

Lesson 4: The Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson Looks Back on the Declaration of Independence

Guiding Question

What were the philosophical bases and practical purposes of the Declaration of Independence?

- I can interpret primary sources related to Founding Principles and Civic Virtues.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.

Introduction: In his retirement at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson wrote many letters that looked back on the American Founding and reflected on its meaning. He exchanged letters with John Adams, James Madison, and other well-known individuals. Nearly 50 years after the Declaration of Independence was adopted, Thomas Jefferson reflected on the document's purpose and importance in one such letter to Henry Lee. This letter was written toward the end of Jefferson's life, when he'd had many years to reflect on the significance of the document. (Jefferson died on July 4, 1826.)

Essential Vocabulary

assent	agreement
contravening	violating
redress	to set right
tribunal	court
whigs	opponents of British tyranny

Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825

[W]ith respect to our rights, and the acts of the British government **contravening** [violating] those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American **whigs** [opponents of British tyranny] thought alike on these subjects.

When forced therefore to resort to arms for **redress** [to set right], an appeal to the **tribunal** [court] of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject; [. . .] terms so plain and firm as to command their **assent** [agreement], and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we [. . .] compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the american mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All it's authority rests then on the harmonising sentiments of the day, whether expressed, in **conversns** [conversations], in letters, printed essays or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney Etc.

Comprehension Questions

1. According to Jefferson, who was the audience for the Declaration of Independence?
2. According to Jefferson, what was the document's purpose?
3. Jefferson called the language of the Declaration "plain and firm." Give at least two examples of this from the text of the Declaration.
4. Why would plain and firm language be necessary in this document?
5. Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of the Independence, before it was revised by other members of Congress, included the following passage as one of the "injuries and usurpations" the colonists had suffered under King George III.

[The king] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither ... determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold.

How does Jefferson describe slavery in the first line of this passage? Why do you think other members of Congress revised the Declaration so that it did not include this passage?