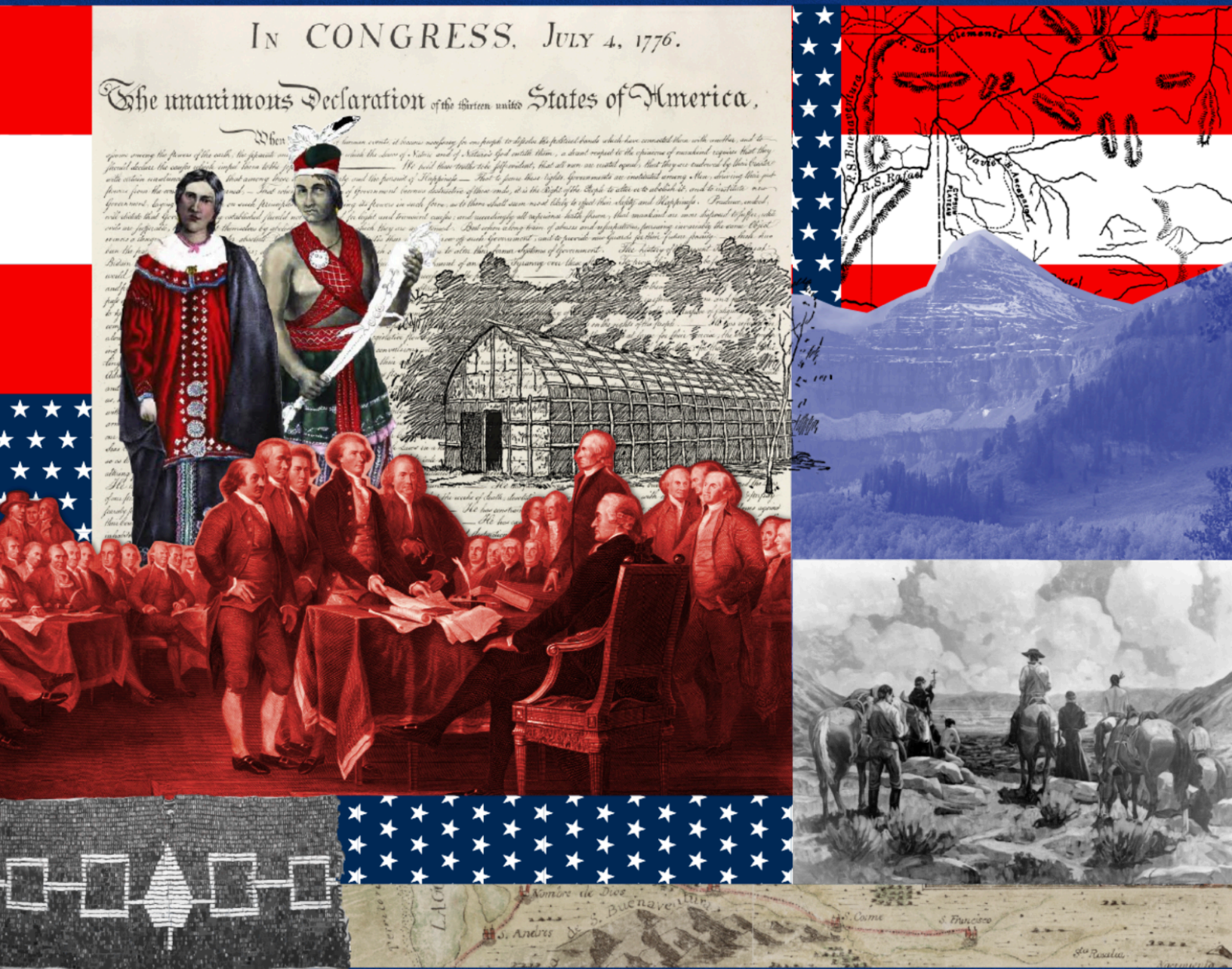


Declaration of Independence Placemat

Grade: 5



Description

Overview:

In this activity, students will identify and explore the grievances included in the Declaration of Independence. The painting “The Declaration of Independence” by John Trumbull will be used to “set the stage” for the creation of the Declaration of Independence. Students will use the Declaration of Independence placemat to make connections with the grievances and their meaning and to track their learning during this activity.

Subject: Social Studies

Grade: 5

Date Created: July 2025

License: CC-BY-NC

Language: English

Authors: Ruth King, Wendy Rex-Atzet, Brenda Beyal, Emily Soderborg

Standards:

Utah Social Studies Standard 5.2.2.

Summarize the most significant ideas found in the Declaration of Independence.

Literacy Skill:

Utah English Language Arts Standards 5.R.5, 5.R.6

Fifth-grade learners will learn to proficiently read and comprehend grade-level literature (historical) and informational text, including seminal U.S. documents of historical significance. They will identify and refer to evidence from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text. They will use details to determine the theme or main idea and to summarize the text.

Background for Teachers

Key Frameworks:

- Many different people lived in North America during the 1700s:
 - Native Americans had thousands of communities, extensive trade and travel systems, and over 500 different languages and cultures.
 - People had come from Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands as colonists.
 - Enslaved people were forced to come from Africa to work.
 - All of their descendants, along with other groups who have come here from all over the world, are part of America today.
- **Declare** means to announce a choice or decision.
- **Independence** means being able to make your own decisions without having someone else tell you what to do.
- The Declaration announced that the thirteen colonies were **independent** of Great Britain. They were not British colonies anymore; they were now the **United States**.
- The thirteen British colonies of North America were located along the east coast, and were a small part of what is now the United States. Today, there are 50 states and 574 Tribal sovereign nations in the United States, and 16 U.S. territories around the world.
- Written 250 years ago, the ideas in this document are important values in our government and our nation today.

Historical Background:

Tensions between [Britain's North American colonies](#) and their ruler, King George III, had been growing since the end of the [Seven Years' War](#) (French and Indian War) in 1763. When France lost this war, it gave up most of its North American empire to Britain, including Canada, the Great Lakes, western New York and Pennsylvania, and the Ohio Valley.

British colonists wanted to expand their settlements into these western lands. However, North America was already home to [thriving Indigenous communities](#). Native Americans did not believe that people could own, purchase, or sell land. Instead, they assumed that when colonists exchanged goods with them for land,

they were all agreeing to [share the land together](#). Colonists, for their part, believed they were purchasing the land permanently and that the Native people who lived there should move somewhere else. To prevent conflicts between Native peoples and settlers in the western lands, the king would not allow the colonists to move west. This angered many colonists, especially farmers.

The Seven Years' War had created a huge debt for Britain. The British government felt the colonists should help pay for these war expenses, since the war benefited them. So Parliament imposed new fees, called taxes, on popular items like sugar, newspapers, and tea. The fees went to the British government to help pay back its war debt.

However, these taxes were new; the British government had never directly taxed the colonists before. Many colonists were angry about the taxes. But as colonists, they didn't have any seats in Parliament to represent them and give them a voice in how they were taxed.

Mutual distrust, conflict, and violence between the British and the American colonists grew over the next twelve years. Finally, in June 1776, colonial leaders in the Continental Congress began writing a statement that would explain to everyone – the British, other European nations, and the rest of the colonists – why the North American colonies should be free from British rule. They used several ideas that were new at that time, including:

- That all men are created equal
- That all men have basic rights that the government should respect
- That all men should have a voice in their government

Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and other leaders helped to finalize the text. The Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Copies were then sent to other colonial leaders for their approval. The Declaration was signed by most members of the Continental Congress on August 2, 1776. (See [Creating the Declaration of Independence Timeline](#).)

The authors did not say that “all people” were equal. The term “all men” was specific. It described men of European descent who owned land and businesses in the thirteen colonies. This included owners of large businesses and plantations, as well as small businesses and family farms. The authors of the Declaration were making a powerful argument against the hereditary monarchies and aristocracies that governed Europe. This was a radical break from centuries of tradition and law. By framing equality as a core value in the new nation, the Declaration opened the possibility for this idea to grow and embrace more people. Over time, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants from all over the world worked to extend these values and rights to more people. These efforts continue today.

Goals and Outcomes

Learning Intentions:

Students will be able to

- Identify the grievances presented in the Declaration.
- Determine the main idea of a specific list of grievances.
- Use the text of the Declaration to draw inferences about the writers’ intent.

Success Criteria:

Students will

- Use the Declaration of Independence placemat to write down key words, to help categorize the grievances, and to determine which grievances they feel were the strongest worded or most forceful.
- Use the placemat as a quick overview of the problems and difficulties the colonists perceived were caused by King George III.

Instruction

Materials Needed:

- [“Declaration of Independence placemat”](#) - 1 copy for each student
- [Declaration of Independence Teacher Reference](#) (6 pages) - Print 1 copy for easy reference and for the teacher to use at the start and end of this lesson/activity.
- [“Declaration of Independence – Grievances” Group Charts](#) (1-6) - Print 1 copy of each chart.
- [“The Declaration of Independence” painting](#) by John Trumbull
- For option two and the arts extensions, you will need a computer, an internet connection, a projector, and a screen.

Procedure:

Background for 5th Graders

The Declaration of Independence can be read and presented as an example of a persuasive letter to King George III. As you read it, imagine you are the writer and decide if you would have been so bold as to write those things to the King.

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Give each student a “Declaration of Independence Placemat” to use as a reading/listening guide during this lesson. (This is to help them follow along and stay engaged as the lesson proceeds.)
- Instruct the students that throughout this activity, when they hear or read about the information or phrases in the boxes on the placemat, they should draw a star or check in the corner of that box.
- The teacher begins by pointing out the painting in the center of the placemat. It may be helpful to display [the Trumbull painting](#) on the screen/whiteboard so that students can see it in color and with more detail. Utilize the [“See, Wonder, Connect x 2” thinking strategy](#) to help the students “read” the painting. If time permits, conduct a more in-depth study of this painting using the National Archives analysis form. (See below.)
- Ask the students to notice that the artist, J. Trumbull, focused on the “Committee of Five,” the five men standing in the middle of the painting

(Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman). On June 11, 1776, the Second Continental Congress asked those five men to prepare the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson did the actual writing. They came from different parts of the colonies and had very different thoughts on how each colony should be run, but they were united on the principles written in the Declaration of Independence. (Note: this is in the first box on the student placemat.)

- To continue, the teacher may choose which option fits best with their students.
 - Option 1: The teacher reads the first part of the Preamble, which is found on page 1 of the Teacher Reference Introduction/Preamble Chart. Stop after the words, "...pursuit of happiness."
 - Option 2: The teacher may choose to show the first part of ["Thomas Jefferson Reads the Declaration of Independence"](#) up through the words "...pursuit of happiness" (52 seconds). It is read by the historical interpreter who portrays Thomas Jefferson at Colonial Williamsburg. You can turn on the closed captioning to allow students to read along as the words are being spoken.
 - Option 3: Show the first part of [Senator John F. Kennedy reading the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1957](#) (John F. Kennedy Library Foundation) up through the words "...pursuit of happiness," (49 seconds). You can turn on the closed captioning to allow students to read along as Sen. Kennedy reads.

Group Activity Grievance Charts (7-10 minutes)

This activity focuses on the section of the Declaration where the colonists listed their grievances. It will help students focus on the brilliant stylistic wording of Thomas Jefferson and help them recognize his use of "He has," "For," or "He is" to start the grievance statements.

- Divide the class into six groups.
- Give each group their numbered "Declaration of Independence - Grievances" group chart (Group Charts 1-6).
- As a group, students will read through each of their 2-5 grievances, both the actual grievance from the Declaration of Independence (left side) and the

student-friendly explanation (on the right side). The group will decide which of their grievances is the strongest complaint or grievance. Once that is decided, they will put a "#1" in the rank column (the column to the right).

- Each group will also count how many of their grievance statements on the "Declaration" side of their chart start with "He has," "For," or "He is" and put that number in the tally section at the top of their group chart. You may also choose to have them label each grievance according to which category they think it best fits (in the category column).

Sharing the Group's Summary (3-4 minutes)

- A student from each group will stand up and tell which numbered grievance they ranked as #1 on their chart, and then read the grievance (from the student-friendly column) to the class. (The teacher could assign the student in each group whose birthday is closest to July 4th to be the group's spokesperson.)
- As the group's representative shares that information, the teacher will direct each student in the class to circle the number of that specific grievance on their own placemat.
- Students can also make tally marks on their individual placemats to include each group's tally of what wording Thomas Jefferson used to begin each grievance. (This supports the 5th-grade Math curriculum in gathering data and charting the information they compile.)

Conclusion (1 minute)

- The teacher will read the last three sections of the Declaration of Independence from the "Statement of Independence Section" page (Teacher Reference page 6). (The teacher may choose to read from either side of the chart – the actual Declaration of Independence or the student-friendly explanation.)
- This is a good time to address the following language in grievance 27 – "merciless Indian savage" – as a contradiction to the ideals of the preamble and as evidence of prejudice during that era. It is 1776 rhetoric that dehumanizes Native Americans, justifies westward expansion plus removal,

and genocide. (Please see the important information and resources related to this specific grievance included in the perspectives section below.)

- Emphasize that the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were facing treason but were willing to place their “...Lives ...Fortunes and... sacred Honor” at great risk to sign this document.

Assessment

The students’ placemats can be used for assessing student engagement and understanding in this lesson.

Arts Extension

- Show the [“Declaration of Independence” painting by J. Trumbull](#)
- [Background information](#) on the “Declaration of Independence” painting by J. Trumbull
- Use the [National Archives Artwork analysis form](#)
- [U.S. Government’s key to the painting](#), identifying the subjects of John Trumbull's painting
- [“Writing the Declaration of Independence,” 1776, painting](#) by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris.

Additional Resources & Extensions

- [Primary source image of the Declaration of Independence](#) (Library of Congress)
- [The Declaration of Independence Transcript](#) (National Archives)
- [Image of the Declaration of Independence Rough Draft](#) (Library of Congress)
- [“Declaration of Independence: Making Comparisons”](#) (Library of Congress) - Thomas Jefferson’s “original rough draft” of the Declaration of Independence and the First printed version of the Declaration of Independence

- [The Declaration of Independence: From Rough Draft to Proclamation](#) (Library of Congress lesson plan)
- [Thomas Jefferson's Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence](#) (Library of Congress)
- [Transcript of Thomas Jefferson's rough draft](#) (Library of Congress images)
- ["Declaration of Independence: How did it happen?"](#) (National Archives)
- [Signers of the Declaration](#) (National Park Service) - a booklet with very good historical background
- Video: ["Thomas Jefferson Reads the Declaration of Independence"](#). The historical interpreter who portrays Thomas Jefferson at Colonial Williamsburg dressed in colonial attire.
- Video: [Senator John F. Kennedy reading the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1957](#) (John F. Kennedy Library Foundation) (10:49 min.)

Additional Perspectives

- [Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators](#), National Museum of the American Indian. Educator resource on the Six Nations of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederation: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga, and Tuscarora tribes of greater New York. Includes a discussion of how the Great Law of Peace influenced the authors of the Declaration of Independence.
- [Six Nations Iroquois Life](#), Fenimore Art Museum, educator resource. Grades 4-8.
- [Breaking the Great League of Peace and Power: The Six Iroquois Nations During and After the American Revolution](#), University of Maryland, Baltimore County Center for History Education, lesson plan. Grades 5-9.
- Time should be taken at the beginning of the school year and all throughout the year to teach about Native Americans, to introduce more accurate terms used by Native Americans, and to emphasize that Native Americans were on US land before colonization, during colonization, and continue to live in the US today as equals and are part of the very fabric of US history. There were terms used in 1776 in the Declaration of Independence that are never

appropriate to use today. This link provides a helpful resource for more [accurate terms used by Native Americans](#).

- [Season of Independence](#), Museum of the American Revolution, digital interactive with [eight modular units](#). Explores multiple perspectives on independence, including Patriots, Loyalists, Native Americans, African Americans, and more, using primary sources. Grades 5-12.
- [Finding Freedom](#), Museum of the American Revolution, digital interactive plus [eight modular units](#). Explores the stories of African American men and women in Virginia during the war. Grades 5-12.
- [When Women Lost the Right to Vote](#), Museum of the American Revolution, teacher resources. Five units on women and voting in the Revolutionary era. Grades 5-12.
- [Meet Elizabeth Freeman](#), Museum of the American Revolution, living history performance. "Any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it — just to stand one minute on God's earth a free woman — I would."

America250

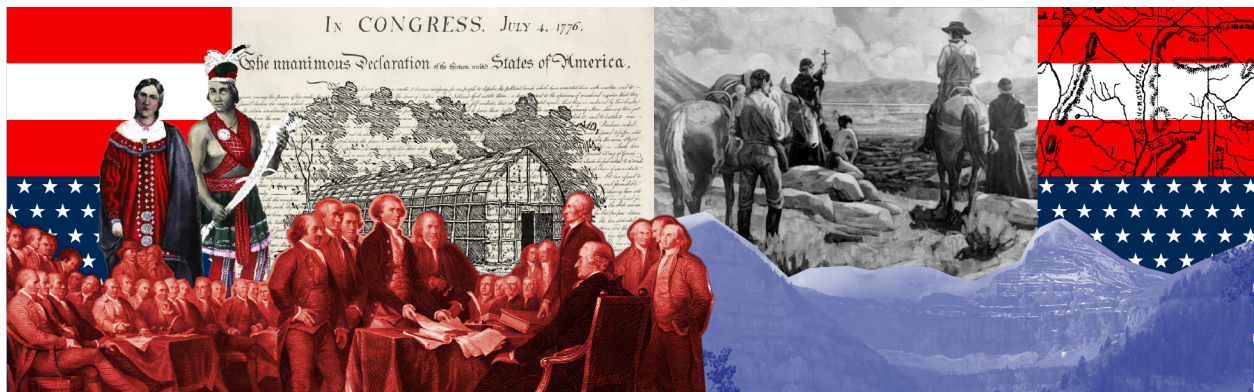
On July 4, 2026, Utahns will join the rest of the nation to commemorate and celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States. Communities will come together to reflect on our nation's past, honor the contributions of all Americans, and look toward the future.

For nearly 250 years, Americans from all walks of life and every corner of the country have had a hand in shaping our nation's history. No two Americans began their journey in the same place. The semiquincentennial is a chance for everyone to feel a part of this major milestone in our nation. We can celebrate courage, liberty, and sacrifice, while also reckoning with difficult truths. By fostering a sense of belonging and coming together with our local communities, we can ensure that Utahns of all ages and backgrounds see themselves in American history.

This teacher resource was created as part of the America250 project and focuses on sparking deeper awareness and understanding of the history, values, and democratic processes that shape our nation. Visit america250.utah.gov to learn more about America250 Utah.

Credits

This resource was created in collaboration with [Utah Valley University's Center for Constitutional Studies](#), [Utah Historical Society](#), [Brigham Young University's ARTS](#)



[Partnership](#), and the [Utah Education Network](#).