

Grade: 9-12





## Description

### Overview:

In this activity, students will examine documents and programs used in civil rights-era citizenship classes that utilized the Declaration of Independence as their “textbooks.” They will then explore concepts of citizenship contained within the Declaration of Independence. As a final project, they will create presentations as if they were going to lead a citizenship class today.

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### Standards:

U.S. GOV Strand 1: Foundational Principles

The framework of the United States Constitution and the functions of government are guided by principles essential for our way of life. An understanding of how these principles are applied in the rule of law, government, and politics is vital in order to be a responsible and effective citizen. Students need to be able to see how the ideals found in the Constitution are present in many of the issues of the day.

U.S. GOV Standard 1.1

Students will explain how documents, challenges, events, and ideas such as the rule of law, the social contract, compromise, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, Shays' Rebellion, and the Federalist Papers significantly influenced the United States Constitution.

U.S. GOV Strand 2: Civil Liberties, Civil Rights, and Responsibilities

American citizenship brings with it civil liberties, civil rights, and responsibilities. Students must know their rights and responsibilities and understand the extent of those rights. Students should be able to defend their own rights and the rights of

others, understanding that the Constitution and its amendments extend protections to individuals who may not share their views. Our nation's future rests on the ability and willingness of every generation to fulfill its civic responsibilities.

#### U.S. GOV Standard 2.3

Students will explain the purpose and importance of fulfilling civic responsibilities, including serving on juries; voting; serving on boards, councils, and commissions; remaining well-informed; contacting elected officials; and other duties associated with active citizenship.

### Literacy Skill:

Students will participate in reading and analysis activities, followed by writing activities that help them synthesize the information they read.

## 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, 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

- Explore concepts of citizenship contained within the Declaration of Independence.
- Examine the Declaration of Independence and consider how it may have been used to help African Americans understand their role as citizens of the United States.

## Success Criteria:

Students will

- Create a master list of evidence of citizenship found within the Declaration of Independence.
- Create presentations as if they were going to lead a citizenship class today.

## Instruction

## Materials Needed:

- [Citizenship School, National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)
- [Highlander Folk School and Septima Clark, Civil Rights Women Leaders of the Carolinas](#)
- [Dorothy Cotton Interview by Tavis Smiley](#)
- [If Your Back's Not Bent](#), by Dorothy Cotton

## Procedure:

In 1932, the Highlander Folk School was founded with a focus on helping “workers fight for just and fair wages and safe working conditions” (Cotton, 98). Over time, a major focus became literacy of African Americans so they could vote. Some states required literacy tests to register to vote.

As the Civil Rights Movement deepened, the curriculum at Highlander also broadened to include other aspects of citizenship and leadership. Early leaders and designers of the program included [Septima Clark, Bernice Johnson, and Esau Jenkins. Famous guest speakers included Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) One offspring of Highland was the Citizenship Education Program (1954). The Highlander Folk School became a target of controversy and was shut down by the State of Tennessee. Eventually (1961), the Citizenship Education Program (CEP) was moved and directed by the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition (SCLC).

Dorothy Cotton, the SCLC Director of Education, said the following about the purpose and curriculum of the CEP Workshops:

“A strong focus would be on basic things like how to run a meeting, how to successfully negotiate, the importance and nature of politics, how governing decisions are made, how laws are made, and how to assess whether a law was just, and understand the basic documents on which the country was founded.” (Cotton, 105)

A key document used for teaching these concepts was the Declaration of Independence. The following activities will help students explore concepts of citizenship contained within the Declaration of Independence.

### **Activity Ideas**

#### **STEP 1:**

In the context of teaching lessons or units about the 1950s-1960s civil rights movement in the United States, provide students with background information about the SCLC and Highlander Folk School. Introduce students to the Citizenship Education Program (CEP) and its purpose to educate African Americans throughout the South about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, help them register to vote, increase voting, and prepare them to be leaders for advancing civil rights within their own communities. Help students understand that founding documents were used as “textbooks” for the citizenship classes. For today’s activity, they will

examine the Declaration of Independence and consider how it may have been used to help African Americans understand their role as citizens of the United States.

What does the Declaration of Independence teach about the role of citizens in relation to government?

**STEP 2:**

Individually, or in groups, students will analyze the Declaration of Independence for examples and explanations about what it means to be a citizen within a nation, state, and city (connected to any government). Require students to brainstorm a list of keywords, phrases, or concepts related to citizenship as they read the text.

**STEP 3:**

Through pair/share or group presentations, create a master list from the whole class of evidence of citizenship that was found within the text.

**STEP 4:**

In groups of 3 (recommended only), have students create a presentation as if they were going to lead a citizenship class today. The lesson they will prepare will be called “What You Need to Know About the Declaration of Independence,” and they will use the Declaration to help future citizens understand their role in the United States. Presentations could be 8-10 minutes.

**STEP 5:**

Invite (randomly) 2-3 groups to teach the whole class using their presentation.

**Options:** Use slides or other digital presentations, require all students in the group to present, ask students to prepare a handout, require the class to participate/take notes/discuss, encourage class feedback after each presentation, and include a rubric.

**STEP 6:**

The following are sample questions used during the CEP Workshops in the 1960s (Cotton, 113). They may be used in a summary activity in numerous ways: Exit slips,



student writing reflections, group discussions and brainstorming, class discussion or debate, individual research and writing assignments.

- What does it mean to function as a citizen in these times?
- Do citizens in fact have real power? What is this power? Can they know this power?
- How do we work together in this decade of unavoidable diversity?
- What does diversity look like now?
- How is it different from earlier times?
- What is the role of government/ indeed, what is government?
- What is the role of the citizen? Do citizens have real governing responsibilities?

#### Another Takeaway:

Dorothy Cotton wrote, "Once you see yourself as citizens, you will function in newer, more effective, and more powerful ways." The Declaration of Independence created a line of separation that colonists were not subjects, but citizens. With that designation came rights as well as responsibilities. How are citizens of the United States of America today preserving the rights and performing the responsibilities declared 250 years ago?

## Arts Extension

Have students create an original work of art that draws inspiration from the Declaration to help future citizens understand their role and responsibility in the United States. This can be done through any chosen art form (visual art, music, drama, dance, media arts, or literary art). It should communicate a message that helps future citizens reflect on their own role in sustaining democracy and freedom. Step 4 in the above lesson would be adapted to have students create artworks rather than an oral or written presentation.

#### **Select one medium in which to create a response:**

- Visual Art: painting, drawing, sculpture, mixed media, photography, digital art.

- Music: original song, instrumental composition, or adapted piece with new lyrics inspired by the text.
- Drama: monologue, short play, or dramatic scene embodying the Declaration's ideas.
- Dance: choreographed movement expressing freedom, struggle, or unity.
- Media Arts: film, video, digital collage, podcast, or social media campaign.
- Literary Art: poem, short story, personal essay, or spoken word performance.

### **Connect to the Declaration:**

- Identify at least one key phrase or principle from the Declaration to highlight in your work.
- Show how that idea connects to the role of citizens today.
  - Example: A visual artist might illustrate "consent of the governed" through an image of diverse people casting ballots. A musician might set "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to a melody that conveys hope and resilience.
- Develop and refine your idea.
- Use artistic techniques appropriate for your chosen medium.
- Be intentional about symbolism, tone, and message.

### **Artist's Statement (Written Component):**

Alongside your artwork, submit an artist's statement that:

- Explains the connection between your work and the Declaration of Independence.
- Describes the artistic choices you made (style, symbolism, mood, etc.).
- Reflects on how your work might help future citizens understand their role in the U.S.

## **Additional Perspectives**

The Declaration of Independence created a line of separation that colonists were not subjects, but citizens. With that designation came rights as well as responsibilities. However, it took many years to determine what it meant to be a United States citizen. The process was a long and piecemeal effort, marked by

major legislative and constitutional changes that extended rights to different populations over time. The most significant milestones include the 14th Amendment and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.

The 14th Amendment was a landmark in the expansion of U.S. citizenship (1868).

- Granted citizenship to formerly enslaved people. Passed after the Civil War, this amendment's first sentence granted citizenship to all persons "born or naturalized in the United States," directly overturning the 1857 *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision that had denied citizenship to African Americans.
- Provided birthright citizenship. It established the principle that any person born in the U.S. is automatically a citizen, a concept that was later affirmed by the Supreme Court in the 1898 case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* regarding the U.S.-born children of Chinese immigrants.

The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924

- The 14th Amendment's birthright citizenship clause did not apply to Native Americans, who were subject to tribal, rather than U.S., jurisdiction.
- The Indian Citizenship Act, also known as the Snyder Act, formally granted U.S. citizenship to all Native Americans born in the United States.
- While the act was a major step, it did not solve all issues. It was not until 1940 that a new Nationality Act reaffirmed the citizenship of Native people, and some states continued to bar Native Americans from voting for decades afterward.

Coverture and women's citizenship

For much of U.S. history, a woman's citizenship was tied to her husband's.

Legislation like the Cable Act of 1922 and the Nationality Act of 1940 was required to grant married women their own independent citizenship status.

## 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](https://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](#).

