

The Declaration of Independence

Author(s)

Thomas Jefferson, with probable revising assistance from Benjamin Franklin and John Adams (as well as input from the Congress).

Date created/enacted

- Created between June 12-27, 1776.
- Reviewed in Congress between July 1-4, 1776.
- Adopted by Congress on July 4, 1776.
- On July 9, 1776, Washington orders DOI to be read before American Army in New York.
- On January 18, 1777, Congress orders that signed copies of DOI be sent to all states.

Content summary

The DOI, which many people consider to be a persuasive or expository essay, has several parts. Here are brief summaries of these sections.

- Introduction: “When people are planning on severing political bonds, they must explain why they are doing so.”
- Role of government: “Government exists only to safeguard the basic, intrinsic rights of human beings—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When a government stops guarding these rights, its citizens must dissolve that government. The government of the King of Great Britain is one of these offending governments.”
- List of grievances: “The King of Great Britain has committed at least 27 specific, injurious actions against the Colonies. These grievances (which are listed in detail) are not the actions of a just government.”
- Declaration: “The Colonies are no longer a part of Great Britain.”

Current location

Jefferson’s rough draft and “composition” draft (an earlier rough) are in the Library of Congress. Two of the 26 “Dunlap broadsides” (printed copies) are also in the Library of Congress; the other 24 are the property of various libraries and historical societies. One of these Dunlap broadsides was actually found in the back of a picture frame bought for \$4 at a yard sale; it was recently sold for more than eight million dollars. The official signed copy is in the National Archives in Washington, DC.

Teacher’s Activities

The following are some activities that might be helpful in teaching the Declaration of Independence.

1. Keeping in mind that the DOI functions as a list of complaints or grievances, have the students construct their own list. From whom are they separating? Why?
2. Look for critical words in the first and second paragraphs. What are these words? What are their synonyms? Did Jefferson use the best words for what he was trying to accomplish?
3. Try to imagine King George III's reaction to the DOI? What would his reply have looked like?