

The Declaration of Independence

Reader's Theater



A Note for the Teacher

This resource includes the following:

1. A Note for the Teacher {How-To Guide to Reader's Theaters}
2. A script (3 pages) with roles for 9 students
3. Five class discussion questions

How-To Guide to Reader's Theaters

The Declaration of Independence Reader's Theater is designed to be used in middle school and high school. It gives students the opportunity to act out the history surrounding the writing of the Declaration of Independence and is an engaging and memorable classroom activity.

The reader's theater can be performed as a review after students have learned about the document or as a way for students to teach their peers through a creative performance.

The play should take between 4-6 minutes and includes the following roles:

Narrator
John Hancock
Samuel Adams
John Adams
John Dickinson

Benjamin Franklin
Thomas Jefferson
Robert Livingston
Roger Sherman

After reading the play, I recommend that teachers hold a class discussion or use the discussion prompts in this resource as writing prompts to assess students' understanding of the Declaration of Independence.

Happy Teaching!



The Declaration of Independence

The document that founded a nation.

Scene One: The members of the Second Continental Congress have met in Philadelphia to discuss calls for independence from the citizens of their colonies.

Enter: Narrator, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, John Dickinson, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston and Roger Sherman.

Narrator: The year is 1776. For over a year, the members of the Second Continental Congress watched as the presence of British soldiers in the colonies increased and tensions boiled to a breaking point. Citizens of the colonies began demanding that the delegates discuss the idea of becoming independent of Great Britain.

John Hancock: Delegates! Delegates! Please be seated.

All delegates sit down.

John Hancock: As President of the Second Continental Congress, I would like to begin today's proceedings with the topic of declaring independence from Great Britain.

Samuel Adams: Here! Here! I completely agree. We can't let King George III and the British Parliament continue to limit our rights. Are we citizens of England or not? If we are, we should have the same rights and representation in Parliament as the people living in England. If not, then we must be independent!

John Adams: I agree!

John Dickinson: Think of the consequences, Samuel. Can our country survive if we declare independence? Will we be able to trade with other countries and defend our borders? I have my doubts!

John Hancock: What would you suggest, Mr. Dickinson?

John Dickinson: I propose we continue working with the British government to bring back the "good old days" – the life we had before the French and Indian War, these taxes and the rest of this mess. We can then be at peace once more!

Samuel Adams: The days of peace are over! We have to take action. Our citizens are demanding it. They have read Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and are ready for war, if it comes to that.

Benjamin Franklin: I agree with Samuel Adams. We have tried to find a peaceful solution. Have you forgotten the Olive Branch Petition, Mr. Dickinson?

John Dickerson: Of course not! I had to edit that petition before it even left our hands. Jefferson's language was too harsh. He practically said that war was certain!

Thomas Jefferson: Even after you edited my draft, John, the King refused to accept the Olive Branch Petition. What does that tell you? The "good old days" are over.

John Adams: We need to create a new document to send to the King. This time we will make it clear that the time for independence for the United States has arrived.

John Hancock: After much thought, the Second Continental Congress has nominated a committee of five men to draft this declaration. The task belongs to John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Thomas Jefferson and Robert Livingston. Good luck, gentlemen.

Exit all.

Scene Two: The Committee of Five meets in Philadelphia on June 11, 1776 to draft the Declaration of Independence.

Enter John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Benjamin Franklin.

John Adams: Thomas Jefferson, this committee appoints you as the leader with the responsibility of writing the draft for the declaration.

Thomas Jefferson: Why me?

Benjamin Franklin: You are a brilliant man and the youngest delegate to the Second Continental Congress. You are a talented writer and have proven that you are a leader.

Robert Livingston: Jefferson, we'll hear no more doubts from you. We have complete trust in your ability to write our nation's greatest document.

Thomas Jefferson: I will try my best.

Exit all.

Scene Three: The Committee of Five meets once again to review the draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Enter Narrator, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston and John Adams.

Narrator: Thomas Jefferson had only a few days to write the draft for the Declaration of Independence. He wrote a passionate argument with reasons why the United States should seek independence from Great Britain.

Roger Sherman: Jefferson, you made a great choice to divide the document into four parts. I especially like the Preamble where you've explained why we've created this Declaration of Independence.

Robert Livingston: I find the Declaration of Natural Rights to be the most interesting section. Your first line is powerful: "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".

Thomas Jefferson: I was inspired by the Enlightenment thinker John Locke on that last line. He said that all people have the right to life, liberty and property.

Benjamin Franklin: My favorite part of the Declaration is the third section, the List of Grievances! I especially like that you called the King a tyrant. Your list covers every complaint against King George III that I can think of – from keeping and quartering his soldiers in the colonies to forcing us to pay taxes without our permission.

John Adams: Your argument for independence is better than I could have hoped for, Thomas Jefferson. It is the last section, however, that has me moved to tears. In the Resolution of Independence by the United States, you state "we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor". We truly are "Free and Independent States" with all the powers of a nation. Thank you.

Narrator: On June 28, 1776, the Committee of Five submitted the final draft to the Second Continental Congress. On July 2nd, the Continental Congress held a vote and approved the Declaration of Independence. It was released to the colonies on July 4th, 1776 – a day we celebrate as the birth of a new nation.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think some delegates at the Second Continental Congress argued against declaring independence from Great Britain? Explain your reasoning.
2. If you had selected the Committee of Five to write the draft of the Declaration of Independence, what qualities would the members need to have?
3. What are the four parts of the Declaration of Independence? Which section do you feel is the most powerful in the argument for independence? Explain your reasoning.
4. The Declaration of Independence singles out King George III as a tyrant and blames him specifically in the List of Grievances. In your opinion, what was the purpose in doing so?
5. Imagine that you are one of the fifty six signers of the Declaration of Independence. What feelings would you have as you sign your name?

