

**The Declaration of Independence & Enlightenment Ideals  
Primary Source Analysis Activity**

**Grade Level:** 7-12

**Subject:** Civics, U.S. History

**Time Required:** One 60-minute class period

**Objectives:** Students will be able to analyze key excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and examine the Enlightenment principles behind the document.

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**Lesson Plan:**

**Part 1: Bell Ringer** (5-10 minutes)

**Write-Pair-Share:** Ask students to write an individual response to the prompt:  
*What makes a government legitimate? When, if ever, do the people have the right to break away from it?*

Ask students to share with each other and have some student pairs share out.

**Part 2: Setting the Stage** (15 minutes)

Ask students: *What do you already know about the Declaration of Independence?*  
*What are some examples of Enlightenment principles?*

- The Declaration of Independence showcases many democratic ideals
  - Democratic ideals - ideas at the heart of the United States government
- Many of these ideals came from Enlightenment thinker John Locke. For example:
  - Natural rights (Liberty and Equality)
  - Popular sovereignty
  - Social contract
  - Limited government
- Adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776
  - Written by a committee, but Thomas Jefferson was the main author
  - Jefferson was chosen to write the first draft, but the committee and Congress edited before adopting
- There are 3 main parts of the Declaration:
  - American creed (*what I want in a partner*)



- Grievances/complaints about the King (*all the terrible things you've done*)
- Announcement and justification of revolution (*we're breaking up*)

**Part 3: Primary Source Analysis Activity** (30 minutes)

- Declaration of Independence and Enlightenment Ideals (Attached)

**Part 4: Discussion and Reflection** (15 minutes)

In small groups, or as a class, discuss:

- What was the main argument or claim in the Declaration of Independence?
- What evidence is supplied by the author to support the claim?
- How present are Enlightenment ideals in the Declaration of Independence?
- In what way(s) are Jefferson and Locke different?

**Part 5: Assessment**

Students complete a web graphic organizer connecting democratic ideals in the Declaration of Independence to those of Enlightenment thinkers, like Locke, using textual evidence.



Name \_\_\_\_\_

### The Declaration of Independence & Enlightenment Ideals

**Objective:** Analyze key excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and examine the Enlightenment principles behind the document.

**Write-Pair-Share:** What makes a government legitimate? When, if ever, do the people have the right to break away from it?

**Setting the Stage:** What do you already know about the Declaration of Independence? What are some examples of Enlightenment principles?



## Primary Source Analysis – The Declaration of Independence, 1776

Text Excerpt	Analysis Questions
<p><b><i>The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America</i></b>, <i>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.</i></p> <p>*impel - force/urge</p>	<p>Shrink the text: In your own words summarize what Jefferson was saying here.</p> <p>What is the purpose of this section?</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p> <p>*self-evident - obvious without proof or reasoning *unalienable - incapable of being given up</p>	<p>Which Enlightenment (Locke) ideals are represented in this excerpt?</p> <p>Underline or highlight the evidence that supports your answer above.</p> <p>Compare what Jefferson says with Locke's ideas of natural rights.</p>



<p><i>That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted* among Men, deriving* their just powers from the consent* of the governed,*</i></p> <p>*instituted - set up; established  *deriving - receiving  *consent - approval; authorization  *governed - those who are ruled in a society; citizens</p>	<p>Where does Jefferson argue the government gets their power from?</p> <p>What does that mean in your own words?</p> <p>What Enlightenment (Locke) ideal is this excerpt most connected to?</p>
<p><i>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. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.</i></p> <p>*abolish - get rid of  *institute - set up; establish</p>	<p>What is the purpose of this excerpt?</p> <p>According to the author, why are the colonies justified in their decision to separate?</p>

<p><i>He (the British King) has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.</i></p> <p><i>He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone...</i></p> <p><i>He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.</i></p> <p><i>For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:</i></p> <p><i>For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury...</i></p>	<p>What is the purpose of this excerpt?</p> <p>Describe how the list of grievances (complaints) about the King supports Jefferson's earlier claim about the nature and purpose of government.</p>
<p><i>We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, ... 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. . .</i></p> <p>*absolved - set free</p>	<p>Summarize Jefferson's main point in your own words:</p>

### Questions:

What is Jefferson's claim or argument?

What are two pieces of evidence Jefferson uses to support his claim?

1)

2)

