



Why did the colonists risk everything to declare independence—and how did 13 colonies become one nation?

Students become time-traveling reporters covering the founding era: they watch the Citizenship 101 episode “Early U.S. History,” then build their files by matching the key names and dates (Level 1), report *why* the colonists fought by connecting each British action to the freedom it violated and restore a “garbled” transmission of the Declaration’s most famous sentence (Level 2), weigh two delegates’ counsel on independence and commit before the reveal (Level 3), and file the front-page dispatch of July 4, 1776—ending with the quill in their own hands: sign, or don’t (Level 4)—climbing from recall to creation as they rise through the ranks.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify why colonists came to America, who lived here before them, and the key figures, documents, and dates of the founding era, as tested on the official U.S. naturalization exam.
- Explain the causes of the Revolutionary War by connecting each British action to the principle it violated—and restore the Declaration’s most famous sentence word for word.
- Evaluate the arguments for and against declaring independence—committing to a position before the reveal, then measuring it against what the signers risked.
- Create an original front-page dispatch reporting the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and take a reasoned personal position on signing it.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Colonist:** A person who settled in the 13 American colonies, often seeking religious freedom, political freedom, escape from persecution, or economic opportunity.
- **Native Americans (American Indians):** The peoples who lived in America before any Europeans arrived.
- **Declaration of Independence:** The document, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and adopted July 4, 1776, proclaiming the colonies an independent nation founded on rights given by God, not by government.
- **Treason:** The crime of betraying one’s government—the charge the signers risked, and the reason signing could cost them their lives.
- **Revolutionary War:** The war (1775–1783) between the American colonies and the British Empire, begun near Boston and ended by the Treaty of Paris, in which Britain finally recognized U.S. independence. Against all odds, America had won.
- **Constitutional Convention:** The 1787 meeting in Philadelphia where delegates from the states wrote the U.S. Constitution, after earlier attempts to outline a government had not worked.
- **The Federalist Papers:** Essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay—written under the pen name “Publius”—that helped persuade the states to approve the Constitution.



- **Founding Fathers:** The leaders who won independence and built the new nation—among them Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, the “Father of Our Country” and first President.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.4, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.9, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Civics, U.S. History

What You'll Need

- Video: *Citizenship 101: “Early U.S. History”* ([Watch Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Citizenship 101: Early U.S. History* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencils, whiteboard or projector; optional: one large sheet of paper or poster (“the class parchment”) for the signing moment

Lesson Plan (45–55 minutes)

Warm Up: The Odds (5–7 minutes)

- Display or read aloud: *Thirteen small colonies. The most powerful empire on Earth. And a document the king calls treason—punishable by death. Would you sign your name to it?* Take a hand-poll: Sign / Don't sign / Need more information. Record the tally on the board—students will vote again at the end of class.
- Follow with three rapid-fire questions students jot silently: *The colonists came to America for many reasons. Name one. Who wrote the Declaration of Independence? When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?*
- Reveal: all three are real questions from the U.S. naturalization test.
- Deliver the twist: “Your press pass works in any century. Today your editor is sending you to the founding era—and the front page is due by the end of class.”

Newsroom Orientation: Watch and Build the Files (12–15 minutes)

- Distribute the worksheet (one per student). Preview **Level 1 | Cub Reporter**: students complete the Level 1 matching activity as they watch the “Early U.S. History” video. Every name and date is covered directly in the episode.
- **Reporter's briefing (direct instruction, 2 minutes):** Before pressing play, set the scene. The colonists crossed a punishing ocean in search of religious, political, and economic freedom. They were not the first people here, and not everyone came by choice. And when the government they lived under began taking their freedoms without their consent, they faced a choice no people had ever made quite this way before. Ask students to watch for the following in the episode:
 - Why the colonists came—and who was already living in America when they arrived.
 - The specific British actions that pushed the colonists toward war.
 - The document of July 4, 1776—who drafted it and what it declared for the first time in world history.
 - The men who won the peace—Franklin and Washington—the treaty that ended the war, and the essays that helped approve the Constitution.

- Watch *Citizenship 101: "Early U.S. History"* (6 minutes, 9 seconds).
- Give students 1–2 minutes to finish the matching with a partner, then rapid-check the letters as a class—the files must be airtight before anyone reports from the field.

Field Reporting: Why They Fought (8–10 minutes)

- Students move to **Level 2 | Field Reporter**: three British actions, each to be matched to the *principle* it violated, followed by the **Garbled Transmission**—restoring the five missing words of the Declaration's most famous sentence. Work in pairs so reporters must defend each principle to a colleague.
- **Teacher guardrails for this section:**
 - **Ban "it was unfair."** The editor wants the principle: taxes without representation violate the consent of the governed; silencing newspapers violates freedom of the press; quartering soldiers violates consent and the security of the home. If students can name the principle, they understand the Revolution; if they can only say "unfair," they don't yet.
 - **Make the transmission stick.** After restoring the five words, have the class read the completed sentence aloud once, together. These are the most famous words in American history—worth carrying out of the room.

The Correspondent's Dilemma: Decide, Then Reveal (8–10 minutes)

- Students advance to **Level 3 | Correspondent**: two delegates' counsel on the eve of the vote—one warning of doomed war and a death warrant, one insisting rights come from God and some things are worth everything. Recruit two volunteers to read the delegates aloud, in character, before students write.
- **Enforce the commitment.** Students must circle their counsel and write their "because" *before* reading the "Now Read What Happened" box. The learning is in committing under uncertainty—the way the delegates did—and then measuring themselves against history.
- **Key idea to surface:** there was no safe option in 1776, and no wrong answer here—grade the reasoning. What separates strong answers is engaging the real stakes on both sides: near-hopeless odds and the charge of treason against God-given rights being stripped away.

The Front Page: File and Sign (7–10 minutes)

- Students complete **Level 4 | Editor-in-Chief**: a headline and 3–5 sentence dispatch reporting the Declaration's adoption (what it did, where rights come from, what the signers risked)—and then the quill passes to them: *I sign/I do not sign*, with a reason.
- **The signing moment (optional but recommended):** post the "class parchment." Students who chose to sign come forward and sign it; students who declined explain their reasons aloud. Both choices require reasons—that's the point. Close by noting that in Philadelphia, the vote was unanimous (though New York took an extra week to decide).
- **Teacher tip:** for early finishers or as an extension, assign the "**Hire a Founder**" task: based on his résumé in the episode—diplomat, founder of the first free library, first postmaster general, author of Poor Richard's Almanac, oldest delegate at the Convention—write the job listing Benjamin Franklin alone could fill, or design his trading card.

Wrap Up (3–5 minutes)

- Rerun the warm-up poll: *knowing everything you now know, would you sign?* Compare the tallies and let students who changed their vote say why.

- Exit ticket (spoken or written): What did the Declaration of Independence do, and who wrote it?
- **Success criteria:** A strong response says the Declaration announced the colonies' independence from Great Britain, names Thomas Jefferson as its author, and—best of all—adds that it declared our rights come from God, not government.
- Collect worksheets as a formative assessment, or have students keep them as part of a citizenship-test study guide if you plan to use other episodes in the series.

Don't have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (25–30 minutes)

Hand out the worksheet and play the episode—the worksheet's "mission brief" gives students everything they need with no setup. Students complete Level 1 while watching and Levels 2–3 after; assign the Level 4 | Editor-in-Chief dispatch as homework. Check answers against the answer key. (The worksheet is written directly to students as a mission, so it works handed out with the video alone—no lesson plan required.)