

Reading and Discussion Questions: *The Declaration of Independence*

1. Where and when have you encountered the “Declaration”? Do you recall any of your thoughts or feelings when you read or heard it in the past?
2. So far as you can determine from your background knowledge, from lecture, and from the text itself, who is the author of this text? Does the writer purport to represent a group? What are the difficulties entailed in “speaking for” a group? Does this rhetorical text allow for multiple voices? Can you think of any differences of opinion that may have been suppressed in the final form of the *Declaration*?
3. To whom is the rhetorical act addressed? Are there multiple addressees? How are different audiences addressed in the text?
4. This text announces its genre: declaration. How do you know what a “declaration” is from reading the text? Are the features of this genre well established? Does this text strain or violate them? Play with or parody them?
5. What is the situation? To what event or occasion (exigence) does the rhetorical act respond? Does the rhetorical act create the event, or does it fit into an existing pattern or ritual? How does power in terms of social position affect the rhetorical performance? Are there power inequities or imbalances involved in the rhetorical situation?
6. What are the purposes? To express, inform, persuade? To instruct, move, delight? To set an agenda, shift attitudes, advocate specific policies?
7. How would you describe the style? Is the style determined by the genre? Is it determined by historical period or cultural location?
8. What do you know about delivery and/or circulation of this rhetorical act? Through what medium does it come to life?
9. The “Declaration” is structured like essay with an introduction, a statement of principle and purpose, supporting evidence, and a conclusion that announces action. When you read it, did it remind you of the essay structure you have used in school writing? Did you find it well ordered? Was it persuasive to you?
10. What does the introductory paragraph do? Is it effective? Why or why not?
11. The second paragraph states principles of Enlightenment philosophy. Which words stand out to you? Do you believe in the principles stated in this paragraph? Why or why not?
12. One historian who analyzes the *Declaration* divides the body of the *Declaration*—the charges against King George III—into three general groups (Maier 107-23). How would you categorize the charges? Which seem most serious? Are they explained sufficiently?
13. What is the function of the two paragraphs following the list of charges?
14. The final paragraph contains the “declaration.” This substantial paragraph includes only two sentences. What is the effect of packing so much into the first sentence? Comment on the style and structure of the final

sentence. What gives this final paragraph its dramatic force? Or, if you don't find it forceful or dramatic, why not?

15. How would you describe the tone of the *Declaration*? For which audiences would this tone be most effective and why?

16. This passage, accusing King George III of conducting slavery, was omitted from the final draft. (See this site for a comparison of Jefferson's draft and the version finally adopted by the Congress:

<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/compare.htm>)

“He has waged cruel War against human Nature itself, violating its most sacred Rights of Life and Liberty in the Persons of a distant People who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into Slavery in another Hemisphere, or to incur miserable Death, in their Transportation thither. This piratical Warfare, the opprobrium of infidel Powers, is the Warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain.

“He has prostituted his Negative for Suppressing every legislative Attempt to prohibit or to restrain an execrable Commerce, determined to keep open a Market where Men should be bought and sold, and that this assemblage of Horrors might want no Fact of distinguished Die.

“He is now exciting those very People to rise in Arms among us, and to purchase their Liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the People upon whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off, former Crimes committed against the Liberties of one People, with Crimes which he urges them to commit against the Lives of another.”

How would you paraphrase this passage (restate it in your own language)? How well does it describe the historical circumstances of the times, so far as you know? How effective is it for the general argument Jefferson and the Congress seek to make? Why do you think it was ultimately omitted from the *Declaration*?

17. The resource list includes a number of documents modeled after the *Declaration*. Read one and note similarities and differences, especially in the definition of the “human” (or “man”). What kinds of texts has the *Declaration* inspired? How does the text you read differ from the *Declaration*?