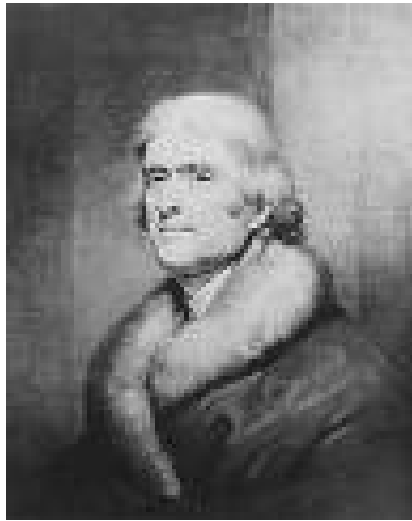


Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence



Writing and Comprehension Strategies for Elementary Students

Theresa Sweeney
Digiorgio School
Arvin, CA

*In the spring of 1776, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston gathered in Philadelphia to draft the Declaration of Independence. Since Thomas Jefferson was considered the most gifted writer on the committee, he **drafted** (wrote the first copy) the document. The Declaration was a letter to England notifying the British Parliament of the colonists reasons for forming a new government. Jefferson's words were **radical** (new and very different); he argued that the king no longer met the needs of the colonists. Jefferson felt that if a government was not meeting the needs of the governed, it must be replaced. In other words, the king and its government served the people.*

*In the years leading up to 1776, the colonist felt the British government was not acting in their interests. When the British government passed the Stamp Act (1765), colonists argued they were being taxed without representation. Over the next decade, the colonists began to organize. In 1774, representatives gathered at the first Continental Congress, to list their **grievances**.(complaints) King George III did not respond and called the colonists rebels. Armed conflicts had begun, and in 1776 the Declaration of Independence was published.*

This document is not only significant because it marks our nation's beginning, but because of the words of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's argument that "all men are created equal," and of a man's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," have been held as our country's core values. His words have inspired movements for equality not only in our country, but in nations around the world.

Setting: Students in grades 2nd-5th are the primary audience for these activities. However, the activities can be adapted and are suitable for younger and older students. The activities are not only appropriate for studying Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, but are useful for other areas of the curriculum. The focus is primarily on writing, and the strategies are specifically useful for English Language Learners.

Purpose: In “*Notes on the State of Virginia*,” Thomas Jefferson wrote of the need for an educated population. A “government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people. The people themselves are its only safe depositories.” Our purpose, as educators, is to pass along the wonder and principles of the Declaration of Independence to the next generation.

Outcomes: Students need to know the events which led to the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Students should have background knowledge of the author, Thomas Jefferson. Students should be able to write a summary of the events and an age appropriate biography of Jefferson.

Instructional Resources: Classroom text, or grade appropriate materials describing the events of the era.

Suggested texts:

If You Lived at the Time of the American Revolution by Kay Moore and illustrated by Daniel O’Leary.

Thomas Jefferson (History Maker Bios Series) by Victoria Sherrow and Tim Parlin

Revolutionary War on Wednesday by Mary Pope Osborne

Who Was Thomas Jefferson by Dennis Brindell Fradin and John O’Brien

Instructional Process:

After studying the events that led up to the writing of the Declaration of Independence, students will recall the events verbally. Summarizing, according to educational researcher, Robert Marzano, is one of the most effective instructional strategies. In the following activities, students will first summarize as a group activity. Next they will summarize in small groups, and finally individually on a summarizing template. The final step is taking the information and writing an age appropriate summary individually.

ACTIVITY 1

Step 1: Summary Squares

In my classroom I have five squares painted on the floor, large enough to stand in. The first is green and has ‘First’ written in it. The next three are yellow: “Then, Next, and Later.” The final square is red and “Last” is written in it. (Students can also hold up cards with the transitional words written on them). Five students are chosen and each takes a square to recall the events of what we are studying. I use visual cues for the English Language Learners by holding up the text. If the material is especially important, such as the Declaration of Independence, we will repeat the process a few times using different students.

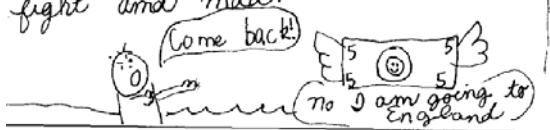
Kindergartners using summary squares:



Step 2: Small Group Summary: Problem and Solution

Each student takes a blank piece of paper and folds it into fourths. In the first square a **character** is drawn and some information is given about the main character. That paper is handed to another student. (Each student is writing at each new exchange). Now each student has a paper, started by another child, with a character in the upper left hand corner. Now the **setting** is drawn and described-in this activity, the setting of the Declaration of Independence. That paper is handed to a third, and different, student. In the third square, students write the **problem** that led to the colonist decision to declare independence. *Note: Historians are not in total agreement of the root cause of breaking free of England-some may argue taxes, while other side lack of representation.* In the final two squares, students don't have to make a picture. The paper is handed to a fourth and final student to write the **solution** to the problem.

Student Sample: (Note: The first student identifies Jefferson as the 3rd president even though it was 26 years before he becomes president).

<p>Character: Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was the 3rd president of the United States.</p> 	<p>Setting: Philadelphia in a 2 story house on the edge of town in 1776.</p> 
<p>Problem: Thomas Jefferson was unhappy because England was the boss of America and keeps on taxing and taxing the colonists so much. Taxing is taking people's money. Some taxing is okay but too much makes the colonists fight and mad.</p> 	<p>SOLUTION: THOMAS JEFFERSON took ideas from John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston and sat in his room and wrote the Declaration of Independence. On July 4, 1776 the Continental Congress met to sign it. People cheered in the streets because they were not happy with England.</p> 

Step 3: Summary Squares Template

Using the past two activities, students fill in their own summary squares. Although I used “first, next, then, later, and last,” as transitions, older students should be encouraged to use a wider range of transitions. Editing and corrections should be made here before Step four.

Sample Template:

First	Next	Then	Later	Last

Step 4: Individual Evaluation

Students write their own essay describing the events leading to the Declaration of Independence.

ACTIVITY 2: Reading the Declaration of Independence

Step 1: Discussion



Begin by drawing a Venn diagram and labeling it “Child” on one side, and “Adult” on the other. Talk about what children do, what adults can do, and what both can do. This can lead to a discussion about independence. At one time the colonies felt they needed England, but as they grew, they felt a need for *independence*.

Step 2: Frontloading Vocabulary

The Declaration of Independence is a difficult text for children. Before reading, select words you feel will be challenging (e.g. dissolve, liberty, pursuit, inalienable). Students can complete the following vocabulary worksheet before reading. For most elementary children, reading beyond the middle of the second paragraph would be difficult. Fortunately, there is so much to enjoy and discuss in those first two paragraphs:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

<p>Word: <u>liberty</u></p> <p>Sentence: My teacher gave us the <u>liberty</u> to choose an activity.</p>  	<p>Synonym: freedom</p> <p>Antonym: suppression</p> <p>Definition: The freedom to act as one wishes without being forced.</p>
<p>Sentence</p> <p>My teacher gave us the <u>liberty</u> to choose an activity.</p>	<p>Synonym/Antonym</p> <p>Synonym: freedom</p> <p>Antonym: suppression</p>

Activity 3: Writing a biography

In order to better understand the Declaration of Independence, read-or have students read- a biography of our third president.

Research has found note taking to be an effective strategy in remembering material. Students also retain more through non-linguistic representations. Second Language Learners especially benefit from drawing and labeling. Many teachers use circle maps, or webs, as a pre-writing strategy. From experimenting in my own classroom, student writing increased when they drew a “map” of the subject they were to write about. Writing was enriched with more sense words and stronger verbs. While students listen to a biography about Jefferson, encourage them to take notes after first drawing (or the teacher can provide a drawing) of Jefferson. The drawing helps students better articulate what the character felt, saw, heard, thought. After completing their map, students use the notes to write a paragraph or essay.

Sample Jefferson "map"

Thomas Jefferson

1743-1826

