly incensed the colonists; \_\_\_\_\_, they made a special amendment to the new Constitution to ensure a law like this was never passed again.

- A moreover
- B initially
- C namely
- D consequently

8. In the Declaration of Independence, the king is accused of holding legislative meetings "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" from their ordinary locations.

What right has become an important part of American democracy ever since this complaint was written?

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9. Why was the Declaration of Independence intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies?

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10. The author writes that the Declaration of Independence was “used to raise an army, to protect a rebellion that had just barely begun.”

Explain why the Declaration of Independence would be an effective tool in these efforts. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

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## Teacher Guide &amp; Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1260

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8. In the Declaration of Independence, the king is accused of holding legislative meetings "at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" from their ordinary locations.

What right has become an important part of American democracy ever since this complaint was written?

**Suggested answer:** An important part of American democracy has become the right for people to watch their government in action.

9. Why was the Declaration of Independence intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies?

**Suggested answer:** The Declaration of Independence was intended to be read aloud throughout the colonies because it was meant to incite frustrated citizens to rebellion against their king.

10. The author writes that the Declaration of Independence was "used to raise an army, to protect a rebellion that had just barely begun."

Explain why the Declaration of Independence would be an effective tool in these efforts. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

**Suggested answer:** Answers should indicate that the Declaration of Independence reflected the frustration of the colonists with the British King by listing a series of complaints that captured the "history of repeated injuries and usurpations" the colonists suffered under the British monarchy. Since the Declaration of Independence was read aloud throughout the colonies and built a tone of rage and indignation the colonists could relate to, the colonists were most likely enraged upon hearing the document read. They would most likely be motivated to join armies and fight against British rule.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

7th Grade  
HW 2

**ReadWorks** Non-fiction: Colonization and Revolutionary War – The Declaration of Independence

**TASK:** Read and annotate the article. Answer all questions.  
Due Thursday, March 23rd

## Colonization and Revolutionary War The Declaration of Independence

During the years right before the Revolutionary War, more and more colonists wanted independence. Patriots gave speeches urging the colonists to take up arms and fight the British **tyrants**<sup>1</sup>. Patrick Henry, a **patriot**<sup>2</sup> from Virginia, gave a famous speech to the legislature of his state. Patrick Henry **proclaimed**<sup>3</sup>: "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me **liberty**<sup>4</sup> or give me death!"

As fighting from the war spread, many more colonists became convinced they needed to cut ties with Britain. They still considered themselves British, but the king was not respecting their rights. They stood together as colonists to defend themselves and their interests. Before long they would call themselves Americans.

On May 10, 1775, representatives from every colony met at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. They gathered in response to the battles of Lexington and Concord. The representatives agreed the time for negotiating with Britain was over. They decided that the Congress should rule the colonies and they should declare independence. The Continental Army was formed, and George Washington was named its leader. Washington came up with a plan to battle the British troops.

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence. It took him a little more than two weeks. Although he was only 33 years old, Jefferson **eloquently**<sup>5</sup> wrote why the colonists did not want British rule. He listed all of the rights that every man deserved. He wrote that Britain was denying the colonists these rights. The Declaration of Independence clarified the values of the colonists. The war was not just about taxes. It was about freedom. It was about

<sup>1</sup> **tyrants** – people who use their power in a cruel or unjust way

<sup>2</sup> **patriot** – a person who loves his country and gives it loyal support

<sup>3</sup> **proclaimed** – declared in a public way

<sup>4</sup> **liberty** – freedom

<sup>5</sup> **eloquently** – expressed in a smooth and clear way

the relationship of any government to its people. Finally, the war was about the responsibility of the government to protect the rights of the people.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long did it take Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence?
  - a. It took him seven days.
  - b. It took him two weeks exactly.
  - c. It took him a little more than two weeks.
  - d. It took him a month
  
2. What caused representatives to meet at the Second Continental Congress?
  - a. The battles of Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts
  - b. They wanted to negotiate with the British
  - c. They wanted to write the Declaration of Independence
  - d. The need to clarify the colonists' relationship with England
  
3. Why does the author most likely say, "the time for negotiating with Britain was over"?
  - a. The sides would have to fight rather than talk.
  - b. The war for independence was coming to an end.
  - c. The British had run out of time and lost control.
  - d. The Americans no longer wanted to gain independence.
  
4. Read the following sentences: "The Declaration of Independence clarified the values of the colonists. The war was not just about taxes. It was about freedom."

The word **clarified** means

- a. changed
  - b. made improvements to
  - c. drew pictures of
  - d. made easier to understand
- 
5. The passage "The Declaration of Independence" is mostly about
    - a. famous declarations of independence throughout history and how the United States' was different.
    - b. the Second Continental Congress and the states that were there.
    - c. what led up to the Declaration of Independence being written and what it was about.
    - d. the process of writing the Declaration of Independence and the people who were involved.

6. What did the representatives agree to at the Second Continental Congress?

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7. Based on the passage, explain why Patrick Henry said, "give me liberty or give me death!"

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

The Americans needed to explain their reasons, \_\_\_\_\_ Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.

- a. because
- b. after
- c. so
- d. although

9. Read the following sentence.

**In 1775, representatives from every colony met in Philadelphia to form the Second Continental Congress.**

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who? representatives from every colony
2. What did representatives do? \_\_\_\_\_
3. When? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Where? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

10. **Vocabulary Word:** eloquent: well expressed and effective in persuading people.

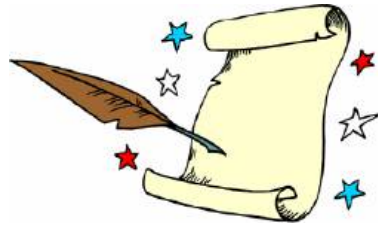
Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE



In the summer of 1776, many of the British colonists in the New World had had enough. They were tired of paying taxes to a government that wasn't doing anything to earn the money it was being paid.

The Continental Congress had written angry letters over a year ago. King George III did not write back. Why were the colonists paying taxes to a King who didn't even answer their letters? Finally, King George III answered them: he said that the new "United Colonies" were rebels.

The Colonies were being treated like enemies. They were angry! In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote a "Declaration of Independence". This document was the beginning of a new, independent country.

The Declaration explained why the United Colonies were disappointed in the Crown. It declared why they deserved to be treated as an independent country. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, the Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence as the official announcement of their departure from England.

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> in Philadelphia, the Declaration of Independence was signed by most of the members of Congress. Some members were not there, and the document traveled across the country, gathering the remaining signatures. In all, fifty-six delegates signed.

The Declaration of Independence is considered the first and one of the most important documents in U.S. history. It is an important symbol of liberty. It defines the hopes of a new country.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer the questions about *THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE***

1. Who wrote the Declaration of Independence
  - a. George Washington
  - b. John Hancock
  - c. King George III
  - d. Thomas Jefferson
  
2. What is it famous for?
  - a. It has a secret clue on the back
  - b. It announced the United States' split from Britain
  - c. It is written in very fancy letters
  - d. It explained how much the United States paid in taxes
  
3. Where was it written?
  - a. Philadelphia
  - b. Washington, D.C.
  - c. New York
  - d. England
  
4. When was it adopted and officially announced?
  - a. July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776
  - b. August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1776
  - c. June 1776
  - d. May 1775
  
5. Why is it considered as a symbol of America?
  - a. Because it is was signed by 56 famous people
  - b. Because it is in the National Archives
  - c. Because it was the first American document
  - d. Because it was well written

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Answers to *THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE***

1. d
2. b
3. a
4. a
5. c