



The Declaration of Independence

The teaching of the Declaration of Independence in secondary schools is centered on the event rather than the ideas behind the document. Students are given the opportunity to read the document as homework or in class and memorize parts of the document. Classroom work on the document will focus on the meaning or definition of the words.

The class time spent on the Declaration of Independence is brief in a United States History course, and by the time of the student U.S. Government course, the Declaration had been assumed to have been covered in the U.S. History course.

Yet the meanings of words do change over time, for example:

	Word use today	Word use in the 1780s
<i>discover:</i>	to uncover or find	disclose or reveal
<i>nervous</i>	to worry or be jittery	strong or vigorous
<i>awful</i>	extremely bad	that which inspires to awe and reverence
<i>natural</i>	of nature	discoverable by reason as opposed to being revealed by God
<i>liberty</i>	freedom	property

The Declaration of Independence has 1,488 words when the names of the signers are included. These words created a new idea of government that depart from the ideas of John Locke. When John Locke wrote his theory on the “social contract,” the idea of government was that individuals gave up some power in exchange for good government. The people had a right to remove a bad leader. The Declaration place government into the hands of the people and was not a shared power between the people and their leaders.

The document was a masterpiece of political writing by a group. Thomas Jefferson, who took a strong radical view of the King and Parliamentary abuses, wrote the first draft through a committee of five. The group modified and reduced Jefferson’s language by some 25%, changing wording, deleting sections and removing most reference to slavery.

It is a document that was written by well-to-do men for future generations. It is a document that has been copied or used as a guide for other revolutionary movements for freedom. In 1848 at Seneca Falls, women copied the Declaration to express their rights. Freeman in South Carolina during the Reconstruction Period referred to those men who wrote the Declaration, as it was their own declaration of rights in debates on freedom and rights. Then, in 1945, a Vietnamese revolutionary who would later be named Ho Chi Minh wrote a document based on the Declaration of Independence to free his country from French domination. More recently, during the civil rights movement in the last half of the 20th century, the Declaration of Independence became not just a document to express one people’s rights to be free. It was a shift in the way to think about government. The writers gave the world a new way to look at government even if they fell short of today’s ideas.

For further reading on the Declaration, Danielle Allen wrote a good book titled *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com