

## ENLIGHTENMENT IDEAS IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

**SS.912.CG.1.2** Explain the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the Declaration of Independence.

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### 2023 BENCHMARK UPDATES

- Updated from SS.912.C.1.2
  - Changed from “Explain how the Declaration of Independence ~~reflected the political principles of popular sovereignty, social contract, natural rights, and individual rights.~~” to “Explain the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the Declaration of Independence.”
- Depth of Knowledge Changes within Benchmark
  - No changes
- Addition of Benchmark Clarifications
  - Benchmark clarifications are an addition to the 2023-2024 high school civics and government benchmarks. Benchmark clarifications are listed in the lesson summary below.

# Essential Teacher Content Background Information

[Teacher Content Notes Not Appropriate For Student Use]

**This section addresses the following topics:**

1. Enlightenment Ideas
2. Natural Rights and the Declaration of Independence
3. Colonial Grievances in the Declaration of Independence

## 1. Enlightenment Ideas

“Enlightenment” is the term used to describe a Western philosophy that emphasizes reason as its primary basis. The Enlightenment emerged from Europe in the 18th century and represents a departure from the legitimacy of government that comes from a religious authority such as a theocracy or the divine right of kings. Core Enlightenment values emphasize liberty, individual rights, and reason. Governments that reflect these values grant more freedom for the common people based on self-governance, natural rights, and natural law. Historians of America’s founding argue that Enlightenment philosophy was read by those who signed key governing documents in the United States, including the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

## 2. Natural Rights and the Declaration of Independence

There are three core themes found in the Declaration of Independence. It is a common misunderstanding that the Declaration of Independence formed a government. This concept is important because the Declaration of Independence focuses instead on what the colonists found to be unacceptable governance. These unacceptable governance practices fell into three broad categories:

Power was concentrated in one place (unitary government). The concentration of power contributed to the abuse of power. The form of government that created this concentration of power was going to be avoided for this reason when the colonists formed their own government.

For example, the Declaration preamble includes the following phrase:

*“...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. — ...whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of 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.”*

The preamble focuses on “natural rights philosophy”, the notion that there are certain rights that are inalienable or God-given. Because these rights are given by God and not given by a government, any government or person cannot take them away. Natural rights supersede legal rights, those rights granted by governments. Government abused its power by denying the colonists their natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

There is a relationship between natural rights and the role of government. In the same way that government can deny the people their natural rights, so too can government protect natural rights. Governments are created by people who can create government structures that protect natural rights. The people consent to

how they are governed because they wish for a government that will protect their natural rights; if the government fails to protect the people's natural rights, the people have the right to change the government. In extreme cases, the people have the right to abolish the government if their natural rights are not being protected. Once that government is abolished, the people will then create a new government that protects their natural rights. The preamble to the Declaration of Independence explains the peoples' natural rights and the role that government plays in guaranteeing those rights.

The preamble is based largely on the ideas of John Locke, a 17th-century English philosopher whose work *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* includes the notion that government is based on the principle of "consent of the governed." Locke argued that legitimate governments function based on the people's consent. The form of government was less important than the government's actions; the government earned the people's consent provided that it protected the people's "life, liberty and property."

The preamble states that it was the *form* of government (unitary or centralized power) that rendered it impossible for the colonists to enjoy their "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness," which justified their right to "alter or abolish" the government ("...that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it"). Jefferson also makes it known, later in the preamble, that King George III shares the blame for the government's failure to ensure core guarantees to the people ("The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."). Together, the preamble clarifies that both the form and the head of government have not earned the people's consent. In many respects, the preamble foreshadows that the first sovereign government that the colonists would form would not be a unitary government and would exclude King George III.

Enlightenment ideas can also be found in the grievances:

- A. Due Process, *"For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States." "He has obstructed the Administration of Justice by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers."*
- B. Individual Rights, *"For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of trial by jury." "He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people."*
- C. Natural Rights, *"He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people."*
- D. Popular Sovereignty, *"He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures." "For imposing taxes on us without our consent."*
- E. Social Contract *"For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments."*

### **3. Colonial Grievances in the Declaration of Independence**

The bulk of the Declaration of Independence is devoted to enumerating the colonists' grievances about King George III and his abuse of power. The preamble ends with "let facts be submitted to a candid world." The phrase indicates that the Declaration of Independence was not written *to* King George III but rather *about* King George III. This explains why every complaint is written in the third person ("he") and not the second person ("you").

The listing of grievances may also be understood as a foreshadowing device for the way that the colonists formed their future governments. For example, the colonists were denied acceptable representation in the legislature (*"He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people unless*

*those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.”*). Accordingly, the new government would guarantee representation in the legislature. Many historians and political scientists argue that the colonists identified representation in the legislature to be of key importance because the legislative power is the greatest among the three powers of government (legislative, executive, judicial). The legislative power is the greatest among the three powers of government because only laws can be enforced or adjudicated. The absence of laws means no adjudication or enforcement.

## Lesson Summary

BENCHMARK		
SS.912.CG.1.2 Explain the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the Declaration of Independence.		
BENCHMARK CLARIFICATIONS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Students will identify grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence in terms of due process of law, individual rights, natural rights, popular sovereignty and social contract.</li><li>Students will explain national sovereignty, natural law, self-evident truth, equality of all persons, due process of law, limited government, popular sovereignty, and unalienable rights of life, liberty and property as they relate to Enlightenment ideas in the Declaration of Independence.</li><li>Students will recognize that national sovereignty, due process of law, natural law, self-evident truth, equality of all persons, limited government, popular sovereignty, and unalienable rights of life, liberty and property form the philosophical foundation of our government.</li></ul>		
FLORIDA CIVIC LITERACY EXAM COMPETENCY CONNECTION		
<b>Competency 1:</b> Understanding of the basic principles and practices of American democracy and how they are applied in our republican form of government <b>Competency 3:</b> Knowledge of the founding documents and how they have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-government		
OVERVIEW		
In this lesson, students will identify Enlightenment ideas in the Declaration of Independence.		
ESSENTIAL QUESTION		
What Enlightenment ideas are found in the Declaration of Independence?		
GOVERNMENT CONTENT VOCABULARY		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Declaration of Independence, due process of law, Enlightenment, equality of all persons, limited government, national sovereignty, natural law, popular sovereignty, self-evident truth, social contract, unalienable rights</li></ul>		
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES		
Think pair share	Carousel walk	Document analysis
MATERIALS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Foundations of Government Quote slide</li><li>Jefferson's Pursuit of Knowledge video (external link)</li><li>Enlightenment Ideas Vocabulary Chart</li><li>Declaration of Independence Excerpt reading</li><li>Enlightenment Posters</li><li>Enlightenment Ideas and Declaration Chart</li></ul>		

- 27 Grievances of the Declaration List
- Enlightenment Ideas Categories slide

### **B.E.S.T. STANDARDS**

The grade in which this lesson is taught will determine the specific B.E.S.T. standards correlation.  
Thematically, this lesson aligns to:

- ELA.R.2.2 Central Idea
- ELA.R.2.3 Author's Purpose And Perspective
- ELA.R.3.2 Summarize and Paraphrase

## Suggested Student Activity Sequence & Pace

DAY	ACTIVITY SEQUENCE
DAY 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Project the “Foundation of Government Quote” slide on the board.</li> <li>2. Ask students to write a response in which they explain their understanding of this quote. What might Dr. Spalding mean?</li> <li>3. Ask for responses. Ask students follow-up questions such as: In what foundational document are the ‘principles’ laid out? In what foundational document do we find our ‘form’ of government? What are some of these principles? What is our form of government?</li> <li>4. Lead students to the understanding that our U.S. Constitution secures our rights and protects our philosophical foundation through the establishment of a constitutional republic, with the express purposes laid out so clearly in both the Preamble of the Constitution and the words of the Declaration of Independence.</li> <li>5. Ask students: Where did some of these ideas come from? What influenced these principles?</li> <li>6. Lead students to an understanding that the Founders/Framers were influenced by ancient civilizations (Greece and Rome), Judeo-Christian tradition, English Common Law, colonial governments, other historical documents, and the work of Enlightenment philosophers. <b>Teacher Note:</b> If you have already taught SS.912.CG.1.1, this may be used as a review.</li> <li>7. Play the “<a href="#">Jefferson’s Pursuit of Knowledge</a>” video from the History Channel and ask students to listen to what they say influenced Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration. <b>Teacher Note:</b> You have to scroll down about halfway on the page/in the article for the video.</li> <li>8. Assign students small groups. You will need at least 9 groups.</li> <li>9. Pass out a copy of the “Enlightenment Ideas Vocabulary Chart” to each student. Explain to students that these terms/principles are both Enlightenment ideas but also the philosophical foundation of our government.</li> <li>10. Review the terms together, having students add a short note in the ‘How Will I Remember This?’ column.</li> <li>11. Provide each student a copy of the “Declaration of Independence Excerpt” reading. <b>Teacher Note:</b> The Declaration excerpt is the Declaration in its entirety minus the grievances.</li> <li>12. Pass out <u>one</u> of the “Enlightenment Posters” to each small group.</li> <li>13. In groups, have students read through the excerpt of the Declaration of Independence. Next, they should work together to find 2-3 lines from the Declaration that reflect their assigned Enlightenment idea and write those lines on their poster.</li> <li>14. While students work, circulate the classroom to monitor for engagement and understanding. Also be sure to check their selected lines for accuracy.</li> <li>15. Once groups have completed their assigned poster, hang the posters throughout the classroom.</li> <li>16. Pass out a copy of the “Enlightenment Ideas and Declaration Chart” to each student.</li> <li>17. Explain to students that while staying in their small groups, they will now move around the room to examine all 9 posters. At each poster, they should examine the selected Declaration lines together as a group. Then, select the <u>one</u> their group feels <u>best</u> reflects that Enlightenment idea and record it on their individual charts. <b>Teacher Note:</b> This is best to run as a more unstructured carousel walk rather than a timed gallery walk. You may want to simply provide students an overall time limit in which they must get to all 9 posters. You could break it into two days if necessary. You may also have to help ensure certain areas don’t become too crowded.</li> </ol>

DAY 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin class by leading students in a review of the terms from the “Enlightenment Ideas Vocabulary Chart”. <b>Teacher Note:</b> This can be done as a fun review by placing the terms in a Kahoot or Quizlet mode if you wish.</li> <li>2. Have students take back out their “Enlightenment Ideas and Declaration Chart” from the previous day and review some of the selected responses as a whole class. <b>Teacher Note:</b> Use the sample answers provided below to help guide discussions.</li> <li>3. Explain to students that today, they are going to look more closely at one particular portion of the Declaration of Independence-the list of grievances.</li> <li>4. Place students into pairs.</li> <li>5. Provide each pair a copy of the “27 Grievances of the Declaration List.”</li> <li>6. Remind students that the majority of the Declaration was devoted to these grievances against King George III. These were all the ways that the colonists felt the King had abused his power and denied them due process of law, their rights, and their representation. He had broken the social contract that was supposed to exist between people and their government.</li> <li>7. Project the “Enlightenment Ideas Categories” slide.</li> <li>8. Explain to students that they are to read through each of the 27 grievances in the Declaration. For each one, they are going to place a label beside it (DP, R, PS, SC) to indicate which Enlightenment category that grievance is connected to. Encourage them to use more than one label if they deem appropriate.</li> <li>9. Provide students time to complete the task, circulating and monitoring to check for engagement and understanding.</li> <li>10. Once pairs have completed, bring students back together to review. <b>Teacher Note:</b> Use sample answers provided below to help guide discussion. While the key indicates at least one connection per grievance, students may be able to justify different or additional choices.</li> <li>11. End the overall lesson by having students individually use the information they have learned to write a paragraph responding to the following writing prompt: Explain the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the Declaration of Independence.</li> </ol>
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## Government Content Vocabulary

Word/Term	Definition
<b>Declaration of Independence</b>	founding document of the United States, adopted on July 4, 1776 by the Second Continental Congress and contained the unanimous declaration of the thirteen colonies declaring independence from Britain
<b>due process of law</b>	the right of people accused of crimes to have laws that treat them fairly, so that they cannot lose their life or freedom without having their legal rights protected
<b>Enlightenment</b>	a period in European history when many educated people stressed the importance of learning and reasoning; education was considered the key to understanding and solving society's problems
<b>equality of all persons</b>	every individual is born equal and has equal opportunity to succeed
<b>limited government</b>	a government that has been limited in power by a constitution, or written agreement
<b>national sovereignty</b>	the idea that a nation has the power to govern itself
<b>natural law</b>	laws passed by government to protect natural rights
<b>popular sovereignty</b>	the principle that the authority of a government comes from the consent of the governed
<b>self-evident truth</b>	obvious, having no need of proof
<b>social contract</b>	an implied agreement among the people of an organized society that defines the rights, duties, and limitations of the governed and the government
<b>unalienable rights</b>	the belief that individuals are born with basic rights that cannot be taken away by governments; life, liberty, and property

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Florida Department of Education: Florida Civic Literacy Exam Homepage](#)

Florida Department of Education's Civic Literacy Reading List

- *Second Treatise on Government* by John Locke
- *The Spirit of Laws* by Montesquieu
- *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes

### ANSWER KEYS

Sample Answers: Enlightenment Ideas Vocabulary Chart

Sample Answers: Enlightenment Ideas and Declaration Chart

Sample Answers: 27 Grievances of the Declaration List

Written Response: Sample Scoring Rubric

### SOURCES

The Declaration of Independence from the National Archives:

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

Florida Department of Education Civic Seal of Excellence Course: <https://www.civicsexcellence.org/>

Jefferson's Pursuit of Knowledge video from the History Channel:

<https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/enlightenment>