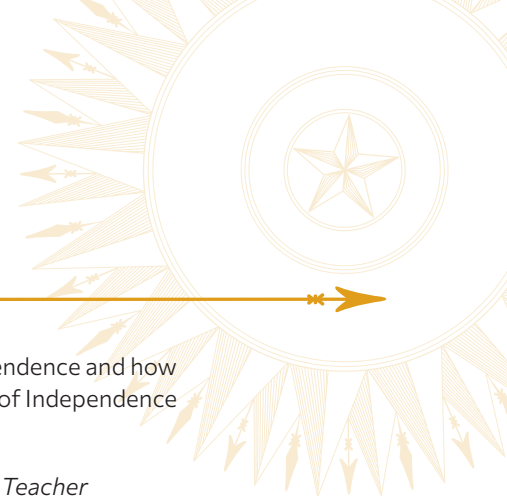


THE DECLARATION IN ITS TIME



The purpose of this unit is to introduce students to the creation of the Declaration of Independence and how it spread. Students will examine the ideas that helped create the wording of the Declaration of Independence and explore how the Declaration was shared across the colonies and the world.

All activities and resources are available online on the Museum of the American Revolution's Teacher Resource Guides page.

MATERIALS

Primary Sources

Big Idea 1: Dunlap's copy of the Declaration of Independence (U.K. National Archives) Art Card A

Document: Matlack's copy of the Declaration of Independence (National Archives and Records Administration) Art Card B

Document: Goddard's copy of the Declaration of Independence (Private Collection) Art Card C

Document: Thomas Jefferson's Final Public Letter (Library of Congress)
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.15300100/>

Document: Broadside of the Declaration of Independence in German (Gettysburg College Special Collections)
<https://gettdigital.gettysburg.edu/Documents/Detail/declaration-of-independence-translated-into-german-published-in-philadelphia-1776/107173>

Painting: *American Commissioners of the Preliminary Peace Negotiations with Great Britain* by Benjamin West (Winterthur)
<http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/imutest/imu.php?port=40138&request=multimedia&irn=134905>

Painting: Benjamin Franklin in a Fur Cap by John Trumbull (Yale University Art Gallery)
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/51661>

Painting: Benjamin Franklin by David Martin (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts)
<https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/benjamin-franklin>

Transcript: Declaration of Independence

Selection of Congress's primary sources (see Sum of Parts)

AIMS/OBJECTIVES

The modular activities and extensions in this unit provide opportunities for students to:

- Examine the documents, conversations, and events that influenced the creation and changes in the wording of the Declaration of Independence.
- Understand the significance of the widespread transmission of the Declaration of Independence, both domestically and internationally.
- Explore how the Declaration of Independence's reputation and influence changed in its first few decades.
- Explore the variety of American reactions to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence during the Revolutionary War and its immediate aftermath.

Other Sources

Big Idea 1: The Declaration in its Time

Revolution Around the World
<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/revolution-around-the-world>

Virtual Museum Tour
<https://museumvirtualltour.org/>

Handout: A Newsworthy Declaration

Handout: Unfinished Painting

Worksheet: Looking Back: The Declaration's Legacy

Worksheet: Promise of the Declaration

A virtual version of this exhibit will appear online in January 2026.

PROCEDURES

Engagement Activities

These activities can be used as hook activities, introductions to concepts, or shorter lessons.

A Newsworthy Declaration

Objective: Understand the significance of the widespread transmission of the Declaration of Independence, both domestically and internationally.

Time: 15-20 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare copies of a blank map of Europe and the handout *A Newsworthy Declaration*. Students should have access to coloring supplies.

Teacher Note: This activity begins with a discussion about the line “To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.” This line can be found at the end of the Preamble just before the list of grievances. The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence is its second paragraph.

Teacher Note: The handout focuses on the spread of news across European newspapers during 1776. Countries and colonies outside of Europe began receiving word of the Declaration soon after its adoption. Newspapers were the primary means of transmission. However, in some countries and colonies it did not appear in newspapers for many years. Part of this was due to a lack of public newspapers in 1776, like in the Ottoman Empire, India, and parts of Africa. Another factor was restrictions placed on the press, like in France and Spanish America.

Have a class discussion around the following line of the Declaration of Independence:

“To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.”

Possible questions to guide discussion:

- What does the Declaration of Independence mean by “a candid world?”
The term can be interpreted as meaning an unbiased world willing to listen to facts.
- Who was the intended audience of the Declaration of Independence?
Answers may vary. The Declaration of Independence was originally intended for a global audience, particularly European countries who might be persuaded to be allies against the British or be future trade partners with the new United States. However, people in the United States embraced the promises within the Declaration. Later, other countries would use the Declaration as inspiration for their own independence movements.
- Why might the U.S. wish to address a global audience?
Suggested answers: To justify their separating from Great Britain to other countries; to convince some of

those countries to stay out of the fight or ally with the United States; to establish future trade partners, etc.

Explain that almost immediately after July 4th, news and copies of the Declaration of Independence spread. Provide students with a map and handout. Then tell students they will be using the information on the handout to create a map of the Declaration’s journey through European newspapers in the months following July 1776. As a digital alternative, you may wish to have students use the information from the handout to place colored markers on a Google Map.

You may wish to discuss the role of geography in the spread of the news of the Declaration of Independence as a wrap up.

EXTEND: Use the Revolution Around the World articles to have students explore how different countries were involved in or impacted by the American Revolution.

EXTEND: Have students read through the section Spreading the Word in Big Idea 1 to explore how the news of the Declaration spread.

Spot the Difference

Objective: Explore how the Declaration of Independence’s reputation and influence changed over time.

Time: 15-20 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare to project, display, or provide copies of the Dunlap, Matlack, and Goddard versions of the Declaration of Independence.

Explain to students that the Declaration of Independence went through some changes even after July 4. Allow them to explore the three versions of the Declaration of Independence provided and have them ‘spot the differences’ between them.

Give students time to share their findings. Then, have a discussion around the following questions:

- Why do you think one is handwritten and the others aren’t?
Student answers may vary. Congress ordered an engrossed, or handwritten version, of the Declaration of Independence on July 19, 1776. Their plan was to have the delegates sign this version of the Declaration. The others were printed to spread the word around the colonies.
- Which one do you think was created first and which ones were made later? What makes you say that?
The Dunlap broadside is the oldest version in this set, while the Goddard broadside is the youngest. Students

may point out that Dunlap's version does not have the signers and does not say "unanimous" like the Declaration they are used to. Students may also point out the January 18, 1777 date on the Goddard broadside.

- Why might there have been changes over the six months between Dunlap's broadside and Goddard's broadside? Student answers may vary. One change is the addition of the signatures, which largely took place between July 1776 and January 1777, because the signers were not all in the same room at the same time. Dunlap's version was printed July 4, 1776, before any of the delegates had signed it. The only names in that version are John Hancock and the secretary of Congress. Most of the signers signed the engrossed copy on August 2, 1776. Historians are unclear when the last signature, that of Thomas McKean, was added, but they believe it was between 1777 and 1781. Another change was the use of the word "unanimous" in the title. New York delegates did not approve the Declaration of Independence until July 19, 1776, when they received permission from the New York government to vote in favor of it.

Development Activities

These activities are suitable for diving deeper into a particular concept and can be used for an entire class period.

Looking Back: The Declaration's Legacy

Objective: Explore how the Declaration of Independence's reputation and influence changed over time.

Time: 40-50 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare copies of Thomas Jefferson's final public letter for students.

Teacher Note: For many years the Declaration of Independence was largely forgotten by the American public. It made a brief appearance in the 1790s as a part of the partisan warfare between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. However, it was only after the War of 1812, during the so-called Era of Good Feelings, that the Declaration became revered as "American scripture" alongside the Constitution.

Have students read and annotate Thomas Jefferson's final public letter. You may choose to have students do this for homework. Then discuss the following questions:

- What is the "instrument pregnant with our own, and the fate of the world?" Why do you think Jefferson describes it as such?
The Declaration of Independence; Student answers may vary. They may mention that the Declaration was being celebrated for the first time since the Revolution when

Jefferson wrote the letter in 1824; that other countries, like France and Haiti, used the Declaration as inspiration; that Americans used the Declaration to challenge each other and the government in support their rights; etc. They may also connect it to the present day and how people still reference the Declaration.

- Jefferson describes the Continental Congress as "between submission and sword." What was happening in 1776 that might have caused Jefferson to use this phrase?
Possible answers may include things like:
 - Given the growing conflict, Continental Congress may have felt their only options were war or surrender.
 - Great Britain was trying to force the colonists to stop fighting.
 - The Continental Congress was in the middle of an ongoing war.
 - There was a possibility that the signers of the Declaration might lose their lives if they lost the war.
- What reason does Jefferson give for not attending the event he references in his letter? What words or phrases in the letter tell you that? What does he send in his stead?
Jefferson mentions "sufferings of sickness" and "ill health" in the letter. At the end of the letter, he notes that he sends the community his "highest respect and friendly attachment."

Provide students with the worksheet Looking Back: The Declaration's Legacy. Have students analyze each section and write a summary for them in their own words. To use less time, split students into groups and assign each group one of the sections. Discuss their responses as a class.

Once the students are finished, discuss the following question as a class: what do these sections tell you about how Thomas Jefferson views the Declaration of Independence?

Ask the students how the Declaration of Independence is celebrated or remembered today. Explain to students the reputation of the Declaration of Independence in the first fifty years of the United States. Discuss with the students why the War of 1812 might have helped revitalize the importance of the Declaration of Independence. You may wish to point out the surge in national pride within the United States after their second war against the British.

To wrap up, tell students that a version of the letter was published as a broadside. Why might the mayor of Washington, D.C. have published Jefferson's letter for the public? You may wish to show them the actual broadside using the [virtual tour The Declaration's Journey](#) when it becomes available in January 2026.

EXTEND: Explore John Adams’s opinions on the Declaration of Independence and compare them to how Jefferson describes it. The letter to [Abigail Adams on July 3, 1776](#) has a similar tone of hope and praise of the Declaration that Jefferson has in 1824. Adams’s letter to [Thomas Pickering on August 6, 1822](#), however, includes more critiques of Jefferson and the wording of the Declaration.

Promise of the Declaration

Objective: Explore the variety of American reactions to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence during the Revolutionary War and its immediate aftermath.

Time: 30-40 minutes, plus homework

Teacher Preparation: Prepare copies of the worksheet *Promise of the Declaration* for each student. Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access the [Virtual Museum Tour](#). You may also wish to prepare copies of *Big Idea 1: The Declaration in its Time* or have a way for students to access it online.

Explain to students that the colonies were full of different people with different life experiences and different perspectives on both the Revolutionary War and the Declaration of Independence. Have them read the section *Reactions* in *Big Idea 1* for homework.

Give each student a copy of the worksheet *Promise of the Declaration* and have students access the Virtual Museum Tour on their devices. Tell them they will be using the virtual tour to complete the worksheet. Guide them to:

- The subsection *Promise of Equality*, under *Becoming Revolutionaries*. Have them turn the view around so they can see the wall labelled *Promise of Equality*. They can investigate the following individuals along the wall: Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Freeman, and William Findley.

Tell students to use the three people showcased on this wall to answer the following questions on the worksheet:

- Based on the display, what do you think this person thought about the Declaration of Independence?
- Based on the display, do you think this person thought the United States fulfilled the promises of the Declaration of Independence? What makes you say that?

Conclude by discussing student findings and how these three people may have felt about the promise of the Declaration based on their findings. Remind students that Adams, Freeman, and Findley were only three people in a new country that was filled with people from different backgrounds and experiences. Ask students to

cite information from the Big Idea that show different perspectives or feelings about the Declaration that may have existed in the new United States.

EXTEND: Have students investigate the rest of the virtual tour to find other people’s perspectives. Additional perspectives can also be found within the digital interactives [Finding Freedom](#) and [Season of Independence](#), the online exhibit [When Women Lost the Vote](#), and the virtual tour [Black Founders](#).

EXTEND: Have students further research the lives of Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Freeman, and William Findley to deepen their understanding of these historical figures’ relationships and reactions to the Declaration of Independence.

How Word Spreads | Then & Now

Objective: Understand the significance of the widespread transmission of the Declaration of Independence, both domestically and internationally.

Compare the transmission of news between the 18th century and the present day.

Time: 30-35 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: The Declaration in its Time*. Print enough copies of *Big Idea 1* or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access it online. Ensure students have access to paper to write on. You may wish to provide student groups with large chart paper and markers.

Have students read the *Spreading the Word* section of *Big Idea 1: The Declaration in its Time*.

Instruct students, individually or in small groups, to create a T-chart on a piece of computer paper, in their notebooks, or on a large chart paper. On one side of the T-chart, have students write *Revolutionary Era* and on the other write *Today*. Tell them that they will be comparing how news spread during the Revolutionary War and today.

Have them fill out the *Revolutionary Era* column using the information they read in *Big Idea 1*. They should make note of any way news was communicated during the Revolutionary War. Then have them complete the *Today* column with ways that news spreads today. You may also wish to complete this as a class.

Conclude with a discussion about how the transmission of information (methods and speed) impacts people’s lives both in the past and today.

Translation Declarations

Objective: Understand the significance of the widespread transmission of the Declaration of Independence, both domestically and internationally.

Time: 40-50 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare to project or display the Broadside of the Declaration of Independence in German.

Project the image of the Broadside of the Declaration of Independence in German. Have students examine the image of the document and ask them to share any observations they make. If students are struggling, use the following questions to help guide them:

- Is this document in English? What language do you think it is in?
- Are there any words or phrases you recognize?
- Is this handwritten or typed? How can you tell?
- What type of document do you think this is?
This is a broadside. Broadside were commonly put up on the walls of buildings like a poster to help spread news.

Explain that this is a German translation of the Declaration of Independence, printed by ted by Melchior Steiner and Charles Cist. The first German translation of the Declaration of Independence was by Henrich Miller on July 9, 1776. By the time he was asked to print the Declaration, Miller already had a few years of experience translating and printing Congressional documents. Ask students why it may have been decided to print the Declaration of Independence in German.

- Explain that Pennsylvania, including the area in and around Philadelphia, had a large German-speaking population. Miller was likely chosen due to his translation experience and ownership of a German newspaper.

Explain that the Declaration of Independence was also translated into French, which was considered a universal language within Europe, and from there into other languages in the months after July 1776. Why might people have decided to translate the document that quickly? Why is the Declaration of Independence translated into other languages today?

Conclude by having a discussion about which languages would have been most useful for people who lived in your area during the 1770s and which ones would be most useful for your local community today.

EXTEND: Have your students create a booklet or trifold that has an excerpt of the Declaration of Independence in at least three different languages.

Culmination Activities, Research Projects, and Group Projects

Write Together Group Activity

Objective: Examine the documents, conversations, and events that influenced the creation and changes in the wording of the Declaration.

Time: 1 day (50-minute class)

Teacher Preparation: Divide students into groups of 4-5. Prepare the prompt below to be displayed or projected.

Explain to students that they have been chosen to rewrite the Declaration of Independence. Their new version should include their reasons for declaring independence, an introduction, and a conclusion. Remind students that they should not be copying the existing Declaration, but creating a new one based on similar or brand-new ideas. This means famous lines should not be included in their new declaration. Tell students they will work for 15-20 minutes before the class pauses for a discussion.

As students work, walk around and see how the groups approach the challenge. Keep note of your observations for the discussion.

After 15-20 minutes, have students pause their work for a group discussion around the following questions:

- Is writing as a group more or less difficult than writing alone? What are your reasons?
- What challenges or problems emerged at the start of this task?
Student responses may include: how to start, what should be included, how to divide the work, who should do what part, etc.
- What solutions did you come up with?
If students are reluctant to respond, use your own observations to point out how different groups handled things.
- How did you feel during and at the end of the process?
Allow students to share their experiences and work and express their feelings.

Have students read the Road to Declaration of Big Idea 1: The Declaration in its Time.

Afterwards, explain to students that the Committee of Five was given instructions to draft a Declaration of Independence that outlined the reasons for the colonies' separation from Great Britain. After that, the committee was left on their own to produce results in less than three weeks. Several members of the Committee of Five were also on other committees. How do you think the committee members may have felt about this assignment?

To wrap up, have a discussion comparing the students' experience with that of the Committee of Five. Use the following questions to help lead this discussion:

- What instructions would have been helpful before beginning draft their declaration?
For example, students may wish for an outline or example to start with or that each person had been assigned a role ahead of time.
- Did they designate anyone to write their group's proposal. If so, why did they choose that person? If not, how did their group write instead?
- What responsibilities did a single person have? Which responsibilities were shared?
- What did their experience writing their own declaration teach them about the challenges and opportunities the Committee of Five had when drafting the actual Declaration of Independence?

EXTEND: Have students research the instructions the Committee of Five actually received from Congress for drafting a declaration of independence and what members of the committee said about their work drafting the document afterwards.

Sum of Its Parts Group Jigsaw Activity

Objective: Examine the documents, conversations, and events that influenced the creation and changes in the wording of the Declaration.

Time: 1-2 days (50-minute classes)

Teacher Preparations: Prepare enough copies of the Declaration of Independence so each group has at least one copy. You may wish to laminate them to let students reuse them. Prepare enough copies of the following documents so each group member gets one:

- Group 1: [Article of Association \(1774\)](#)
- Group 2: [Declaration of Rights and Grievances \(1774\)](#)
- Group 3: [Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms \(1775\)](#)
- Group 4: [Virginia Declaration of Rights \(1776\)](#); [Samuel Adams's Rights of Colonists \(1772\)](#); and [Richard Henry Lee's Resolution for Independence \(1776\)](#)

Teacher Note: Group 4 has three shorter documents in comparison to the other groups which have longer documents. Samuel Adams's *Natural Rights of Colonists as Men* is a part of his longer work *The Rights of the Colonists*.

Divide students into four groups and give each group one of the documents or a set of documents. Have students annotate their document by focusing on the question: which words, phrases, or ideas remind you of the Declaration? Some annotation examples may be to highlight matching phrases and circle connected/similar ideas.

Have students present their findings. Then discuss the following questions:

- What does this tell you about the writing process?
Answer: The writers, Jefferson included, may have been inspired by the same documents, conversations, or ideas and may have also used them as references.
- How is it similar (or different) from your own writing process?
Students may answer that they also use other sources to write — particularly informative or argumentative writing.
- Are you familiar with other examples of authors being inspired by other authors?
Connect to writers inspired by other authors. Many fantasy writers, for example, have been inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, other writers were inspired by or mimicked stories from Shakespeare, folktales, or myths. You may wish to check and see if any recent movies, books, or tv shows were inspired by classics.

Share with the students that though historians have identified many similarities between the Declaration of Independence and earlier documents, Thomas Jefferson was adamant later in life that he did not use any references while he was writing the Declaration of Independence:

"...whether I had gathered my ideas from reading or reflection I do not know. I know only that I turned to neither book nor pamphlet when writing it. I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether & to offer no sentiment which has ever been expressed before." - Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 30 Aug 1823

So why are the ideas so similar?

Some answers may include:

- He was already familiar with these documents — education during that time involved a lot of memorization and likely had the ideas memorized and didn't notice he was using similar wording.
- Discussions had already been happening writ large.
- In the 1770s, less weight was placed on originality in writing and those who could repackage existing ideas were celebrated for their ability to do so.
- Some students may say he lied. While possible, for sake of discussion let's take Jefferson at his word.

DIFFERENTIATION: Have students only read the shorter documents from the Group 4 set. Divide the Virginia Declaration of Rights and Sam Adams's *Natural Rights of Colonists as Men* into shorter segments to match the length of Lee's Resolution for Independence.

Extention Activities

Unfinished Painting

Objective: Explore the variety of American reactions to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence during the Revolutionary War and its immediate aftermath.

Time: 15-20 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare to project or display images of the painting *American Commissioners of the Preliminary Peace Negotiations with Great Britain* by Benjamin West. Print enough copies of the worksheet *Unfinished Painting* or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access it online.

Project or display the painting and have students examine the image. What do they notice? Do they recognize anyone? Note the figures left to right are John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin.

Explain to students that this painting celebrates the initial peace negotiations before the Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the Revolutionary War. The American victory cemented the United States' independence on the world stage, but there were many reactions at home.

Provide students with the handout *Unfinished Painting*. It contains quotes from people living in the 13 colonies during and after the Revolutionary War and how they felt about the war, the Declaration of Independence, or the United States after the war. Give the students a few minutes to examine the quotes.

Give each student a copy of the painting and invite them to decorate the unfinished part with images based on these quotes or some of these quotes.

EXTEND: Though this painting was a part of an unfinished series about the American Revolution, West completed several other paintings about the time period. Have students explore other paintings by Benjamin West.

EXTEND: Have students research other people's reactions to the successful achievement of American independence.

Ben Franklin's Cap

Objective: Understand the significance of the widespread transmission of the Declaration of Independence, both domestically and internationally.

Time: 5-10 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare to project or display the two portraits of Benjamin Franklin by John Trumbull and David Martin.

Teacher Note: By the time of the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin was a well renowned celebrity as a scientist, politician, spokesman, and Enlightenment thinker. Due to this, the Continental Congress chose him to be the diplomat to France in 1776. As a diplomat, Franklin had the vital job of convincing France to join the United States in the war against Great Britain.

First display the portrait by John Trumbull and have students examine the image. Ask: What is Benjamin Franklin wearing? Explain to students that Benjamin Franklin wore a fur cap during his diplomatic mission to France to promote the American cause and the Declaration of Independence. Have students compare the Trumbull portrait with an older portrait by David Martin. Ask: why might Franklin have changed his dress to the new style in France?

Explain that the fur cap was a quintessentially American garment due to the fur trapping industry in North America. Connect to students wearing jerseys or t-shirts supporting a team, band, or famous person. Explain that Franklin may also have chosen a plainer manner of dress to evoke the Enlightenment idea of equality from the Declaration of Independence.

EXTEND: Have a discussion on the importance of international support during the Revolutionary War.