

The Declaration of Independence

In 1776, soon after the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, the leaders of the war got together to write a letter to the King of England. They wanted to explain why they were fighting to be their own country, independent of England. This is what they had to say (but in easier words):

5 Sometimes one group of people decide to split off from another group, and to become an independent country, as the laws of Nature and of God say that they can. But when this happens, if they want other people to respect them, they should explain why they are splitting off.

We think these things are obviously true:

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- That all men are created equal
 - That all men have some rights given to them by God
 - That among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So whenever any government is getting in the way of these rights, people have the right to change it or get rid of it, and to make a new government, in whatever way seems most likely to make them safe and happy.

15 People should not change their government without a good reason, so people usually suffer as long as they can under the government they have, rather than change it. But when there have been a lot of problems for a long time, it is their right and their duty to throw off that

20 government, and to set up a better government.

We here in America have suffered for a very long time, and now we should change our government. The king of England has done many bad things to us - here is a list:

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- He won't let us pass laws we need for everybody's good.
 - Even when we do pass laws, he won't sign them so they can go into effect.
 - He tried to force men to give up their right to make laws.
 - He calls men together to make laws in the most inconvenient times and places, so that they won't be able to go discuss the new laws.
 - He won't let new settlers come to America, and he won't let the settlers take over new

30 land from the Native Americans.

 - He won't let us choose our own judges, and instead he chooses them all himself, so they're all on his side.
 - He sends lots of new government officials that we don't want, and he makes us pay for them.

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 - He sends lots of English soldiers here when there isn't even a war, and makes us let them live in our own houses.
 - He tells us these soldiers can do whatever they want and don't have to obey the law.
 - He won't let us buy and sell things from wherever we want. We can only buy things from England.

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 - He makes us pay all kinds of taxes without asking us about it.
 - He won't let us have a jury for our trials, only a judge.
 - He sends people accused of crimes far away to England for their trials.
 - He tries to get people to revolt and tries to get the "Indian Savages" to attack us.

45 When we ask him to stop, he just keeps on doing more bad things. We have tried to talk to the other people who live in England. We asked them to stop these crimes against us, but they have acted as though they were deaf. So we have to separate from England, and they will be our enemies during the war, although we hope they'll be our friends when there is peace.

So we think that God will see that we are doing the right thing when we declare that the United States are now completely independent of the King of England. We have no more political

50 connection to England at all. And as independent states, we say that each state has the right to make war, to make peace, to make alliances with other countries, trade with other countries, and do everything else that countries do. And we promise that we will fight for our independence with the help of God - we promise by our lives, our property, and our sacred honor.

Source (adapted): <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/northamerica/after1500/government/declaration.htm>

Annotations :

obvious (adj.)	offensichtlich	instead (adj.)	stattdessen
pursuit (n.)	Streben, Verfolgung	official (n.)	Beamter
usually (adv.)	gewöhnlich	obey (v.)	gehorschen
suffer (v.)	leiden, erleiden	jury (n.)	Jury (Gruppe von Bürgern, die in einem Prozess abstimmen, ob der Angeklagte schuldig ist)
rather than (adv.)	anstatt	trial (n.)	Gerichtsprozess
duty (n.)	Verpflichtung, Pflicht	accuse (v.)	anklagen
pass (laws) (v.)	(Gesetze) verabschieden	deaf (adj.)	taub
sign (v.)	unterschreiben	alliance (n.)	Bündnis, Allianz
go into effect (v.)	in Kraft treten	property (n.)	Besitz
inconvenient (adj.)	unbequem	sacred (adj.)	heilig
		honour (BE), honor (AE) (n.)	Ehre

Tasks:

- 1) After reading the text, in your own words, say what the declaration is mainly about.
- 2) Choose the three points mentioned in the document of which you think that they were the most important ones for the people who wrote it, and give your reasons.
- 3) Discuss if you think that what the declaration says was all true at the time. If you do not think so, please give your reasons.
- 4) In general: what can historians do to find out if a text tells the truth?

A commentary on the Declaration of Independence

Among the men who signed this declaration of independence were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. This Declaration of Independence was an exciting letter to write - it laid out a lot of new ideas about the rights that all people should have. Some of those ideas came from the preaching of Anne Hutchinson, more than a hundred years earlier. On the other hand, all of the people involved in writing the Declaration were rich white men. Although they thought they themselves should have these rights, they were pretty vague about whether the same rights should apply to poor people, women, black people, or Native Americans - most of the people living in the United States at this time. Representatives of all these groups asked to be included, and some white men started out supporting their inclusion, but in the end, only rich white Christian men signed the Declaration of Independence. But although the Declaration of Independence only applied to some people, it was a very important statement of the idea that everybody has rights.

Source (adapted): <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/northamerica/after1500/government/declaration.htm>

Annotations :

preach (v.)	predigen	apply to (v.)	beziehen auf, zutreffen auf
involve (v.)	einbeziehen	include (v.)	miteinbeziehen
vague (adj.)	ungenau	inclusion (n.)	Einbeziehung, Erfassung

Tasks:

- 1) Based on the text, explain what has been criticized about the declaration of Independence.
- 2) Say what you think about this criticism.