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The Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson

Activity One—Background

The Declaration of Independence is a statement originally composed by Thomas Jefferson, then adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. It announced that the 13 American colonies, then at war with Great Britain, regarded themselves as independent states, and no longer a part of the British Empire.

Activity Two—Close Reading/Annotation of the Text

Read the Declaration of Independence printed for you below. As you read, use the questions in the right margin to guide your annotations. (Keep in mind that this document was written before the regulation of spelling and capitalization.) You will complete paragraphs 1-2 as a class. Your teacher will assign your group additional paragraphs to annotate.

<p>[1] IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.</p> <p>The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Why would it be important for the decision to separate from Britain to be <i>unanimous</i>?</p> <p>Paragraph 1 provides the reason <i>why</i> the document was written. What is the purpose of this declaration?</p>
<p>[2] 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</p>	<p>Jefferson notes that "all men are created equal," suggesting that this was "self-evident." What is meant by that statement?</p> <p>How has this idea been supported or challenged throughout history?</p>

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<p>principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--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. 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>	<p>What, according to Jefferson, is the duty of the colonists?</p> <p>What has Britain done?</p> <p>What words that show how the colonists feel about Britain and the king.</p>
<p>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, 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. He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual,</p>	<p>Who is "he"?</p> <p>What has the king done, according to Jefferson?</p>

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<p>uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures....</p> <p>[4] He has endeavoured 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....</p>	
<p>[5] 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....</p> <p>For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:</p> <p>For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:</p>	<p>Summarize the two grievances or issues that Jefferson has with the king in this section.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.
<p>[6] For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:</p> <p>For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:</p> <p>For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:</p> <p>For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences</p> <p>For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so</p>	<p>Summarize the grievances or issues that Jefferson has with the king in this section.</p>

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<p>as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:....</p>	
<p>[11] 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.</p>	<p>According to Jefferson, what have the colonists attempted in the past?</p>
<p>[13] 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, <u>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;</u> 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>	<p>Read the underlined statement. What is Jefferson saying?</p> <p>What rights does Jefferson claim that the colonies now possess?</p>

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Activity Three—Express Understanding

Examine the grievances that Jefferson lists as reasons that the king has violated the natural rights of the colonists. Select **one** grievance that you consider the most significant violation that supports Jefferson's claim that the colonists should declare independence from Britain. Explain why this grievance seems so important and how it conflicts with the idea of natural rights. You'll be discussing this, along with the paragraphs you were assigned, in small groups.