

**Interview with Pam Gernerd  
Fourth Grade Teacher  
Declaration of Independence**

**1. Overview (1:43)**

I find the Declaration of Independence to be very difficult and yet I am very surprised at how well the students were able to really understand the document and reiterate what it was written for and just look at it as a real founding document for our country.

The lesson itself is designed to be three separate days, an hour of each day. The first day would've been the introduction to the document, going into the first two parts of the document. The second day I went into the third, fourth and fifth portions of the document and how it was broken up to study it in sections. And then the third day was the day that we looked at the last section and from there it gave the children time to culminate their ideas, working on their draft of their final project.

The use of primary sources in the classroom has been ongoing. Our social studies book, even though it is very basic, it does pull in various primary sources. I introduced it right at the very beginning of the year and I wanted them to have a clear understanding of the difference between a primary source, a secondary source, a reference source.

When it got closer to the Declaration itself, I brought in Thomas Paine's Common Sense. Briefly touched on the Proclamation of 1763 and about the unrest in the colonies of 1765. Talked about Lord Dunmore's war. Then we went into the Stamp Act and the tea tax and the children really saw it escalating and they would constantly talk about, "Well I would revolt too. I mean, they're taxing me, they're not letting me have my rights as a citizen, as a British citizen."

**2. SOLs/Objectives (1:44)**

We had the VS1 which is one of the social studies standards and the children are to identify and interpret artifacts in primary and secondary sources.

They need to seek ideas and opinions of others. The children would readily ask each other opinions. "Well what do you think it means?" Or simply ask questions of, "I don't know what that word is, we've got to find out." So they would ask each other ideas throughout their conversations. They also had to support their ideas and their opinions in their discussions. They are to be able to develop a writing plan. Which would have been the writing process itself starting with their drafts for their final project with the project itself.

And then the main standard for social studies would be in VS5 and here the children had to demonstrate their knowledge of the role of Virginia in the American Revolution and under that, the next step is to identify the reasons why the colonists went to war with England as expressed in the Declaration. They are doing comparing and contrasting of the ideas of the colonists versus the British government.

The students will identify the colonist's grievances and concerns for unfair treatment by the British king and parliament. They are to examine the purpose of the Declaration of

Independence as identified in the document. Another objective for the students is to look at cause and effect relationships. Identify and interpret a primary source.

Sequence events in Virginia's history and to interpret the grievances and concerns stated in the Declaration of Independence. And the final objective is for the children to produce a final product in a poster form that describes their understanding of the document and its parts.

### **3. Hook (1:00)**

Well first I started with the hook. I just went up in front of the room and simply said, "I have a question for you. How do you deal with grievances at home or how do you ask your parents or talk to your parents about something you don't agree with? So I made a list on the board. Even though I hadn't yet pulled the word "grievance" into it, all of their concerns or dislikes about their parent's decisions.

So we started out with a hook and then they kind of wondered why I asked that question. I said, "Well this is leading us into the British colonists and why they had their grievances." From there I'd simply put the word "grievance" up and said, "Now what is a grievance?"

The children called out their ideas of what the definition would be and they were very on target. It was dislikes, unhappiness, disillusionment. And so we went on to the definition that I had typed. "A wrong considered [as grounds for a complaint or something believed to cause distress. Example, unfair taxation is the chief grievance."

### **4. Document Exploration (1:43)**

Then I explained to them I was passing out the Declaration. The children could touch the parchment and actually crinkle it and hear it and feel it. And then I gave them a laminated form, so that they could write on it, the magnifying glasses and then a little questionnaire.

My directions were simply to look at the document, read the three questions and to make their observations. The three questions that I had given the students for their investigation were to write down key points and things you notice about the document. Simply what they were visually seeing. To write down any questions that came to mind as they looked at the document and is the document easy to read? What is different about the text, the font and spelling of the words in the document?

They wanted to know where they stored all this paper in that size. The biggest thing was the spelling. They were rather disturbed that it wasn't written with paragraphs and there were a lot of run on sentences. They used the magnifying glasses, they loved it because they could really enlarge the print and really make observations. And then we went in to talk about the length and time it took to produce this with a pen and ink.

I asked them such questions as, "What did you see? What surprised you about the document?" Words that they wanted to look up.

Then I asked them to write down any questions they had about the document and the basic questions the children had asked was, “Why did John Hancock sign in the center? Why was his so big?” And then we backed up and I did bring up that they were building it up to address to the world, not only to the king and to the parliament, they were addressing it to their own people in the colonies and to the British people in England.

### **5. Preamble/Statement of Beliefs (1:50)**

And then we read through the preamble and the children had to look at this and have a discussion about what was the goal of the writers. I’d also given the children some of the vocabulary with simplified definitions. The next question was, “Why are they writing this document?” And the preamble leads them into why they were writing the document and they would write down their ideas of what the writers were saying in the document. And I asked the children to make a prediction of what will come next in the document based on what they’ve read in the preamble.

It states that, “To secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” They understood just powers, meaning they had the right, the power, to do it as a government. When it came to the word “men” the kids still are fixating on the fact that women don’t have rights at this time period.

Then where it states “That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its power in such forms as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness.” They understood that part of it. That it was so bad, that the majority of the people felt the need to make change, to govern themselves.

But in the end the children walked away with understanding that these were the colonists’ beliefs of why they had a right to break away. I really wanted them to look at the writers themselves and what they were really trying to say. What was their goal? What were they really trying to address in that paragraph?

### **6. Grievances (0:36)**

Here the hook is quickly asking them questions about what is a grievance again. Who is stating the grievances? Why are they writing the Declaration of Independence? Then I had the children into their small groups. Each group received their own complaints And I asked them to write a brief description of each complaint in their own words.

The second question was, who is “he” that the colonists referred to in the grievances, and who were the colonists blaming for their grievances? “He” being of course the king, had alone, the will or the right to make decisions for the people.

One of the grievances, “for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us.” Well they didn’t know what quartering was so it was. So they went and looked it up. They had their own little discussion about what it would be like to have soldiers live in your house. The children also felt it was interesting that they had no civil powers, meaning that they had no rights or ability to voice their opinions when it came to the military in the second grievance.

I had also given each of the groups the entire list of grievances as a future reference. And throughout these, it talks more about most valuable laws and how the altering of the government, that—how the king had taken away the Charters. And the children immediately go back to the early Charters that we had talked about in our early study of Virginia’s history. Then they all in the end wanted to go and read all of the grievances.

So this section worked really well. The kids really did understand that they had given their grievances in the past, but they weren’t addressed, they were ignored or worse yet, there was a retaliation on the colonists.

### **7. Declaration and Signers (3:04)**

“What words from the paragraph actually declare the colonist’s independence?” was the first question. The second question was, “what rights and powers do they state that they now have?” And then I went through this particular paragraph, the declaring independence and we discussed it.

But the kids really understood this section without a lot of explanation other than reading it and talking about each one of them. Appealing, they understood that. They understood when it comes to understanding their rights, meaning they as a people and their government, now had the rights to wage war, to conclude peace.

And in this part on the last day, we look at the signers of the Declaration. I give list of the signers of the Declaration. And then I do read to them. Dr. Rosie Zagari states: “The stakes were very high. What people didn’t like to think about is that these delegates were becoming outlaws. They were operating outside of the official rules that governed the legal system of Britain. They were establishing a separate nation. Looking back, we can put this patriotic halo around it. From Britain’s point of view, what the colonists were doing was disloyal, wrong, treasonable.”

What they really gravitated to was her last word which was “treasonable” and that’s exactly what I hoped they would do. Because I wanted them to know that what was being done by the writers and the colonists, was treason, and in that, there was punishment.

My directions were to simply look at the list, the signings again the signatures. I did give them three questions to think about “Which names on this list of signatures do you recognize? Circle the names that you recognize.” The next question is, “Would you have signed the document? Why or why not? What might have happened if the Americans had lost the war against Britain?” And, “What were the risks associated with writing and signing the documents?”

They were fascinated that Ben Franklin was on here, they noticed Samuel Adams and John Adams, I don’t think there was a single child in my classroom that would not have signed this document. They had such strong feelings after looking at the document, studying history.

“What if the colonists had lost the war? What if George Washington lost in New York before this document had been finished?” You know, what would have happened? And immediately the children were coming up with ideas. “We would still be a colony of England.”

The final wrap up was to just go over every day, very briefly, what we had covered.

## **8. Student Projects (2:28)**

And in here I give them directions that they have analyzed a primary source, the Declaration of Independence and it's now going to be their time to share their understanding of the document.

They needed to include six sections, the six sections that we had broken the document into, on their poster. The preamble, the beliefs, then the complaints, the attempts to address the grievances, the Declaration of Independence, the paragraph where they are actually declaring the independence, and then the signers.

I encourage them to use the questions and their answers from each of the sections to help them explain what their understanding is. So then I go into just the basics of the outline of the Declarations project and I tell them, it is theirs, run with it. To just start thinking of how they would tell a reader what the preamble meant to them. We did all the drafting work in class and then the final building was done at home.

This young man, he had spaced it out so that it was visual. It says, "In the preamble, we learned that this is the beginning of the Declaration of Independence. They wrote it to remind Great Britain about other documents they wrote to England. The goal of the writers is to tell England that they want to break political ties and be independent from England. They want to be their own country.

Under beliefs, the beliefs of the writers was that all men are created equal. The greatest of these beliefs is that all men have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Also, when the government doesn't act right, that they should be able to break away and form a new government. The writers wrote it to say that America should be their own independent government.

They said they would have to break away because things were not changing. They tried to work it out but they never would listen. Then when they declared independence, they said that the united colonies were free and independent form the state of Great Britain. They said as free states, they have the full power to levy taxes, declare war and conclude peace.

Also, Thomas Jefferson was the father of the Declaration of Independence. There is also—there also were some future presidents like John Adams."

## **9. Teaching Tips (1:24)**

The first time you do this, it's going to take longer. Once you've done it, you have a feel for how children are going to react and work independently in the small groups, or as a whole group.

I frequently have them seated in groups of four or five, possibly six. I don't like sitting the children in rows and isolating them. I believe the children are learners from each other as well as teachers of each other. I don't group them according to high readers and simply low readers. I

usually think about having a person who's a very good writer, who is a very good reader and the other children will pick up on their abilities.

It's always been a part of Virginia's history when we teach Virginia history in fourth grade. But until I really dove into this project, I never realized how much I didn't know. And I did a lot of research, I went online. I would go and grab information in books and textbooks and reference material and I really researched the document itself. Just when you feel good about what you know about history, it's easier to do a lesson.

My other thought about primary sources, I want to use even more than I've already used. And I try to have a lot of hands on, even if it's a piece of paper such as the document. If the kids can hold it, if they can touch it, other than in a book, it makes such a difference to them remembering it, understanding it and wanting to learn more.