

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and the American Revolution

Grade Level: 6 – 8

Length of Lesson: 1-2 class periods plus homework

Objective:

- Students will comprehend the main ideas presented in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.
- Students will analyze excerpts from *Common Sense* to understand its impact on the movement for American independence.
- Students will discover the changing nature of ideas, specifically in relation to the Enlightenment.
- Students will engage in discussions and activities to connect historical context with contemporary issues.

Required Materials:

1. Copies of selected excerpts from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (attached)
2. Master key connecting selected excerpts to themes for teacher reference (attached)
3. Four whiteboards or flip charts
4. Markers

Lesson Plan:

Introduction (10-15 minutes):

1. Discuss the idea of “common sense” with students. Perhaps prepare some examples of how the idea of common sense might change from generation to generation. For example, ask them what they would do if they got lost while driving, and how their decisions might be different from when their parents were their age (i.e. using a phone's GPS vs. paper maps).
2. Ask students how a king and his subjects might disagree on what is “common sense.”
3. Activate prior knowledge with a brief overview of the American Revolutionary War and its historical context. Discuss the discontent among the American colonists towards British rule.
4. Introduce Thomas Paine as a key figure in the revolutionary movement and mention his pamphlet *Common Sense*. These two quotes may be useful in introducing him:
 1. “Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.”—John Adams
 2. “He had lived long, did some good and much harm.”—From Paine's obituary

Reading and Analysis (15-30 minutes):

1. Distribute copies of selected excerpts from *Common Sense* to each student.
2. Encourage students to read the excerpts individually and underline key ideas, phrases, or words that stand out to them.
3. After individual reading, facilitate a class discussion about the main ideas presented in *Common Sense*. Use open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking and exploration of Paine's arguments.

Group Activity: Poster Creation (25-30 minutes):

1. Divide the class into four groups.
2. Assign each group one of the four Paine excerpts. State that the excerpt will highlight a theme, either “flaws of a hereditary monarchy system of government” or “merits of declaring American independence.” “factors giving the American colonies an advantage in a bid for independence”
3. Provide art supplies and have each group create a poster illustrating the theme in the assigned excerpt with relevant excerpts from the text.
4. Each group will present their poster to the class, explaining the chosen theme and how it connects to the broader message of *Common Sense*.

Class Discussion (10-20 minutes):

1. Initiate a class discussion based on the group presentations. Encourage students to share their insights, questions, and reflections on Paine’s arguments.
2. Connect Paine’s ideas to the broader historical context and discuss their relevance to contemporary issues.
3. Highlight the influence of *Common Sense* on the American Revolution and its impact on shaping public opinion.

Conclusion (5 minutes):

1. Summarize the key points discussed during the lesson.
2. Emphasize the significance of critical thinking and questioning authority in history and contemporary society.

Assessment: Assign the students to draw the historical context of *Common Sense* in a six-panel comic strip (attached)—stick figures are fine! Suggest having them begin the first panel reflecting the uncertainty of the colonials regarding independence—the next four panels should have Thomas Paine explaining why independence is “common sense.” The final panel could involve King George III’s rebuttal. These are only suggestions—the best responses will come from unleashing student’s creativity.

Scaling up for Advanced Students (Time TBD):

1. Have students reactivate prior knowledge by linking Enlightenment thought to *Common Sense*. Where was Paine drawing ideas from?
2. Have students summarize each of the four themes from *Common Sense*; then prepare a rebuttal from the point of view of a monarchist or even from King George III. If time permits, students tend to enjoy putting Thomas Paine on trial for his crimes against the English Government.

***Common Sense* (1776)—Selected Excerpts**

Source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/147/pg147-images.html>

Part One: Of the Origin and design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution

I offer a few remarks on the so much boasted constitution of England. That it was noble for the dark and slavish times in which it was erected, is granted. When the world was overrun with tyranny the least remove therefrom was a glorious rescue. But that it is imperfect, subject to convulsions, and incapable of producing what it seems to promise, is easily demonstrated...

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of Monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the World, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless.

Part Two: Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession

For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever...yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them.

One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in Kings, is that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule, by giving mankind an Ass for a Lion.

Part Three: Thoughts on the Present State of Affairs in America

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense...

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation, to shew, a single advantage that this continent can reap, by being connected with Great Britain...Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for by them where we will...

[T]here is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet, and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverses the common order of nature, it is evident they belong to different systems: England to Europe, America to itself.

Part Four: Of the Present Ability of America, with some Miscellaneous Reflections

It is not in numbers, but in unity, that our great strength lies; yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world. The Continent hath, at this time, the largest body of armed and disciplined men of any power under Heaven; and is just arrived at that pitch of strength, in which, no single colony is able to support itself, and the whole, when united, can accomplish the matter...

Master Key: Connecting Selected Exerpts to Themes for Teacher Reference

See the highlighted selections below for the passages reflecting the key themes:

- Flaws of a hereditary and monarchical system of government
- Factors giving the American colonies an advantage in a bid for independence

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Comic Strip Template

