A Promise Tested

Three documents examine who shares in American equality.

RI.9-10.9 "Analyze documents of historical and literary significance, including how they address related themes and concepts."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each document's claim about equality or freedom, then circle a detail showing who did not share in that promise. Use your marks to compare how the documents address the same ideal.

Who Was Included?

1. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence made a public case for the American colonies to break from Britain. Addressing the world as well as the British crown, its authors claimed that 'all men are created equal' and possess rights, including liberty. They argued that governments gain power from the consent of the governed, then listed acts by the king that, in their view, violated those rights. The document presents equality as a reason to create a new government. Yet its promise did not give enslaved people freedom or women a vote, leaving later readers to ask who counted among 'the governed.'

2. At the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, women's rights advocates adopted the Declaration of Sentiments. Its opening echoes the earlier declaration but changes the claim to 'all men and women are created equal.' The delegates also listed grievances, including laws that denied women a voice in making the rules they had to obey. They demanded voting rights, turning the founders' test of legitimate government back on the United States. Rather than reject the 1776 ideal, this document asks the nation to apply it more widely. Its familiar structure helped readers recognize both the borrowed promise and the missing half of its original wording.

3. Four years later, Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery, spoke in Rochester, New York, during Independence Day celebrations. In 'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?' he praised the courage of the founders but refused to treat their achievement as freedom for everyone. While his audience could celebrate, enslaved people still faced bondage. Douglass used the holiday itself to show the distance between a national ideal and lived reality. Like the Seneca Falls delegates, he pressed listeners to measure American equality against the people it left out. Unlike their declaration, his speech makes a celebration feel painfully divided.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the Declaration of Sentiments use the Declaration of Independence's claim about equality, and what does it change?

2. Both the Seneca Falls delegates and Douglass identify people left out of an American promise. Whom does each focus on, and how does each show the exclusion?

3. How does Douglass's treatment of the founders' achievement differ from the Declaration of Independence's treatment of independence?

4. The Declaration of Sentiments borrows an earlier document's wording, while Douglass centers a national holiday. How does each choice help examine the gap between an ideal and reality?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 100 word museum label that places the three documents in an order you choose, not necessarily by date. Use one detail from each to show how their views of equality speak to one another, explain your order, and end with a question for visitors.

A Promise Tested

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each document's claim about equality or freedom, then circle a detail showing who did not share in that promise. Use your marks to compare how the documents address the same ideal. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the Declaration of Sentiments use the Declaration of Independence's claim about equality, and what does it change?	**It echoes 'all men are created equal' but adds women, applying the earlier claim to people denied a political voice.**
2	Both the Seneca Falls delegates and Douglass identify people left out of an American promise. Whom does each focus on, and how does each show the exclusion?	**The delegates focus on women, citing laws made without their voice and demanding votes. Douglass focuses on enslaved people, contrasting their bondage with others' Independence Day celebration.**
3	How does Douglass's treatment of the founders' achievement differ from the Declaration of Independence's treatment of independence?	**The Declaration presents independence as a way to protect rights. Douglass praises the founders but argues that their achievement has not brought freedom to enslaved people.**
4	The Declaration of Sentiments borrows an earlier document's wording, while Douglass centers a national holiday. How does each choice help examine the gap between an ideal and reality?	**The borrowed wording makes women's absence from the earlier claim visible. The holiday contrasts a public celebration of liberty with the continued bondage of enslaved people.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Begin with Douglass's speech: his divided holiday makes visitors feel the cost of a promise not kept. Next, display the Declaration of Independence, which says governments need the consent of the governed. Last, place the Declaration of Sentiments, whose revised claim includes women and whose voting demand tests that idea. This order moves from the harm of exclusion to the principle behind the promise, then to one way people tried to widen it. Who gets to decide when a nation has made its promise real?

Accept comparisons grounded in the passage, even if students describe the shared ideal as liberty rather than equality. For the museum label, accept any order supported by a distinct detail from each document and a relevant final question.