

The Declaration of Independence in a Global Context

Grade Level: 10-12

Time Required: 1-1.5 hours

Historical Thinking Skill: Comparison and Contrast

Objective: The goal of this exercise is to analyze the differences between the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence. Studying these two documents will help students place the Declaration of Independence in a global context. They should read the pre-reading questions to prepare for the primary texts and evaluate the two sources in the light of these questions. Students will write their reflections on the differences between the declarations before participating in a class discussion.

Required Materials:

1. Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, complete document:
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
2. Excerpt from the Declaration of the Rights of Man, complete document:
https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/declaration_of_the_rights_of_man_1789.pdf

Directions: Have students read the pre-reading questions before they read the primary sources. After reading the primary texts, have the students complete the reflection assignment. This activity can be contained in one class period or assigned as homework. It can be completed entirely independently, in small groups, or a combination of both. After this, conduct an in-class discussion about the similarities and differences the students noticed between the two documents.

Pre-reading Questions:

1. Why might the French preamble refer to a “Supreme Being” and the American to “God”? In your mind, is there a difference if rights come from other people (like those in government) rather than God? Which is more secure?
2. Does the French preamble have the same universal appeal as the American preamble?
3. What historical circumstances in France would have shaped its Declaration?

Reflection: Students will identify and explain five differences between the two excerpts. Facilitate a class discussion about the students’ observations.

Suggestions for class discussion on how the French Declaration differs from the American Declaration:

1. Rights do not come from God, but instead “representatives of the French people.” Why did they write it this way? Note that at this time in history, France is a devoutly Catholic nation. What is the significance of rights emanating from the people rather than God? Is the latter more permanent and unchanging? Does it disallow atheists to be a part of civil society?

2. The French document specifically mentions the French people while the U.S. Declaration does not use the term “American.” What might account for this difference? Discuss the idea of national identity. Ask students to define what it means to be French as opposed to American. Which is easier to define?
3. The French preamble says people are “equal in rights” while the American preamble states people are “created equal.” Discuss the difference and why it matters. Is the former more restricted and circumscribed than the latter? Note that “equal in rights” implies that rights come from the state unlike “created equal” which suggests a divine origin of rights. Ask students which is their preference and why?
4. The French preamble is specific to the French nation and people. Does that give it less universal appeal than the American Declaration? Discuss how the American Declaration is more exportable than the French Declaration. Remind them that Ho Chi Minh quoted it when Vietnam declared independence from France in 1946.
5. The French document mentions a “general will.” Link this back to the Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. What does a “general will” mean? Is it democratic or potentially tyrannical? Does it leave room for minority views? What are the problems with majoritarianism?
6. The French writers do not denounce the king as the American preamble does. Why? Discuss the differences between colonists and citizens. Explain that pro-independence Americans had already given up on Parliament (which they saw as hopelessly corrupt). The monarch, King George III, was their final link to England, therefore they believed they needed to criticize him thoroughly.
7. The French preamble does not mention a right of revolution. Why? Discuss the more static nature of European societies, compared to American society, with respect to class and social mobility. Also explore the anti-authoritarian nature of the colonists. Does this trait persist in us today?
8. The French preamble is not submitted to the world. Again, does this make it less universal than the American work? Why did the American colonists do this? Note that French writers were not seeking outside assistance; the American colonies were. Remind students that the Americans hoped to win Canada and the wealthy British Caribbean islands to their side.

