

The Declaration of Independence: Draft vs. Final Version
Primary Source Analysis Activity

Grade Level: 7-12

Subjects: U.S. History, Civics

Time Required: One 60-minute class period

Objective: Students will be able to analyze differences between Jefferson's draft and the final approved Declaration of Independence to understand how language, politics, and compromise shaped America's founding document.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm Up Activity (5-10 minutes)

Ask students to conduct a **Write-Pair-Share Activity** on the following scenario: Imagine a friend asks to borrow your notes from class, but they never give them back. Write TWO text messages to the friend:

- One that is more emotional or focused on being persuasive
- One more formal or focused on legal ramifications

Draw the connection with Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence vs. the final edits as an attempt to balance being persuasive with legal authority and legitimacy.

Part 2: Setting the Stage (15 minutes)

- The Declaration of Independence showcases many democratic ideals
 - Democratic ideals - ideas at the heart of the United States government
 - Natural rights
 - Liberty
 - 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; 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 (time varies)

- Provide students with selected parallel excerpts (see [Student Handout](#))
- You may choose to have students look at all of the excerpt pairs, or you may choose to break students up into groups and have each group take a different set of questions and have groups share out with the class to lighten the load.

Part 4: Discussion and Reflection (15 minutes)

As a class, ask students to reflect on and discuss any (or all) of the following questions:

1. What do these edits suggest about the Declaration's dual role as both a practical political document and a symbolic statement of values?
2. What do the changes between the draft and final version suggest about the value of precise language in founding documents?
3. If the draft version had been kept, how might the meaning or interpretation of the Declaration differ today?

When possible, have students point to examples in the text to support their answers.

Part 5: Assessment

Students choose one change between Jefferson's draft and the final approved Declaration of Independence and complete the following:

- Identify and summarize the difference
- Describe why they think the Continental Congress made the change
- Explain how the edit shaped the meaning or tone of the Declaration of Independence



Founding Civics

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name _____

The Declaration of Independence: Draft vs. Final Version

Objective: I will be able to analyze differences between Jefferson's draft and the final approved Declaration of Independence to understand how language, politics, and compromise shaped America's founding document.

Draft Version Excerpt	Final Version Excerpt
When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained, & to assume among the powers of the earth the equal & independent station to which the laws of nature & 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 change.	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.
Analysis Questions	
1. How does the phrase "advance from that subordination" differ in tone and meaning from "dissolve the political bands?"	
2. Both versions include "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." Why might this phrase be important in 1776?	



Draft Version Excerpt	Final Version Excerpt
<p>the history of his present majesty, is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations, among which no one fact stands single or solitary to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, all of which have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.</p>	<p>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. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.</p>
Analysis Questions	
<p>5. How does "unremitting injuries and usurpations" differ in tone from "repeated injuries and usurpations?"</p> <p>6. What might the changes in this excerpt reveal about how the Continental Congress wanted to balance passion with reason?</p>	



Draft Version Excerpt	Final Version Excerpt
<p>he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, & murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.</p>	<p><i>[this grievance does not appear in the final declaration]</i></p>
<p>Analysis Questions</p>	
<p>7. Why do you think the Continental Congress cut this section?</p> <p>8. How might history have been different if this remained in the Declaration of Independence?</p>	

Draft Version Excerpt	Final Version Excerpt
<p>We therefore the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled do, in the name & by authority of the good people of these states, reject and renounce all allegiance & subjection to the kings of Great Britain & all others who may hereafter claim by, through, or under them; we utterly dissolve & break off all political connection which may have heretofore subsisted between us & the people or parliament of Great Britain; and finally we do assert and declare these a colonies to be free and independent states, and that as free & independent states they shall hereafter have power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, & to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, & our sacred honour.</p>	<p>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.</p>
Analysis Questions	
<p>9. How might the addition of "and of Right ought to be" strengthen the argument for independence for the states?</p> <p>10. Both versions end with a similar mutual pledge. Why is that pledge significant?</p>	