

Declaration of Independence Timeline Activity

Declaration of Independence Timeline Teaching Notes

Summary:

The words “all men are created equal” have echoed throughout history. Since 1776, there have been approximately 120 declarations of independence made by different countries and different peoples. This activity will explore the impact of these words by building a timeline of significant events, historical documents, and moments in time when the American Declaration of Independence has been used to advocate for the expansion of human rights. Ultimately, student will answer the question “How have the words and ideas in the Declaration of Independence impacted human rights around the world?”

How to make a Declaration of Independence Timeline:

Pass out cards in random order. Have students (working in pairs, small groups, or individually, depending on group size) put themselves in chronological order using the dates as their guide. Give students time to read their card and become familiar with its content. Then, have students read their cards aloud in chronological order, including date, quote, and source information (assistance may be necessary). Follow up with discussion/questions.

Things to know:

1. You don't have to use all eleven cards. Use the cards that best fit your group's interests and abilities.
2. Choose a place to do this where students can see and hear each other. Be aware of how long it may take – likely not less than ten or fifteen minutes, depending on how many cards you use and how long you discuss them. Make sure they know where the timeline starts (“Oldest cards on that end.”) and ends (“More recent cards on this end.”) Students are used to seeing timelines “start” on the left and “end” on the right.
3. Encourage the students during the read-aloud. There are some challenging words and quotes. Take the time to help students through these words, providing definitions and support when necessary.
4. Be familiar with the historical content of the cards you use and how they relate to one another. There are some interesting facts and patterns you may wish to point out and talk about. For example:
 1963. Abraham Lincoln quotes the DOI when he gives the Gettysburg Address in 1863, exactly 100 years before MLK's “I have a dream” speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. MLK stands in front of the Lincoln Memorial when he gives this speech, referencing both the DOI and Lincoln himself. Exactly 50 years later (2013) you see Barack Obama, America's first African-American President, also quoting the DOI in his

second inaugural address. Pull these three cards forward when discussing this connection.

1964. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harvey Milk were all assassinated. Reagan survived an attempted assassination.
 1965. Many of the cards represent the DOI's global legacy (France, India, China, and Tunisia) and illustrate that the spread of democracy is ongoing, and more than just an American story.
 1966. The "ball of liberty" quote on the last card was written at Monticello – something that's worth pointing out if you're doing this activity at Monticello.
5. Cards are not meant to represent a completed or finished goal; most are merely the start of an ongoing struggle (the DOI itself, women's rights, civil rights, self-governance and anti-colonialism, gay rights, etc.). This supports the larger point – that the fight for equality is never-ending and ever-changing. It can progress or regress depending on the will and the actions of the people.
 6. Talk about the cards and issues that are most interesting to your students. Encourage them to do additional research on the people and issues represented on the timeline. *ASK: Looking at this timeline, how have Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence echoed throughout American/World history? Whose rights do you see being represented by these cards? Who is missing? What does this tell us about the power of ideas? Do you believe ideas alone can produce change?*

Question & Prompts for additional consideration & discussion:

1. What does "all men are created equal" mean to you?
2. What victories in the struggle for human rights are missing from this timeline?
3. If rights can be gained, can they also be lost?
4. Is "all men are created equal" being lived up to in our country today? When will we know when it is?
5. Why do you think Thomas Jefferson's words have been echoed as often as they have?
6. What patterns do you notice within this timeline?
7. Whose stories and struggles are represented on this timeline? Whose would you add?
8. The Declaration of Independence was written over 200 years ago (242, to be exact!). Will it still be relevant in another 250 years?
9. How have the words and ideas in the Declaration of Independence impacted human rights around the world?

Relevant Thomas Jefferson Quotes:

"...wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government." – 1789

"...this ball of liberty, I believe most piously, is now so well in motion that it will roll round the globe. at least the enlightened part of it, for light & liberty go together." – 1795

"...if a nation expects to be ignorant & free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was & never will be." – 1816

"I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past." – 1816

“...the boisterous sea of liberty is never without a wave.” – 1820

Thomas Jefferson
MONTICELLO