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**Directions:** The Declaration of Independence is made up of six sections. Skim over the Declaration with your group members. Don’t worry if you don’t understand every word. While you skim it, take note of what kinds of words, phrases and ideas are contained in each section.

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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 [rights] 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 principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

1. What do you think “unalienable rights” (or “inalienable rights”) means?

According to the document:
2. Where do unalienable rights come from?
3. What is the purpose of government?
4. From where does government get its power?
5. Are the powers given to the government by the people limited or unlimited?
6. When should government be changed?

7. How could the Continental Congress approve this document when so many of its members owned slaves?

8. Does the fact that many of these men owned slaves mean these ideas are wrong or less important?

Vocabulary
- Endowed: given or furnished
- Instituted: set up or established
- Deriving: receiving
- Abolish: put an end to
- Effect: bring about
Fifty-six individuals from each of the original 13 colonies participated in the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Pennsylvania sent nine delegates to the congress, followed by Virginia with seven and Massachusetts and New Jersey with five. Connecticut, Maryland, New York, and South Carolina each sent four delegates. Delaware, Georgia, New Hampshire, and North Carolina each sent three. Rhode Island, the smallest colony, sent only two delegates to Philadelphia.

Eight of the signers were immigrants, two were brothers, two were cousins, and one was an orphan. The average age of a signer was 45. The oldest delegate was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was 70 when he signed the Declaration. The youngest was Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina, who was 27.

Eighteen of the signers were merchants or businessmen, fourteen were farmers, and four were doctors. Forty-two signers had served in their colonial legislatures. Twenty-two were lawyers—although William Hooper of North Carolina was “disbarred” when he spoke out against the Crown—and nine were judges. Stephen Hopkins had been Governor of Rhode Island. Although two others had been clergy previously, John Witherspoon of New Jersey was the only active clergyman to attend—he wore his pontificals to the sessions. Almost all were Protestant Christians; Charles Carroll of Maryland was the only Roman Catholic signer. Seven of the signers were educated at Harvard, four each at Yale and William & Mary, and three at Princeton. John Witherspoon was the president of Princeton and George Wythe was a professor at William & Mary, where his students included the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson.

Seventeen of the signers served in the military during the American Revolution. Thomas Nelson was a colonel in the Second Virginia Regiment and then commanded Virginia military forces at the Battle of Yorktown. William Whipple served with the New Hampshire militia and was one of the commanding officers in the decisive Saratoga campaign. Oliver Wolcott led the Connecticut regiments sent for the defense of New York and commanded a brigade of militia that took part in the defeat of General Burgoyne. Caesar Rodney was a Major General in the Delaware militia and John Hancock was the same in the Massachusetts militia. Five of the signers were captured by the British during the war. Captains Edward Rutledge, Thomas Heyward, and Arthur Middleton (South Carolina) were all captured at the Battle of Charleston in 1780; Colonel George Walton was wounded and captured at the Battle of Savannah. Richard Stockton of New Jersey never recovered from his incarceration at the hands of British Loyalists and died in 1781.

“We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”
Colonel Thomas McKean of Delaware wrote John Adams that he was “hunted like a fox by the enemy—compelled to remove my family five times in a few months, and at last fixed them in a little log house on the banks of the Susquehanna . . . and they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians.” Abraham Clark of New Jersey had two of his sons captured by the British during the war. The son of John Witherspoon, a major in the New Jersey Brigade, was killed at the Battle of Germantown.

Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Francis Lewis’s New York home was destroyed and his wife was taken prisoner. John Hart’s farm and mills were destroyed when the British invaded New Jersey and he died while fleeing capture. Carter Braxton and Thomas Nelson (both of Virginia) lent large sums of their personal fortunes to support the war effort, but were never repaid.

Fifteen of the signers participated in their states’ constitutional conventions, and six—Roger Sherman, Robert Morris, Benjamin Franklin, George Clymer, James Wilson, and George Reed—signed the United States Constitution. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts attended the federal convention and, though he later supported the document, refused to sign the Constitution.

After the Revolution, thirteen of the signers went on to become governors, and eighteen served in their state legislatures. Sixteen became state and federal judges. Seven became members of the United States House of Representatives, and six became United States Senators. James Wilson and Samuel Chase became Justices of the United States Supreme Court. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Elbridge Gerry each became Vice President, and John Adams and Thomas Jefferson became President. The sons of signers John Adams and Benjamin Harrison also became Presidents.

Five signers played major roles in the establishment of colleges and universities: Benjamin Franklin and the University of Pennsylvania; Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia; Benjamin Rush and Dickinson College; Lewis Morris and New York University; and George Walton and the University of Georgia.

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Carroll were the longest surviving signers. Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Carroll of Maryland was the last signer to die—in 1832 at the age of 95.

Matthew Spalding, Ph.D. is the Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at the Heritage Foundation. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Comprehension and Critical Thinking Questions

1. Who were the signers? What kinds of men signed the Declaration?
2. What happened to the signers as a result of their affirmation of the principles outlined in the Declaration?
3. Who made the greatest sacrifices for the principles embodied in the Declaration?
4. How do the sacrifices made by these men and their families demonstrate the importance of courage and integrity?
APPENDIX A

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

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.

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 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.

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, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; 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 inseparable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

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.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

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.
He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

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.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

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.

[The 56 signatures on the Declaration]
Georgia
Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton

North Carolina
Joseph Hewes
William Hooper
John Penn

South Carolina
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton
Edward Rutledge

Maryland
Charles Carroll of Carrollton
Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone

Virginia
Carter Braxton
Benjamin Harrison
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
George Wythe

Pennsylvania
George Clymer
Benjamin Franklin
Robert Morris
John Morton
George Ross
Benjamin Rush
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson

Delaware
Thomas McKean
George Read
Caesar Rodney

New York
William Floyd
Francis Lewis
Philip Livingston
Lewis Morris

New Jersey
Abraham Clark
John Hart
Francis Hopkinson
Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon

New Hampshire
Josiah Bartlett
Matthew Thornton
William Whipple

Massachusetts
Samuel Adams
John Adams
Elbridge Gerry
John Hancock
Robert Treat Paine

Rhode Island
William Ellery
Stephen Hopkins

Connecticut
Samuel Huntington
Roger Sherman
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott