

Interview with Clifford Gold
Eighth Grade Teacher
Declaration of Independence

1. Overview (2:11)

Students tend to come into eighth grade knowing a little bit about the Declaration of Independence. They've learned a little bit about it in fourth grade and then in sixth grade history. They know that it was written, the primary author was Thomas Jefferson, and they know that it declared the colonies' independence from Great Britain, but they really don't know too much more beyond that. They don't read the document in fourth grade or sixth grade to any extent.

What I really wanted them to get out of it was a lot more than just an argument that we should declare our independence, that there were a couple of different audiences involved that Jefferson was aiming at when he wrote the document. And I wanted the students to see that it really was a very well organized legal argument for the colonies to declare their independence from Great Britain.

Before the day of the lesson, we go through the historical context. We talk a little bit about Jefferson. We talk about what was going on, the historical background, and the context surrounding the Declaration. We talk about the fight that the colonists had with Great Britain, the attempts by the colonists to make nice with the king in Parliament, and how that did not succeed very well. We also talk about what the major arguments were that the colonists had, the major grievances that they had with the King in Parliament.

It's a wonderful document to do in small group activities. It's a very organized document. It's eminently divisible. There are very, very distinct parts to the Declaration of Independence and you can. Again, the problem with a document like the Declaration of Independence is that it can be very intimidating. It looks big, the language is difficult, but because it's separated into separate and distinct sections, it's easy to have the students focus on one section and then deal with that section. And then when everyone's done and everyone's happy with it and understands what's going on, you move on to the next one.

2. Introduction (2:04)

A copy of the Declaration of Independence, a parchment type copy of the Declaration is on the desk. They have a draft or they have a version of the Declaration of Independence with vocabulary next to it out of their textbook, so if they have any problems with vocabulary, they can go straight to the textbook. And then we begin the lesson, and we walk through it section by section.

We started off with Jefferson's introduction to the Declaration of Independence and his discussion of natural rights, the inalienable rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and we get into a little bit of a discussion of where this came from.

Jefferson didn't just pull it out of thin air. John Locke, English philosopher, had talked about inalienable right of life, liberty, and property. When they see the language in the introduction, they immediately recognize that. So that's the first step.

We had also done close reading examination of George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, which Jefferson had a copy of when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. They noticed very quickly that although the language is a little bit different that Jefferson clearly borrowed some things from George Mason, and they found that to be very interesting. They always want to know whether it's plagiarism, or whether George Mason was annoyed by that.

They certainly recognize the language about unalienable rights. Among these are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." They always grab onto that.

On the parchment copy, they noticed—they're always very interested in how some of the letters are different from the way they are today. They noticed that there were a couple of typos on the parchment copy as well, and they thought that was pretty interesting. They realized that it was very, very difficult to read.

3. Audience (1:25)

And the hook that I used in connection with the Declaration of Independence was, you know, who is this written for? Everybody seems to think it was written primarily for the King in Parliament. But was there any other audience that Jefferson and the other authors had in mind?

I said if this was simply a matter of declaring the colonies' independence from Great Britain, it could have been done in two lines. And why does Jefferson set out a very, very organized logical legal argument? Who could he have been trying to persuade? One of the other things we had talked about in the class before was that the colonists were not unanimous in their desire to declare their independence from Great Britain and, in fact, those who were actively involved, or actively interested in declaring independence was probably a minority of colonists.

And we talked about the possibility that the document was aimed at persuading other colonists who were sort of sitting on the fence to join the group who were in favor of declaring independence.

The other audience we talked about were possible allies. The colonists certainly knew that there was going to be a war as a result of this, and perhaps this was aimed at explaining the colonists' position to potential allies—and we talked about France in that regard.

4. Grievances (0:53)

Then we moved to the grievances. It's a very difficult and very long section, so we divided it into five different sections. Each small group had their own section and were

responsible for explaining to the rest of the class what the grievances were about. The students, I think, are very, very surprised that the Declaration, when you get to grievances, it's a lot more than just "no taxation without representation." That's one of the eye-opening parts of the lesson for the students.

As a matter of fact as we moved past the Declaration into our discussion of the Constitution, and the students start reading the amendments to the Constitution, and they get to Number 3, they realize, "Oh, now I remember why, you know, this would be so high on their list." This was a real problem back when they were declaring independence from Great Britain.

5. Significance (2:10)

I want them to understand that this was not a decision that was taken lightly by the colonists. I view this as a legal brief where he gives the philosophical underpinnings as to why we should declare our independence. He gives the reasons. He demonstrates that we are unable to reach any kind of accord with the King in Parliament, and then we get right into the discussion about declaring our independence. Jefferson has the students in line with him at that point. They pretty well agree that the colonists have made an excellent argument to declare their independence.

Then we talk about the signatures. I ask the students to circle any of the names that ring a bell. They recognized John Hancock. They recognized Jefferson. We also talk a little bit about the fact that this was not—this was a very difficult decision to reach.

We move into a discussion of what these men had at risk, because in history books you always hear these were the leading minds of the time.

What I think gets glossed over occasionally is that these men were well aware that they were signing their death warrants if, in fact, we lost the war with Great Britain. If you look at their situation at the time they signed the Declaration of Independence, the odds were very much against them. It must have been a very sobering thing for them to sit down and sign their name. And I think that's the first time that the students really realized that these men were more than just intelligent, these were very brave people. And that's one of the lessons that I want them to pull out of the entire lesson.

We had a vote, and the students were very honest about it. A lot of them said, "I'm not sure I would have had the guts to do what they did." And then, of course, some of the more rambunctious students say, "Oh, yeah, I'm always on the cutting edge. I would have been right there signing the document. No problem at all." But it caused them to think about what these people were really doing.

6. Reading strategies (2:00)

I teach honors classes. I teach Special Ed classes as well, and usually the problems we get into are vocabulary problems, because if a student can't get past the vocabulary, they're

just going to stop, and they're going to turn off. So I'm very willing to help them if they're having some problems with vocabulary.

I ask them to try to figure out from the context of the language of the document what is going on, what the author is trying to get across and not worry too much about a particular word. The textbook that we use in conjunction with the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence is excellent when it comes to vocabulary, which is laid out alongside of the wording in the document.

And it varies from class to class. The honors classes tend to do that more than the lower level classes. But even those classes, if they're having problems with vocabulary, they're willing to look at the vocabulary, especially if they're interested in the document. If they're not interested in the document, you're never going to get that far. So you have to give them a hook to begin with to sort of get them into the whole discussion.

I think if I was doing it with a higher level honors class, I would have added a section, giving them copies of preliminary drafts of the Declaration of Independence and asking them to compare and contrast and see how the document changed over a fairly short period of time, and what they hypothesized the reasons were for the changes. Who were the authors trying to satisfy or placate? And did they think that the document that turned out to be the final version, was that a better version, or were perhaps one of the earlier drafts better versions?

7. Working with primary sources (2:58)

I did use the parchment for the first time and, frankly, I was a little skeptical at first. I wasn't exactly sure how much the students were going to get out of touching a piece of parchment. But students love touching things, and they understand that this was a little bit different from dealing with a document that's on a piece of paper, and the spelling and the lettering and the fact that they knew that this had to be written with a quill pen.

When I first started using primary sources, I would typically use them for honors classes. Over the past few years, ever since I've been involved with the Teaching American History program, it's very, very clear that no matter what level of class you're dealing with, they always get something out of the primary source.

They always come up with things that surprise me. So I think, if I was trying to describe how my use of primary sources has changed over the past few years, I use a lot more primary sources. Basically, we don't even hand out the textbook any more. The only time I use the textbook is the appendix where we have the copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

It does take preparation, and it may take a lot of contextual knowledge that you have to give them before hand, and then you have to work on the vocabulary, but there's no

question that the students get a lot more out of the primary sources than just standing up there and describing a document.

There are several documents that lead up to the writing of the Constitution, and when I first started teaching civics, I would talk about Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

And, I'd say, "This served as a model for the First Amendment Religion Clauses," and they'd go, "Okay." That's fine. And what I do now is I actually pull out excerpts from the Statute for Religious Freedom, I have them read it, and I say, "What does this sound like? "Where else have you heard this language?" And, "Isn't this sort of like what shows up in the First Amendment?" Then we sit down, and we take a look at the First Amendment, and we compare it to the Statute for Religious Freedom.

Or I'll take the Bill of Rights. We'll sit down and compare it to the Virginia Declaration of Rights. And I said, "Anyone see anything similar here?" And they go, "Wait a minute. These are identical." And that's always an "aha" moment for them. They always say, "Well, did George Mason get mad that James Madison sort of took his stuff?" So having them take a look at the documents and compare them is usually a very eye-opening situation for them, and I think they get a lot out of that.