The Declaration of Independence

Handout B: Structure of the Declaration

1. Introduction—Contents: We care about what the rest of the world thinks about us, so we’re going to explain why we are declaring independence from England; Purpose: To explain why the Declaration is being issued.

2. Preamble—Contents: People are all born with certain rights that cannot justly be taken away. All human beings have inalienable rights, because “all men are created equal” and there are no natural rulers among men. When government repeatedly fails to protect these rights, people have the right and duty to end that government and make a new one; Purpose: To explain the Founders’ theory of just government whose key purpose it is to protect the rights of individuals.

3. Indictment—Contents: King George III has violated the colonists’ rights in these ways; Purpose: To explain why the colonists believed that a “long train of abuses” has occurred, justifying their revolution.

4. Denunciation—Contents: The colonists have been let down by their “British brethren”—the people of England—who have stood by and permitted the government to be oppressive. Further, the colonists have tried many times to reconcile with England, but it has not worked. Purpose: To justify independence as a necessary last resort.

5. Conclusion—Contents: The colonies are and should be independent states, no longer part of England. They can do all things free states do. The Declaration announces the formation of a new social compact and hence a people. This is why we celebrate the birthday of America on the day and year in which the Declaration was issued. Purpose: To state before the world that the 13 colonies were a new, united people, independent of England.

6. Signatures—Contents: Fifty-six people signed their name according to their states; Purpose: To demonstrate that individuals were taking responsibility for the content of the Declaration.

Handout C: Key Excerpts

1. Inalienable rights come from God or from Nature, and everyone is born with them. Because they are “inalienable,” they cannot be taken away with consent.

2. According to the document: rights come from the Creator.

3. The purpose of government is to secure inalienable rights, and to protect the happiness and safety of the people.

4. Government gets its power through the consent of the governed.

5. The powers are limited. The people, all of whom are born with an equality of rights, delegate limited powers to government to ensure protection of those rights. This is a key part of the social contract.

6. Government should be changed when it damages, rather than protects, peoples’ rights.

7. Many members of the Continental Congress believed slavery to be a great injustice. Even some of those who owned slaves feared African Americans if there for immediate emancipation.

8. The fact that many of them owned slaves does not make the ideals wrong or less important. The Declaration’s ideals were championed by abolitionists and gave life to the fight to end of slavery.

The Constitution

Handout A: Why Do We Have a National Government?

Answers may include (but are not limited to) the following: protect citizens’ rights, make laws, punish criminals, build roads, keep a food supply safe, print money, unite the country, improve the country, deal with concerns or issues of the entire country (not just those of individual states), defend the country.