

SCoPE Site Lesson Plan

Title: Lesson 1 - How the Declaration of Independence Influenced the Creation of the Constitution (SS080101)

Abstract

In this lesson students analyze the *Declaration of Independence* to identify the causes of the American Revolution. They begin the lesson by imagining what life would be like without government. After learning about the social contract theory of government and natural rights philosophy, they explore the *Declaration of Independence* to find evidence of these philosophical beliefs. Students use prior knowledge about the Revolutionary War to draw conclusions as to why Americans were weary of a strong central government. Students also explore the concepts of limited government and popular sovereignty as they relate to the causes of the Revolutionary War. The lesson concludes with students writing a reflective narrative in their student journals.

Subject Area: Social Studies

Grade Level and Course Title: Eighth Grade/Nineteenth Century American History

Unit of Study: The United States Constitution as a Living Document

Benchmark

- Describe philosophical beliefs that influenced the creation of the United States Constitution and explain how they set the foundation for civic life, politics, and government in the United States (I.1.MS.2, III.2.MS.1).

Key Concepts

limited government
popular sovereignty

Instructional Resources

Equipment/Manipulative
Student journals

Student Resource

Lesson 1: Why Do We Need a Government? The Center for Civic Education. 14 Nov. 2006
<http://www.civiced.org/wtp_ms01_sb.php>.

Teacher Resource

Brenneman, Kerri. "Declaration of Independence: Student Worksheet." [Supplemental Materials \(SS080101.doc\)](#). Teacher-made material. Waterford, MI: Oakland Schools, 2007.

Cababe, Louise, Ed. *U.S. History: Beginnings to 1876*. Rocky River, OH: The Center for Learning, 1997. 55, 61-62, 73-76.

The Declaration of Independence. The Library of Congress. 7 Mar. 2006. 14 Nov. 2006
<<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DeclarInd.html>>.

Sequence of Activities

1. Begin the lesson by posing the following questions to the class: What would life be like if there were no government or laws that regulated the behavior of people? What if people could do whatever they pleased? Ask the class to imagine what life would be like if such a situation existed. It may be helpful to divide the class into small groups of four or five students each to examine this situation. After several minutes, have the groups report their discussions to the class.
2. Explain to students that many years ago, philosophers examined this same question. They called this situation “a state of nature.” John Locke, a natural rights philosopher from England, hypothesized that in a state of nature, the strong would take advantage of the weak. The weak would group or band together to become more powerful than the strong individuals. In essence, life would be a constant state of war.
3. Distribute copies of the *Declaration of Independence* to each student or refer students to the text of the Declaration in their textbooks. As a class, read through the Declaration of Independence.
4. Make copies “The Declaration of Independence: Student Worksheet” located in the *Supplemental Materials* ([SS08010101.doc](#)). Distribute a copy of the sheet to each student. Divide students into groups of two or three students each. Have students work in the small groups to answer the questions on the worksheet.
5. After providing time for the small groups to complete the worksheet, discuss students’ responses as a class. As a class discuss the following questions:
 - Were the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence the causes of the American Revolution? Have students explain their answers.
 - What were the five most important causes of the American Revolution? Justify your responses.

Teacher note: To provide students with a review of the causes of the American Revolution, see pages 6-13 of the *Supplemental Materials* ([SS08010101.doc](#)).

6. Next, explain to the class that they are going to examine the *Declaration of Independence* from two important perspectives. Explain the social contract theory of government and natural rights philosophy to the class. These two beliefs about government formed the foundation of the colonists’ beliefs that they had a right to rebel against the King of England. They also set the foundation for civic life, politics and government in the United States. The natural rights philosophy is built on the premise that everyone is equal in that each person has a right to life, liberty, and property. These are rights to which all people are entitled, irrespective of social class or lineage. The social contract theory of government holds that governments arise from agreements among people. It states that people are willing to give up

some of their individual rights in order for a government to protect some of their natural rights. Write the definitions of natural rights philosophy and social contract theory on the board or overhead transparency.

7. Divide students into groups of three or four students each. Have students reexamine the *Declaration of Independence* for evidence of both the social contract theory of government or natural rights philosophy. Have student the groups share their findings with the class.
8. Discuss the following questions with the class:
 - What was the transition that moves thought from a state of nature without government and elimination of tyranny as expressed in the *Declaration of Independence*?
 - Who was the intended audience of the *Declaration of Independence*? Discuss with the class that the *Declaration of Independence* was not written exclusively to the King of England. It was a political document written with the intent to win support from several European governments.
 - What role does the concept of limited government play in the *Declaration of Independence*?
 - What role does the concept of popular sovereignty play in the *Declaration of Independence*?
9. Have students write a reflective narrative in their student journals that considers one of the following questions:
 - Is it ever permissible for people to rebel against their government? Explain when it may and may not be permissible.
 - Are there other rights you would consider natural rights or inalienable rights? Explain your answer.
 - How do the natural rights philosophy and the social contract theory of government influence life in the United States today? Explain your answer.

Assessment

“*The Declaration of Independence Worksheet*” and class discussions in Steps 7 and 8 may be used as an informal assessment of student learning. Students may also be assessed based on their reflective narratives in the student journals completed in Step 9. As a more formal assessment, have students create a picture book for younger children representing the following ideas:

- At least five grievances of the colonists that were expressed in the *Declaration of Independence*;
- Natural rights philosophy; and
- Social contract theory of government.

Application Beyond School

Students can explore current situations in which groups of people seek independence. Students could examine current events that demonstrate action by the United States’ government relative to the ideals of the social contract theory of government and the natural rights philosophy, and judge if those beliefs are being met.

Connections

Arts

When students create a picture book for younger children representing ideas in the *Declaration of Independence*, they use artistic skills.

English Language Arts

When students write in their journals, they practice the writer's craft.

When students engage in a guided reading, they engage in informational reading and analyze text for meaning.

When students share and discuss answers, they practice the speaker's craft.