Reasons for Independence

Read the Declaration's argument, then test how its ideals fit its time.

SS24.US1.1c "Summarize the main arguments within the Declaration of Independence, its rationale for separation from Great Britain, and its ideas of equality, liberty, natural rights, and the rule of law."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Read the passage. Underline the Declaration's main claim about government, number two reasons it gives for separation, and circle one sentence that shows a gap between its ideals and life in 1776.

Making the Case for Separation

1. In July 1776, delegates from thirteen British colonies approved the Declaration of Independence. It was more than a notice that they were leaving an empire: it argued why a people may change their government. The authors declared that "all men are created equal" and possess rights no ruler grants, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Governments exist to protect these rights and get their authority from the consent of the governed. If a government repeatedly destroys those purposes, the people may change or replace it. The Declaration also warns against changing governments for minor or temporary reasons.

2. To support separation, the Declaration listed complaints against King George III rather than asking readers to trust a bare claim. It charged him with dissolving representative legislatures and keeping judges dependent on his will. It also accused the British government of imposing taxes without the colonists' consent. These examples linked liberty to the rule of law: power should answer to laws and to the people, not simply to a monarch's wishes. The authors said the colonies had petitioned for relief, but their petitions brought only further harm. They presented independence as a response to a pattern of abuses, not one disputed tax.

3. The Declaration then announced that the colonies were "Free and Independent States," able to make war, conclude peace, form alliances, and trade. This conclusion followed its argument: people have rights, governments must protect them with their consent, and a long pattern of abuses can justify a new government. Yet the promise of equality did not match life in 1776. Enslaved people remained in bondage, and women and Native peoples were not included as equal participants in the new political system. The Declaration did not resolve those contradictions. Later generations would use its words to challenge laws and practices that denied people equal rights.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the Declaration connect equality and natural rights to the purpose of government?

2. Why did the authors present separation as a response to a pattern of abuses rather than a single complaint?

3. Choose two complaints in the passage. Explain how each challenges consent or the rule of law.

4. What new political status did the Declaration claim, and what contradiction remained in its promise of equality?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write an 85 to 110 word speech to a town meeting in 1776 arguing whether separation is justified. Use one principle from the Declaration and two different grievances from the passage, address a possible objection, and end by noting one gap between its ideals and life in 1776.

ANSWER KEY

Reasons for Independence

GRADE 10 · SS24.US1.1c

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Read the passage. Underline the Declaration's main claim about government, number two reasons it gives for separation, and circle one sentence that shows a gap between its ideals and life in 1776. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the Declaration connect equality and natural rights to the purpose of government?	**It says people are created equal and have rights no ruler grants. Governments exist to protect those rights and gain authority from the governed.**
2	Why did the authors present separation as a response to a pattern of abuses rather than a single complaint?	**They listed multiple abuses and said petitions for relief had brought further harm. They argued that repeated violations justified changing the government.**
3	Choose two complaints in the passage. Explain how each challenges consent or the rule of law.	**Dissolving representative legislatures weakened the people's voice in government. Keeping judges dependent on the king threatened decisions based on law rather than his wishes.**
4	What new political status did the Declaration claim, and what contradiction remained in its promise of equality?	**It declared the colonies free and independent states. Enslaved people remained in bondage, while women and Native peoples were not equal participants in the new political system.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Neighbors, some say we should remain with Britain because changing a government is dangerous. The Declaration agrees that a government should not be replaced for a small complaint. But our rights require a government that answers to the people. The king has dissolved our representative legislatures and kept judges dependent on his will. These acts form a pattern that threatens both consent and the rule of law. Separation would let us establish a government meant to protect liberty. Still, we must confront a painful contradiction: enslaved people remain in bondage despite the Declaration's claim of equality.

Accept either a case for separation or a case against it if the student accurately applies the Declaration's principles and grievances. For question 3, taxes without consent also support an explanation about consent.