

Student Activity Sheet: Investigating the Declaration of Independence

Initial Examination

1. Write down key points and things you notice about the document.

2. Write down any questions that come to mind as you look at the document.

3. Is the document easy to read? What is different about the text, font and spelling of the words in the document?

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Part I – Preamble:

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Questions:

1. According to this paragraph what is the goal of the writers?

2. Why are they writing this document?

3. Make a prediction of what will come next in the document based on what you have read in the "Preamble."

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Part II – Beliefs:

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. ...The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

Questions:

1. What rights are the writers claiming that they have?

2. According to this paragraph, what is the purpose of the government?

Part III – Complaints

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

1. ***He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.***

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

1. ***He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.***

1. ***He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.***

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

2. ***He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.***

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

2. ***He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.***

2. ***He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.***

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

3. ***For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:***

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

3. ***For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:***

3. ***For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:***

4. ***For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:***

4. ***For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences.***

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

4. ***For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:***

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate

for us in all cases whatsoever.

5. He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

5. He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

5. He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

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Grievances: Group 1

Directions:

1. Read the complaints assigned to your group.
2. Discuss each complaint with your group, and then answer the questions below.
3. Select recorder, readers (2-3), and a presenter.
A recorder writes up the notes from the group discussion and hands them to the presenter. (Group should discuss notes before being presented.)
The readers read the original complaints aloud to the class.
The presenter will read the groups responses to the class.
All members of the group will participate and give their ideas as the group discusses the complaints.

To Prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

Questions:

1. What is each complaint about? Write a brief description of each complaint in your own words.

2. Who is “He” that the colonists refer to in the grievances?

3. Who are the colonists blaming for their grievances? Why do you think they are blaming him?

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Grievances: Group 2

Directions:

1. Read the complaints assigned to your group.
 2. Discuss each complaint with your group, and then answer the questions below.
 3. Select recorder, readers (2-3), and a presenter.
- A recorder writes up the notes from the group discussion and hands them to the presenter. (Group should discuss notes before being presented.)
The readers read the original complaints aloud to the class.
The presenter will read the groups responses to the class.
All members of the group will participate and give their ideas as the group discusses the complaints.

To Prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

Questions:

1. What is each complaint about? Write a brief description of each complaint in your own words.

2. Who is “He” that the colonists refer to in the grievances?

3. Who are the colonists blaming for their grievances? Why do you think they are blaming him?

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Grievances: Group 3

Directions:

1. Read the complaints assigned to your group.
2. Discuss each complaint with your group, and then answer the questions below.
3. Select recorder, readers (2-3), and a presenter.
A recorder writes up the notes from the group discussion and hands them to the presenter.
(Group should discuss notes before being presented.)
The readers read the original complaints aloud to the class.
The presenter will read the groups responses to the class.
All members of the group will participate and give their ideas as the group discusses the complaints.

To Prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has combined with others to subject us...to their Acts of pretended legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our consent:

Questions:

1. What is each complaint about? Write a brief description of each complaint in your own words.

2. Who is “He” that the colonists refer to in the grievances?

3. Who are the colonists blaming for their grievances? Why do you think they are blaming him?

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Grievances: Group 4

Directions:

1. Read the complaints assigned to your group.
 2. Discuss each complaint with your group, and then answer the questions below.
 3. Select recorder, readers (2-3), and a presenter.
- A recorder writes up the notes from the group discussion and hands them to the presenter. (Group should discuss notes before being presented.)
The readers read the original complaints aloud to the class.
The presenter will read the groups responses to the class.
All members of the group will participate and give their ideas as the group discusses the complaints.

To Prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has combined with others to subject us...to their Acts of pretended legislation:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

Questions:

1. What is each complaint about? Write a brief description of each complaint in your own words.

2. Who is "He" that the colonists refer to in the grievances?

3. Who are the colonists blaming for their grievances? Why do you think they are blaming him?

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Grievances: Group 5

Directions:

1. Read the complaints assigned to your group.
2. Discuss each complaint with your group, and then answer the questions below.
3. Select recorder, readers (2-3), and a presenter.
A recorder writes up the notes from the group discussion and hands them to the presenter. (Group should discuss notes before being presented.)
The readers read the original complaints aloud to the class.
The presenter will read the groups responses to the class.
All members of the group will participate and give their ideas as the group discusses the complaints.

To Prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He has excited domestic insurrection amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

Questions:

1. What is each complaint about? Write a brief description of each complaint in your own words.

2. Who is “He” that the colonists refer to in the grievances?

3. Who are the colonists blaming for their grievances? Why do you think they are blaming him?

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Part IV – Attempts to Address Grievances

In every stage of these Oppressions, We have petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

Questions:

How did the colonists try to address these grievances earlier?

Why did they feel it was necessary to state this in the Declaration?

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Part V – Declaring Independence

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. 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.

Questions:

What words from this paragraph actually declare the colonists' independence?

What rights and powers do they state that they now have?

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Part VI – The Signatures:

There were 56 signatures on the Declaration.

Column 1

Georgia:

Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton

Column 2

North Carolina:

William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn

South Carolina:

Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton

Column 3

Massachusetts:

John Hancock

Maryland:

Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton

Virginia:

George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton

Column 4

Pennsylvania:

Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer

James Smith

George Taylor

James Wilson

George Ross

Delaware:

Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean

Column 5

New York:

William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris

New Jersey:

Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark

Column 6

New Hampshire:

Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple

Massachusetts:

Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island:

Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery

Connecticut:

Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott

New Hampshire:

Matthew Thornton

Questions:

Which names on the list of signatures do you recognize? Circle the names that you recognize.

Would you have signed the document? Why or why not?

What might have happened if the Americans had lost the war against Britain?

What were the risks associated with writing and signing the document?
