



Chicago Historical Society



WE THE PEOPLE HAVE A FEW COMMENTS

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: One class period

Topic: Formulating a personal response to one of the Documents of Freedom

Subtopic: Document analysis of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence.

Teacher background information

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are often collectively referred to as the Documents of Freedom. As a group, these documents demonstrate the evolution of American democracy and freedoms. This lesson asks students to write personal responses to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. It is best used after students are familiar with the events leading to the writing of these documents, i.e. the Revolutionary War and early American government.

Key concept

Interpretations of historical documents change over time.

Key questions

Are these documents still relevant to our lives? If we could, how would we change these documents today based on our understanding of history and current events?

Goal of this lesson

This lesson aims to promote student responses regarding both the positive and negative aspects of the Documents of Freedom.

Objectives

1. Students will read an excerpt from a Document of Freedom worksheet to organize their thinking around a particular issue addressed in the document.
2. After studying the excerpt, students will craft a letter to the author of the document. Each letter will contain questions, suggestions for revisions, praise, and reflections on the importance of this document over time.
3. Students will then share their responses with the class.



Materials

Master copies of all student handouts are provided.

1. Worksheets for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights (one copy per student or group).

Each worksheet contains:

- a. Directions
- b. Excerpt
- c. Vocabulary List
- d. Response question

2. Scroll stationary (one per student or group)
3. Copies of the original versions of the Documents of Freedom (placed on display, optional)

Procedures

1. On the board, write the names of the following Documents of Freedom: the “Constitution,” the “Bill of Rights,” and the “Declaration of Independence.” Begin by brainstorming as a class: Are these documents still important in our lives today? What if the government or courts declared one or more void? Have the documents, or their application in society, evolved over time? If so, in what ways? The discussion should center on whether or not students believe these documents still matter to them as individuals
2. Inform the class that they will read sections of these documents to see how they address certain issues, including:
 - When is it appropriate to rebel and declare independence?
 - How is the president is elected?
 - Is the right to bear arms applicable today?
3. Distribute the document worksheets. Have students work individually or in small groups. Give each student or group one worksheet or the set. (Given time constraints and teaching purposes the number of documents used for this lesson can be limited.) Review the directions with students.

4. Allow students ample time to read the document. Afterward, ask students to write a letter to the author of the document. Remind students that their letter should contain questions, suggestions for revision, praise, and their reflections on the importance of this document over time.
5. Reconvene the class and have students share their letters and explain their responses.
6. Conclude the lesson with a discussion. Compare and contrast the documents. Why didn’t the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution create the level of freedom granted to Americans by the Bill of Rights? What other amendments were added to the Constitution? What amendments were repealed? What amendments were proposed but not passed? Do we need to create new documents to address specific freedoms to add to those that already exist? What role do the president and the legislature play in this process?

Suggestions for student assessment

Evaluate the students’ responses based on their understanding of the document and insightfulness.

Extension activities

1. Decorate a bulletin board or scrapbook. Ask students to recopy their responses on faux parchment paper. Students should use felt-tipped pens to write their response and quill pens to sign their names so that their document will resemble the actual style of the Documents of Freedom. Display their responses around a photocopy of the original document or bind them in book form.
2. Distribute students’ responses to the social studies faculty, local scholars, or another class. Ask the recipients to reply from the perspective of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, or Alexander Hamilton.

Additional resources

Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

Hakim, Joy. *From Colonies to Country: A History of US. vol. 3*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

O'Connell, Libby Haight, ed. "Save Our History: The Declaration of Independence" on the History Channel website at www.historychannel.com.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States 1492–Present*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1980.

National Archives website at www.nara.gov.

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:**English Language Arts**

State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 2: Read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras, and ideas.

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science

State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

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