

The Editing of the Declaration of Independence

Submitted by admin on Sun, 07/04/2010 - 01:52

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Summary:

Perfect for perfectionists - take a look at Jefferson's rough draft, with many crossouts and changes. Kids may also be interested to learn that Thomas Jefferson was pretty upset about how the Continental Congress further edited his original document.

Here's a few possible assignments that can get kids thinking more deeply about Independence Day:

- 1) Read the final Declaration together, answering questions, and then ask the student to write it in their own words, as if they were telling a friend what the Declaration is about.
- 2) What was Jefferson thinking as he wrote the first draft? Does anything strike you about his edits? What was he trying to achieve? (Some of the edits were likely made directly by Benjamin Franklin and possibly John Adams.)
- 3) Why did the Continental Congress edit in the way that it did? Why was Jefferson upset about it? (Many minor edits may have simply weakened the prose by adding caveats, but note that the whole paragraph condemning the slave trade was removed.)
- 4) Where did the ideas in the Declaration come from? This one requires the most research, and it depends how far back you would like to go - but the evolution of ideas can be a fascinating study!
- 5) Here's a smaller bite: according to Walter Isaacson in [Benjamin Franklin: An American Life](#), Franklin crossed out the word 'sacred' and changed it to 'self-evident' as in 'We hold these truths to be self-evident'. Why might he have done that? (You can tell Franklin's edits, according to Isaacson, because he crossed things out with thick backslashes, different than Jefferson's editing style.)

For more reading:

[Declaration of Independence with the Continental Congress' edits shown in brackets](http://wsu.edu/~dee/AMERICA/DECLAR.HTM) (<http://wsu.edu/~dee/AMERICA/DECLAR.HTM>)

[Library of Congress exhibits on the Declaration of Independence](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffdec.html) (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffdec.html>)

[Library of Congress timeline and links](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DeclarInd.html) (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DeclarInd.html>)

[Discussion of how the Declaration was drafted and the other documents it drew upon](http://www.thedeclarationofindependence.org/) (<http://www.thedeclarationofindependence.org/>)

[Wikipedia article discussing 'happiness' vs 'property'](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life,_liberty_and_the_pursuit_of_happiness) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life,_liberty_and_the_pursuit_of_happiness)

The images below are in the public domain, so feel free to reproduce them. The upper image is the 'polished' rough draft that Jefferson shared with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and most likely includes some of their edits as well. The lower image is a fragment of one of Jefferson's original or very early drafts - and is even messier. The 'polished' rough draft would make a great poster!

([The Bridgeman Art Library, Ltd. v. Corel Corporation, 97 Civ. 6232 \(LAK\)](#) (<http://www.constitution.org/111/court/fed/bridgman.html>) — Ruling that photographic or digital images of public domain art works are not copyrightable)

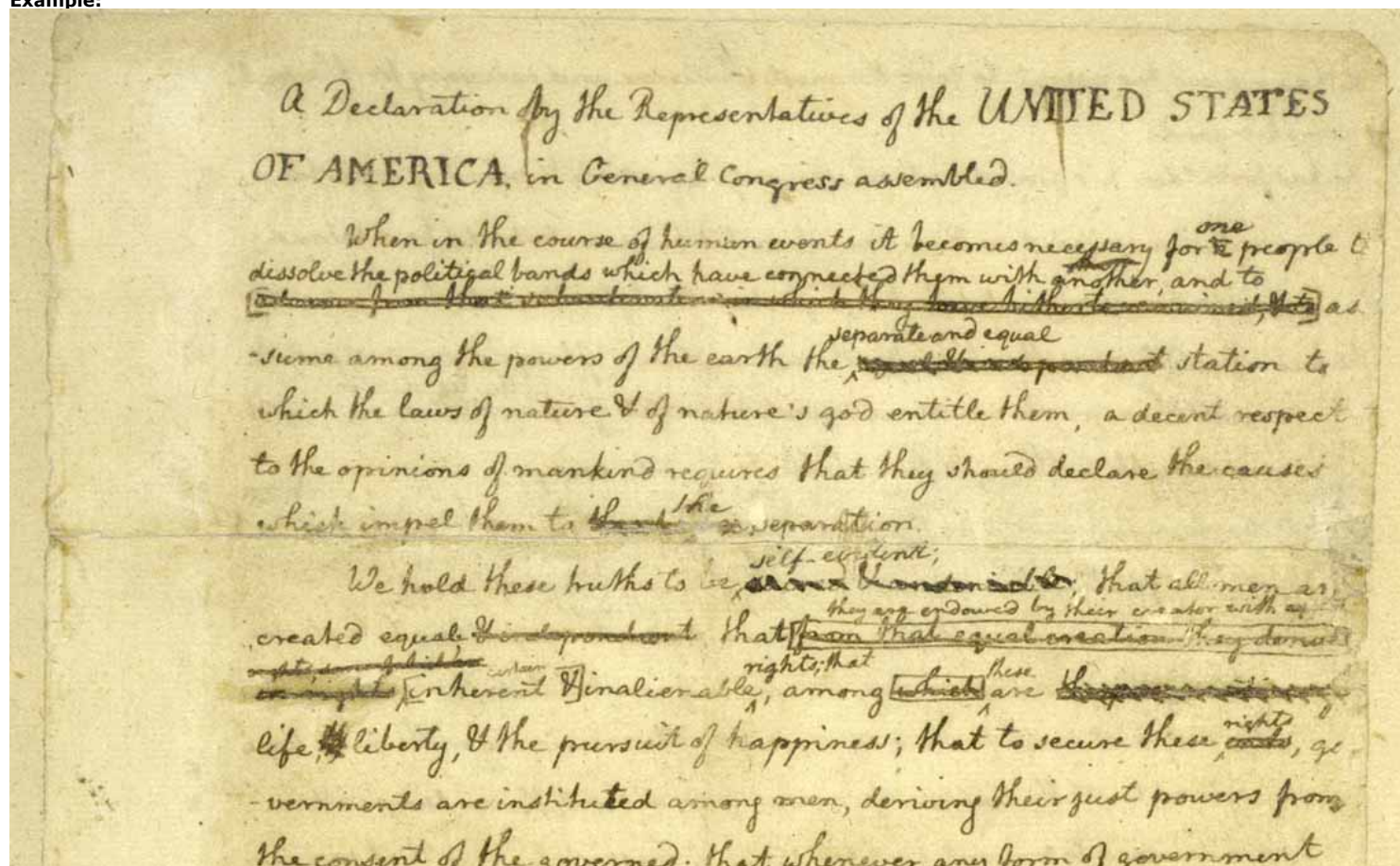
Down to Grade/Age:

3rd Grade

Up thru Grade/Age:

High School

Example:



shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying it's foundation on such principles & organising it's powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. Providence indeed will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes: and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. but when a long train of abuses & usurpations [beginning at a distinguished period] & pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to ~~reduce~~ reduce them ^{under absolute Despotism} ~~to a despotic power~~, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & such is now the necessity which constrains them to ^{alter} expunge their former systems of government. the history of ^{the} present ^{King of Great Britain} ~~reign~~ ^{repeated} is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations, [among which, ^{appears no solitary fact} ~~no fact of a single kind~~] to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, [all of which ^{in all these things} have] in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, [for the truth of which we pledge a faith not unswayed by falsehood]

[illegible]

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 10th inst. in relation to the proposed appointment of a new member of the Board of Directors of the New York and Hudson River Railroad Company. I have the honor to inform you that the Board of Directors of the New York and Hudson River Railroad Company have decided to accept of the appointment of Mr. J. M. Smith as a member of the Board of Directors of the New York and Hudson River Railroad Company. I have the honor to inform you that the Board of Directors of the New York and Hudson River Railroad Company have decided to accept of the appointment of Mr. J. M. Smith as a member of the Board of Directors of the New York and Hudson River Railroad Company.