Rights and Reasons

Read the Declaration's ideas alongside the colonists' complaints.

8.C.1.5 "Analyze the significance of the Declaration of Independence as a founding statement of American thought on the constitutional republic and the purpose of government..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline claims about rights, consent, and changing government. Circle each specific British action named, then draw an arrow from one circled action to a claim it threatens.

Why Declare Independence?

1. In 1776, a colonist reading a draft of the Declaration of Independence might ask a hard question: When may people replace a government? Thomas Jefferson drafted the document, the Committee of Five reviewed it, and Congress revised and adopted it on July 4. Jefferson drew on Enlightenment ideas, including John Locke's belief that people have natural rights that rulers do not give them. The Declaration calls rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness "unalienable." It says governments exist to secure those rights, not to rule for a king's benefit.

2. The Declaration argues that a government gains its "just powers from the consent of the governed." This idea is part of a social contract: people accept a government's authority because it protects their rights. If a government repeatedly destroys those rights, the people may alter or abolish it and create a new one. The colonists did not list only ideas. They charged King George III with dissolving colonial legislatures and refusing to approve useful colonial laws. Without working representative assemblies, colonists had fewer ways to give or withhold consent to government decisions.

3. Other complaints joined economics to political power. The Declaration accused the king of imposing taxes without colonial consent and cutting off colonial trade with other parts of the world. Taxes raised costs, while trade limits threatened merchants and workers. Some colonists also drew on religious beliefs about conscience and freedom, although the Declaration did not list a religious grievance. These different influences helped build an argument for independence: a government that ignores consent and harms rights has broken its side of the social contract.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does Locke's view of natural rights support the Declaration's stated purpose of government?

2. Why would dissolving colonial legislatures weaken the “consent of the governed”?

3. Choose one economic complaint from the passage. How does it support the colonists' argument for independence?

4. How did religious beliefs influence some arguments for independence, and how did that differ from the complaints listed in the Declaration?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a town council repeatedly cancels elections and imposes taxes without a vote by elected representatives. In four sentences, explain which principles from the Declaration this violates, why changing the council might be justified, and one step residents could take to make their government more accountable.

ANSWER KEY

Rights and Reasons

GRADE 8 · 8.C.1.5

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline claims about rights, consent, and changing government. Circle each specific British action named, then draw an arrow from one circled action to a claim it threatens. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does Locke's view of natural rights support the Declaration's stated purpose of government?	**If rights belong to people rather than being granted by rulers, government's purpose is to protect those rights.**
2	Why would dissolving colonial legislatures weaken the “consent of the governed”?	**It removed representative assemblies through which colonists could have a voice in government decisions.**
3	Choose one economic complaint from the passage. How does it support the colonists' argument for independence?	**Accept either taxes imposed without colonial consent, which violated the principle of consent, or trade cut off, which harmed colonists' livelihoods and supported their claim that the government was not protecting their interests.**
4	How did religious beliefs influence some arguments for independence, and how did that differ from the complaints listed in the Declaration?	**Some colonists drew on beliefs about conscience and freedom, but the Declaration did not list a religious grievance. Its listed complaints included specific political and economic actions.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

By canceling elections, the council denies residents a meaningful way to consent to its authority. Its taxes without a representative vote also ignore the principle of consent. Because these abuses happen repeatedly, residents could argue that the council has broken its social contract and should be changed. They could demand new elections and rules requiring elected representatives to approve taxes.

Accept other well-supported links between a complaint and the principles of rights or consent. For Part 3, look for an explanation of repeated abuse and a specific step that would restore accountability.