



Rhetorical Strategies in the Declaration of Independence

Overview

This specific lesson will be used to develop students' abilities to participate in discussion on a fundamental text of American culture, specifically the rhetorical strategies and philosophical underpinnings of the Declaration of Independence. In discussion, students will learn to explore the ideas of others, negotiate with views which challenge or differ from their own, and articulate their own arguments with clarity and persuasion.

Standards

- **SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
 - a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
 - b. Working with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
 - c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
 - d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Objectives

- Students will explore the philosophical issues raised by the Declaration of Independence.
- Students will discuss, define, and explore abstract concepts relevant to the study of this document, including "independence."
- Students will explore the rhetorical strategies used by Jefferson to persuade his audience of the rightness of his cause.

Supplies Needed

- Students should be provided with copies of the [Declaration of Independence](#).
- Teachers will need a copy of their students' seating chart in order to mark or check off those students who have spoken.

Before the Lesson

Students need to be introduced to the concept of small-group and whole-class discussion, clarify appropriate (and not-so-appropriate) approaches, and understand the value of discussion as a tool for deeper-level comprehension.¹

¹ For two absolutely excellent programs that focus on Socratic discussion as a way of exploring fundamental texts of Western literature, please consult the Great Books (<http://www.greatbooks.org/>) or the Touchstones Discussion Project (<http://www.touchstones.org/>). Both programs focus on discussion techniques, thoughtful questions for discussion, and ways of approaching some of the fundamental classics of European and American literature.



Activity 1: Discuss (or Review) the Student Rules of Order

Lecture Points

Note: This lecture assumes students have little or no familiarity with small-group or whole-class discussion of a literary or nonfiction text. If students have had some practice with discussion, this step can be skipped (or only passed over briefly as needed).

What is discussion?

As opposed to lecture or “teacher talk,” where the teacher provides students with information and the students (ideally) remember it, discussion is the mutual exploration of an issue or a text (or both). In lecture, the teacher’s role is to instruct; in discussion, it is to probe for further answers, encourage the flow of discussion, summarize others’ viewpoints, and resolve discrepancies. **NOTE: This also defines the student’s role!**

The following may be copied and reprinted for the students’ reference. Ideally, if students are not familiar with discussion, teachers should move through each element below and explain, clarify, and illustrate these points before beginning discussion.

Elements of Successful Discussion

1. Before Discussion: Prepare!

Adequate preparation for discussion is a crucial element for success. Preparation may include any (or all!) of the following:

- **PREPARATION TIPS**
 - Writing or jotting down thoughtful responses to any prereading questions asked of you or the class
 - Reading or re-reading the text to be discussed
 - Annotating the text with questions, thoughts, opinions, or simply noting pivotal events or textual features (e.g., motif, symbolism)
 - Writing down why-questions, why-author questions, and intense emotions for discussion (see below)
 - Using a dictionary, Wikipedia, or other source to clarify misunderstandings or areas of confusion while reading
 - Researching or reading outside sources to understand the context in which the text was written

Generally, you’re going to walk into discussion knowing what will be discussed, what you think about it already, and what questions you would like to have answered.²

² This step can prove challenging for some students who take a more passive approach to education and expect to come to class essentially (maybe excessively?) free from preconceptions about the text because they expect the teacher will tell them how to interpret the work. **One possible approach to discourage this mindset is to give a quick little quiz** before discussion in which you ask the following questions: *What text are we reading today? What do you think about it already? What is the most important question you have brought to discussion?*



2. During Discussion: Participate!

Obviously, it's not really possible to conduct discussion when a crucial number of people choose not to participate. Your thoughts are vital to the process!³

The good thing is that there are many ways in which participation can occur. You DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE TO HAVE THE "RIGHT ANSWER." Also, you do not have to agree with people – including the teacher. Feel free to disagree (politely).

• GOOD WAYS TO PARTICIPATE

- Ask **open-ended questions** (more about those later!) about the material, e.g., "Is George's killing of Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* really an act of friendship?"
- Explain why you **agree** with one of your peers, e.g., "Well, Amanda's right when she says XYZ because when I looked at the text, I saw PDQ evidence..."
- Explain why you **disagree** with one of your peers, e.g., "Well, but this doesn't fit Character X's earlier statement that..."
- **Find evidence** in the text to help someone else out, e.g., "Here, Martin, I found where Character X said..."
- Call people's attention to **large-scale issues or techniques** in the text, including diction, tone, motif, symbolism, and theme, e.g., "I think the author's theme really changes here from XYZ at the beginning of the poem to PDQ right about at line 6..."
- **Summarize the points** made in discussion so far.
- **Read a text aloud** with expression and feeling.

3. During Discussion: Ask Good Questions

One question that sometimes comes up is, "What if I don't have any questions?" To solve this problem, you have to pull yourself out of "passive reader" mode into "active questioner" mode. Often, reading the text (or a portion of it) twice is a good way to approach this issue. The first time, let yourself be a passive reader. The second time, be more skeptical.

One of the best questions in the world to ask is "why." Why did the character do this action?

³ For this reason, it is recommended that **discussion should be graded** – and should represent an important part of the overall score. One issue that comes up periodically is that some students don't necessarily understand that discussion is as valid and as vital a part of the English curriculum as writing. Some students might say, "Well, I'm not very good at discussion," or "I don't like to participate." Though it's understandable some students are reluctant to participate, imagine how it would sound if a student said, "Well, I'm not very good at reading," or "I don't like tests." Needless to say, teachers should be sympathetic, but should encourage the student to participate at an achievable minimum level, e.g., one appropriate and focused comment per whole-class discussion, for instance.



Think this thought? Not make this choice? Why does Hamlet continue to hesitate before killing Claudius even though he has a U-Haul’s worth of proof that Claudius killed his father? Why does the speaker of “A Dream Deferred” suggest that a dream will “explode” if it isn’t realized? Why is it that the first concern of Gregor Samsa’s is whether he will catch the train on time for work – not why he has turned into a large insect overnight?

A variation of the “why” question is the “why-author” question. Remember, the author *deliberately chose to make everything happen*. Why did she or he make certain choices? It’s very cool how you will get a very different answer when looking at the author’s motives over those of the characters. Why does Shakespeare make Hamlet hesitate for five acts? Why did Hughes choose the word “explode”? Why did Kafka make Gregor worry about his job more than his transformation?

Finally, note down those places where you had **an intense emotional reaction** to an event, a statement, a moment, a scene, a character, et cetera. Did a character’s decision frustrate you? Elate you? Remember, if you have an emotional reaction, it’s probably because the author wanted to you to feel that way – and when we read, we usually agree to go along with the ride. The question is *why*. Why does Shakespeare make us hate Macbeth by act IV even though he’s supposed to be the hero? Why does Hawthorne make us feel so frustrated with Arthur Dimmesdale?

• **BEING A SKEPTICAL READER**

- The best question in the world is this one: “WHY”?
- Why did [character name] do/say/think/not do [this action]?
- Even better, why did [author name] MAKE the character do/not do [this action]?
- Why did I have this reaction?
- Why did the author MAKE me have this reaction?

4. During Discussion: Find Proof, or, How to Eliminate the “It’s Just My Opinion” Mentality

Ever been in a discussion where someone’s only “backup” for a claim was to say, “Well, that’s just my opinion”? Annoying, right? In discussion of literary text, opinion is only as valid as the evidence behind it and the speaker’s interpretation of that evidence. During discussion, it is important to have reasons based in the words of the text for an assertion – otherwise, an opinion doesn’t carry much weight. It’s also important to understand why someone else arrived at a particular conclusion – and to ask others to prove their points with evidence from the text. Some polite tactics to use during a discussion with your peers or in a whole-class discussion include...

• **ASKING FOR (AND GETTING) PROOF**

- “Andy, I’m not sure why you think that. Can you tell me what page you got that information from?”
- “Would you mind explaining why you think that? I’m not sure I understand.”
- “Martin, I didn’t get the same impression of this



scene/character/line/passage. Would you mind telling me what made you think that so I can see where you're coming from?"

- "How are you interpreting this word/this line/this passage? I'm not sure I understand."
- "The way I interpreted this word was _____. How did you read it?"
- "Meg, you seem to say XYZ, but earlier, the speaker said PDQ. I'm not sure I understand how to resolve that?"

5. During Discussion: Clarify Your Position and Others'

It's hard to keep track sometimes of discussion, so at various points, it might be helpful to sum up your own position and others' as a way of "touching base" or getting back on track. This tactic also allows you to check whether you've understood someone else's point of view. Obviously, if you don't understand what someone else is saying, it's hard to argue against it or agree with it.

• SUMMARIZING

- "Okay, Breanna – unless I misunderstand you, you're saying XYZ, correct?"
- "Bottom line, I think XYZ."
- "Am I right in thinking that Britney and John are saying basically the same thing?"
- "So the main reason you're objecting to my perspective is XYZ, correct?"
- "Another way to express your idea is to say XYZ, am I right?"

6. After Discussion: The Coolest Idea You Didn't Think Of

After discussion, it's often helpful to take about five minutes to summarize the main points of the discussion – the central topic discussed, the major approaches people took to the topic, and how ideas were resolved. In addition, what is often helpful is to take the unexpected approach of writing down the coolest idea you *didn't* think of. What did someone else say during discussion that was an insightful or interesting idea? (You don't have to agree with his or her idea – if it provoked discussion, it can qualify as a cool idea even if you think it was utterly wrong.)

In addition, write down your ultimate "bottom line." Did your essential opinion change over the course of the discussion? Did you switch sides? Why? When? Ultimately, what do you believe?

Activity 2: Discuss (or Review) the Teacher Rules of Order

Lecture Points

The teacher's role is much less involved during discussion than during lecture or other teacher-led activities, and students often need to know what the teacher will and won't do. Depending on the class, some students will love discussion while others will sit back and hope the teacher just tells them the answers or ultimately tells them the "right way" to read the text. Students need to be urged to think for themselves and be reassured that as long as their interpretations are solidly grounded in evidence that supports their reasoning, their answers are probably valid.

**1. Asking Questions -- Not Answering Them!**

"Why do you think so?" and "Where did you find that information?" are crucial, of course, but the teacher's role is often to get students to dig a little deeper – what I call the "three layers of 'why.'"

In essence, the "three layers of 'why'" idea means not settling for the student's first answer. It often means digging a bit deeper into the student's reasoning and explicitly reinforcing the idea that this same kind of mental "digging" is necessary during brainstorming for a paper.

Example Discussion with Approximately Three Layers of "Why"⁴

Teacher: Do people have a right to be free?

Student: Yes, there's no reason people should tell them what to do.

Teacher: Why do you think so?

Student: Because no human being is inferior to any other human being; they're all human beings.

Teacher [playing devil's advocate here with the definition of "inferior"]: Why not? Some people, for example, are taller and some shorter...

Student: But they're all human beings.

Teacher [pulling the discussion out of a potential circular tail-chasing and returning to the original question]: Why does the fact that they're all human beings give them a right to be free?

Student: Because if one person is inferior to another person, it goes in a circle -- everyone is inferior to someone else in some way.

Teacher: Can you give me an example?

Student: Someone might be smarter than one person, but he might be taller, so everyone has a characteristic which is better or worse than someone else, and then if everyone is inferior to someone, then no one is superior to anyone.

2. Avoid Fake Questions and Hidden Agendas

I remember very vividly sitting in another teacher's class for about ten minutes. She and the students were discussing a story they had read, and the teacher was asking them questions about it. "Okay," she said, "now, there wasn't REALLY a ghost, was there?"

I hadn't read the story, but I do know one thing for sure: There sure as heck was no ghost.

This is what I mean by a "fake question." The tone and setup of the question presupposes a given answer -- one that does not invite discussion at all. This kind of question is not particularly productive -- and it wasn't that day. The students all dutifully agreed that no, there was no ghost. They didn't seem particularly interested in the discussion.

A better question might have been, "Why does the author initially make us wonder if there's a ghost? Why does s/he want us to believe -- even if only for a short time -- in the ghost's reality?"

In discussion, it's also better to avoid hidden agendas. I usually announce to my classes, "You will never know what I actually think or believe regarding a piece of literature or about a philosophical question. In fact, I will very often take one position and then turn around and take the opposite position. My purpose is not to get you to think as I do but to think for yourselves -- and know why you think so."

3. The Teacher as Skeptic

Overall, the teacher's role is to be a skeptic -- one who is willing to buy a student's idea **but not without being convinced of it first with evidence from the text**. Even (or maybe especially) when a student has

⁴ Actual student/teacher discussion.



the “right answer,” it’s crucial to get her or him to justify that answer with evidence from the text -- the actual words, the actual moments, not general observations.

Even when the student suggests a potentially “wrong answer,” it’s funny how those can turn out to have merit. My favorite example is from a kid I’ll call Duane. Duane was the kind of kid whose answers were either incredibly insightful or a bit from left field. (Maybe they were *all* insightful, and I could only recognize half of them!) One day -- we were talking about *Macbeth* -- Duane raised his hand and asked, “Miss, what’s up with all this milk stuff?”

Left field, I thought. Still, trying to be a good “teacher-as-skeptic” person and not dismiss the idea out of hand, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Duane began, “Like here, Macbeth is calling the messenger a whey-face, a cream-faced loon, and then there’s that part about the milk of human kindness earlier, and then Lady Macbeth says that thing about what she would do with the babe that milks her and...” He continued on, essentially citing every lacteal product mentioned in the play -- and as it turns out, there were quite a few of them.

When I picked up my jaw from the floor, I realized he was right -- that for all the times I’d read this play, I’d never seen that motif. Faced with Duane’s tsunami of evidence, I was delighted to swim. “You know what?” I said. “I’ve never thought of that before! Okay, folks, what do *you* think?” For the next forty minutes, we talked about milk -- the symbolism of milk, the idea of it being a symbol of nurture, comfort, motherhood, femininity, the feminization of Macbeth in the early part of the play and his use of this motif as a verbal insult or weapon in the end of it, and so on. Pretty good for sophomores in a “lower-level” class.

Bottom line, it pays to entertain the “wrong answer”: it might not be so wrong after all.

Activity 3: Prereading the Declaration of Independence

This assignment would obviously work well in a class on American literature or one focused on rhetoric and composition. Students should read and answer these questions prior to discussion of the Declaration of Independence. The writing may be formal or informal, but in general, discussion will be richer when the students have been encouraged to write at least one-half of a page per question. Even though students assure you on bended knees and many sacred texts that they *could not possibly say one more thing about a topic* other than the two sparse lines they put down, it’s surprising how these “last lap” ideas students generate are often the best ones they have.

Prereading Questions-- The Declaration of Independence

1. Do human beings have any inherent rights? (That is, do human beings have any rights they are simply born with, regardless of race, class, gender, et cetera?)
2. What is the fundamental purpose of government?
3. Are people truly born free?
4. What does it mean to be created equal?
5. Is it morally defensible to overthrow a government they believe is unjust?

Activity 4: Small-Group and Whole-Class Discussion

Once students have had the chance to generate ideas about the prereading questions, they should be split up into small groups of at least two people to discuss ideas before turning to whole-class discussion. Although this step



might seem redundant, it is crucial for students -- they often feel intimidated to "break the ice" with discussion of a topic before the whole class, but if they have been arguing about this same topic with a peer for five minutes, they get warmed up, as it were, and feel more confident about sharing and discussing.

Note: Solving the Mount Rushmore Problem

Sometimes, this tactic of breaking students up into groups to discuss a problem is especially helpful when students present the "Mount Rushmore" reaction: an unbroken range of blank faces that occurs when a teacher asks a question that momentarily stumps them. "Okay, folks, talk amongst yourselves about this problem" is a good response to this reaction -- students get to "football huddle" and work out their answers before sharing it with the whole class.

During small-group discussion, teachers should circulate to ensure students are on-task, obviously, but should also circulate to remind students to ask each other for evidence: Why do they think it is morally defensible to overthrow an unjust government? Can they think of examples from literature, current events, history? Is it always morally defensible to do so, or defensible only in certain situations but not in others? What is the difference?

Whole-Class Discussion

During whole-class discussion, the teacher can sit amongst the students in a circle (very effective with smaller classes) or can stand at the board and record students' answers. If that second option is chosen, students will have a teacher-generated model for taking discussion notes, but some degree of give-and-take is lost.

Take Notes!

Either way, the teacher and students should ideally keep track of discussion on a seating chart and/or with notes. Not only do the chart and notes make awarding class participation points easier, but the notes are also invaluable for returning to students' earlier comments in order to resolve possible inconsistencies, e.g., "Hayley, initially you said that people should be able to overthrow an unjust government, but here you're saying that it was wrong for the South to secede from the Union during the Civil War. Those ideas seem to be in conflict. Can you explain your reasoning, please?" [NOTE: The teacher should make every effort to phrase ideas neutrally and **to keep their own biases out of the discussion** in favor of the students being able to develop, defend, and explain their own reasoning with evidence.]

Reeling in Reluctant Participators

The notes or chart will also make it easier to see who has not participated. If some students are reluctant to participate, they may be called upon to summarize or to respond to someone else's thought, e.g., "Hey, John, would you mind summarizing what Brayden just said? Do you agree or disagree with his point?" or "Do you agree with Marisol's argument here, Bill? What was most convincing?" Students need to understand that their participation is more than mandatory -- it is genuinely valuable to everyone.

Another role for truly reluctant participators is to be the "factfinder" -- that is, the person who looks up necessary information in a text or online to clarify points made in discussion and resolve discrepancies or differences of opinion, e.g., "Andre, would you mind looking up the definition of 'empathy' here?" or "Diana, would you mind seeing if you can find that quote about 'To be thus is nothing...' in *Macbeth*?"

Conclusion and Assessment

At the end of the discussion period, students can come to closure on the prereading questions by writing a final summation of the discussion. Focusing on one question or a series of questions, students can essentially be asked the following:

1. What was your initial position on this question?
2. What ideas were suggested by others during discussion that you thought were relevant, interesting, or new to you? Why did you find them interesting, relevant, et cetera?



3. Ultimately, what is your position now? In what way, if any, has it changed? If it has not changed, why did the ideas of others fail to persuade you?

Activity 5: Discussing the Text

When students have discussed the prereading questions, they are prepared to read the Declaration. Some students might find the text less overwhelming if the discussion is broken up into sections, possibly a paragraph at a time. The procedure is as follows, and the directions below may be reprinted for student use.

1. Read X section [e.g., the first paragraph, or from “When in the course...” to “...submitted to a candid world,” or “the list of offenses beginning with “He has refused...”]
2. For each section, write down questions YOU GENUINELY HAVE. Vocabulary questions (e.g., “What does ‘impel’ mean?” should be resolved with recourse to a dictionary, but you may certainly ask diction questions, e.g., “Why does the author use this specific word here? Why use the word ‘necessary’? Why is it ‘necessary’ to dissolve political bands?”
3. Write down emotional reactions or opinions you have about the text itself. Do you agree with Jefferson or disagree with him? Do you partly agree with him? Why?
4. Keep track of important issues or major points Jefferson makes by writing down your ideas in the margins or in notes.

Again, the process of small-group and whole-group discussion can be repeated: students can discuss their specific questions about the text itself in smaller units before turning to whole-class discussion, particularly about those questions they could not resolve satisfactorily amongst themselves.

Conclusion and Assessment

There are two primary ways in which the discussion can be concluded: with teacher-led questions or with written assessment (or possibly with both).

In teacher-led discussions, the teacher focuses student attention on crucial issues of rhetoric, diction, style, irony, or other “author tactic” students may not have addressed in full. Student may answer these questions in short pieces of formal writing (as in a short essay or essay test) or in more casual form (as in preparation for a final discussion). Some possible questions -- but by no means the only ones! -- include the following:

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between a *declaration* vs. a *manifesto* or an *argument*?
 - a. What **advantage** did Jefferson secure for himself and his country by calling this document a “declaration”?
[Note: Students need to understand that writing, like many other endeavors, has its tactics and strategies -- and that the choice of one word over another is often a matter of securing a specific strategic advantage.]
2. The first sentence of the Preamble begins, “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,” what are the implications of using the word *necessary* as opposed to using (for instance) the word *desirable* or *preferable*?” What “work” is the word *necessary* doing that another word would not do as well?
3. To whom is Jefferson writing? Who is the audience for this document? Is it only King



George III?

4. What is Jefferson's goal -- in addition to the stated and clear one of declaring independence?
5. What tactical advantage does Jefferson secure for the new American government in the opening words, "**When in the course of human events**, it becomes necessary..."?
 - a. What is suggested by saying "**when**...it becomes necessary...to dissolve the political bands" rather than "**if** it becomes necessary"?
6. Why does Jefferson never mention the name "Britain" in a document establishing independence from Britain?

Other Writing

Compare the preamble of the Declaration of Independence with Jefferson's "rough draft" copy here: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/rough.htm>. Choose several changes Jefferson made to the Preamble and discuss what tactical advantage Jefferson would have lost if he had not made those changes -- or which changes he did make that were arguably less effective than in the original! Your paper must consider the change from "sacred and undeniable" to "self-evident" and explore the implications of that change, but all other selections may be of your own choosing.