



Chicago Historical Society



ROOTS OF THE DOCUMENTS OF FREEDOM

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: Three class periods

Topic: The evolution of the earliest American Documents of Freedom from earlier documents and the impact these documents had on the later Documents of Freedom.

Subtopic: Document analysis of the Magna Carta, the British Bill of Rights, the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and 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 explores the early influences on the Declaration of Independence 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

Legal systems are greatly influenced by earlier legal codes.

Key questions

What ideas from earlier documents influenced the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights? How did the Declaration of Independence influence later documents?

Goal of this lesson

During this lesson, students will learn how documents influenced each other in order to understand the development of representative democracies and how these democracies expressed their values through documents.

Objectives

1. Students will read excerpts from the Magna Carta, British Bill of Rights, Virginia Declaration of Rights, Declaration of Independence, Declaration of the Rights of Man, and Bill of Rights in chronological order.
2. Students will identify and highlight sections in the last five documents that use language and express ideas from earlier documents.
3. Students will discuss the ideas expressed in these documents that are cornerstones in creating a democracy and will reflect on how political ideals are shared and spread across time and place.



Materials

Master copies of all student handouts are provided.

1. Worksheets for the Magna Carta, British Bill of Rights, Virginia Declaration of Rights, Declaration of Independence, Declaration of the Rights of Man, and Bill of Rights (one set per student or group)

Each worksheet contains:

- a. Directions
- b. Excerpt
- c. Vocabulary list

Note: Each student or each group should receive the entire set of six documents. The Magna Carta worksheet should be copied on regular paper, and the other five documents should be photocopied on transparency paper. If the cost of transparencies is prohibitive, the teacher can work from a master set of transparencies at the overhead and the students can simply highlight on standard paper. If an overhead is not available, everyone can work on standard paper.

2. Red, blue, yellow, orange, and green markers for underlining or highlighting (one set per student or group)
3. Teacher answer key
4. Overhead projector (optional)

Procedures

1. On the board, write the names of the following Documents of Freedom: “Declaration of Independence” and “Bill of Rights.” Begin by brainstorming as a class: What types of rights do these documents actually grant to the individual? On the board, underneath each document name, write the rights students attribute to each document.

If students have trouble articulating these rights help them by using some of the following examples: For the Declaration of Independence, students might mention life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and in

times of extremely bad government the right to declare independence from the ruling power. For the Bill of Rights, they might mention the right to trial by jury, free speech, no cruel and unusual punishment, and the right to bear arms.

Follow the initial question and brainstorming by asking, “Did Thomas Jefferson and James Madison invent these ideas on their own? How did they come up with ideas described in these documents?” Inform the class that they will look for clues in documents from a variety of times and places to see how they influenced one another.

NOTE: If the number of documents seems too large, this activity can be easily adapted. This lesson works just as well with a comparison of the British Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence or the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. Students may also work individually or in small groups.

2. Distribute the Magna Carta worksheet. Review the directions and read the excerpt aloud or allow time for students to read the excerpt on their own. Explain that the Magna Carta is the earliest document in this set and that the following five documents will be compared to the Magna Carta and to each other. Which ideas in this document may have influenced later documents? Can they predict what those later documents might be? Record students’ responses on the board or on a large sheet of paper in chart form, leaving room for responses to each document.
3. Distribute the British Bill of Rights worksheet. Review the directions and read the excerpt aloud or allow time for students to read the excerpt on their own. What similarities can students identify between the British Bill of Rights and the Magna Carta? Students should underline or highlight in red any sections in the British Bill of Rights that they feel are similar to the Magna Carta. Discuss the sections students have selected. What are

the similarities in language, ideas, and types of rights? Which ideas in this document may have influenced later documents? Can they predict what those later documents might be? Add students' responses to the chart you began with the Magna Carta.

4. Repeat this process in chronological order for the document worksheets list below. Have students compare each document with all of the others that came before it. Instruct students to highlight influences from the earlier documents in the appropriate colors.
 - a. Virginia Declaration of Rights, June 1776 (color assignment: yellow)
 - b. Declaration of Independence, July 1776 (color assignment: orange)
 - c. Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789 (color assignment: green)
 - d. Bill of Rights, 1791 (color assignment: none)

After analyzing each document, repeat the discussion questions from Procedure #3 and add student responses to the chart.

5. Have students layer the highlighted document transparencies in chronological order, with the Magna Carta on the bottom and the Bill of Rights on the top. The underlining/highlighting should show through the stack. What observations can students make by viewing the layered documents? If you used regular paper, spread the documents out from left (Magna Carta) to right (Bill of Rights) to see the highlighting patterns.
6. Conclude with a discussion, referring to the highlighted documents and completed class chart. What ideas or rights stated in these documents are needed to build a representative democracy? Why doesn't one document completely outline all these ideas at once?

Why is it important for citizen's rights to be recorded in printed documents? Can rights be lost if they are not recorded in an official fashion? How are political ideals and thoughts about government shared, in the past and today? Why is this global idea exchange important?

Suggestions for student assessment

The highlighted series of documents can be used as an evaluative tool to determine if students mastered the content of this lesson.

Extension activities

Supplement this lesson with additional documents such as the feminist Declaration of Sentiments from the Seneca Falls Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Patient's Bill of Rights.

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.

Avalon Project at Yale School (Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy) website at www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm

National Archives website at www.nara.gov

Teacher Answer Key

The following key shows where influences from previous documents appear in later Documents of Freedom.

Color Code Key

Magna Carta. Red
 British Bill of Rights. Blue
 Virginia Declaration of Rights Yellow
 Declaration of Independence Orange
 Declaration of the Rights of Man Green

British Bill of Rights

- The last paragraph beginning with “That the freedom” and ending with “punishments inflicted” should be highlighted in red.

Virginia Declaration of Rights

- Section 8 should be highlighted in red.
- Section 9 should be highlighted in blue.

Declaration of Independence

- The first paragraph should be highlighted in yellow.
- Paragraphs two, three, and four, should be highlighted in blue.
- “For imposing taxes on us without consent” should be colored in blue.

Declaration of the Rights of Man

- The first paragraph should be highlighted in yellow.
- Article 1 should be highlighted in yellow.
- Articles 7 and 8 should be highlighted in yellow and red.
- Articles 10, 11, and 12 should be highlighted in yellow.

Bill of Rights

- Amendments I and II should be highlighted in both yellow and green.
- Amendment III should be highlighted in orange.
- Amendment IV should be highlighted in yellow.
- Amendment V should be highlighted in red and yellow.
- Amendment VI should be highlighted in yellow.
- Amendment VIII should be highlighted in blue.

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

- State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.
- State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.
- 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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