

The Influence of “Common Sense” on the Revolutionary War

Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 6-8

Curriculum Focus: U.S. History

Lesson Duration: One class period

Student Objectives

- Examine the points of view held by different factions during the Revolutionary War
- Consider the influence of Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*.
- Use the content and techniques from *Common Sense* to write an essay on modern-day issues.

Materials

- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: The Revolutionary War: Declarations of Independence & Victory or Death*
Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- Thomas Paine Writes What Many Colonists Are Thinking in “Common Sense”
- Excerpt from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (see Procedures)

Procedures

1. Tell students that in this two-part lesson, they will first use a part of Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* as a jumping-off point for learning about argumentation, or persuasive writing. Then they will write their own arguments, or persuasive essays.
2. Distribute to each student a copy of the excerpt, reprinted here, from the third part of *Common Sense*, preferably a copy that the student can annotate and otherwise mark up. (You may prefer to use other sections from the pamphlet, the entire text of which you can find by going to Project Gutenberg at <http://www.promo.net/pg/index.html> and entering author, last name first, and title of the document.)

Excerpt from the Project Gutenberg text of *Common Sense*:

THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense... Volumes have been written on the subject of the struggle between

England and America. Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives, and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed. Arms, as the last resource, decide this contest; the appeal was the choice of the king, and the continent hath accepted the challenge... The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent — of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of continental union, faith and honour. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters. By referring the matter from argument to arms, a new era for politics is struck; a new method of thinking hath arisen. All plans, proposals, &c. prior to the nineteenth of April, i.e. to the commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacs of the last year; which, though proper then are superseded and useless now. Whatever was advanced by the advocates on either side of the question then, terminated in one and the same point, viz. a union with Great-Britain: the only difference between the parties was the method of effecting it; the one proposing force, the other friendship; but it hath so far happened that the first hath failed, and the second hath withdrawn her influence. As much hath been said of the advantages of reconciliation which, like an agreeable dream, hath passed away and left us as we were, it is but right, that we should examine the contrary side of the argument, and inquire into some of the many material injuries which these colonies sustain, and always will sustain, by being connected with, and dependent on Great Britain: To examine that connection and dependence, on the principles of nature and common sense, to see what we have to trust to, if separated, and what we are to expect, if dependant. I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain that the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true, for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had any thing to do with her. The commerce, by which she hath enriched herself, are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe. But she has protected us, say some. That she has engrossed us is true, and defended the continent at our expense as well as her own is admitted, and she would have defended Turkey from the same motive, viz. the sake of trade and dominion. Alas, we have been long led away by ancient prejudices, and made large sacrifices to superstition. We have boasted the protection of Great Britain, without considering, that her motive was INTEREST not ATTACHMENT; that she did not protect us from OUR ENEMIES on OUR ACCOUNT, but from HER ENEMIES on HER OWN ACCOUNT, from those who had no quarrel with us on any OTHER ACCOUNT, and who will always be our enemies on the SAME ACCOUNT.

3. Discuss with students what Paine's overall argument is in the excerpt. Have students point out where in the excerpt Paine states opinions and where he states facts. Discuss where he appeals to his reader's logic and where he appeals to his reader's heart. Ask why both appeals are important.
4. Next, ask students to list some of the modern-day issues that they may want to tackle in an argument. Make sure students understand the difference between *argument* used as the everyday term meaning "disagreement or quarrel" and *argument* as it is used in this project—a written statement of opinion supported by various kinds of appeals.
5. You may want to begin your list with the following topics, then have students add others that might be appropriate for written arguments:
 - Too much traffic in the community
 - Unregulated growth of housing in the community
 - Endangered animals or natural resources in the region
 - Inequities in education; the haves and have-nots; the digital divide
6. Before students begin developing their own arguments, share the following advice for the prewriting stage:
 - Once a writer has in mind something that he or she wants to persuade readers of, the writer puts it in the form of a thesis statement: a statement—made in one or sometimes two sentences—that announces what will follow in the essay. You may want to fine-tune the definition of *thesis statement* to include not only the announcement of a topic but also the claim that the writer is making about that topic.
 - The writer should gather all manner of support, or evidence, for the position he or she gives in the thesis statement: reasons, examples, facts, statistics, quotations.
 - The writer should determine in which order he or she will present the evidence. Two approaches are to go from most important to least important or vice versa.
 - The writer should figure out what he or she wants readers not only to think but also to *do*.
 - The writer should anticipate what critics will say to undermine his or her argument. The writer should come up with responses to criticism.
7. Return to the Paine theme by reminding students that *Common Sense* had an electrifying effect on the American population. Challenge students to write an essay that will ignite people in your community regarding one of the issues listed previously or students' own issues.
8. Once students have developed their arguments, have them share and critique each other's work, then make necessary revisions. Photocopy the students' arguments to share with the rest of the class.
9. After reading through all the arguments, discuss them in light of Paine's *Common Sense*. In what ways were these arguments like *Common Sense*? What were some important lessons learned from reading the excerpt from *Common Sense*?

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Student's persuasive argument features exceptionally clearly expressed thesis statement; substantial and varied appeals in support of argument; well-articulated responses to anticipated objections to argument; error-free grammar, usage, and mechanics
- 2 points: Student's persuasive argument features adequately expressed thesis statement; sufficient and varied appeals in support of argument; attempt to respond to anticipated objections to argument; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.
- 1 point: Student's persuasive argument features inadequately expressed thesis statement; insufficient and unvaried appeals in support of argument; absence of responses to anticipated objections to argument; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Vocabulary

coveted

Definition: Wished for enviously.

Context: Washington coveted the military supplies stored in Quebec.

defection

Definition: Conscious abandonment of allegiance or duty.

Context: Defection was a problem in the ranks of the rebel army.

deploy

Definition: To strategically spread out, utilize, or arrange a military unit.

Context: General Clinton planned to deploy 20,000 troops to fight the rebels.

flotilla

Definition: A fleet of ships or boats.

Context: To the rebel fleet, the flotilla of British vessels seemed to approach all at once.

inventory

Definition: An itemized list of goods or supplies.

Context: Taking an inventory of military supplies, the rebels found that they were sorely in need of ammunition.

mercenaries

Definition: Soldiers hired into foreign service who fight merely for wages.

Context: Being mercenaries, the Hessians had no lasting loyalty to the British.

rebels

Definition: Those who oppose or disobey one in authority.

Context: American colonists were known as rebels in their fight against the British.

reconciliation

Definition: The restoration of friendship or harmony.

Context: The rebels disagreed as to what they were fighting for, whether to reconcile differences or for independence.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Civics – What is Government and What Should it Do?: Understands the concept of a constitution, the various purposes that constitutions serve, and the conditions that contribute to the establishment and maintenance of constitutional government.
- U.S. History – Revolution and the New Nation: Understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement, and reasons for the American victory.
- U.S. History – Revolution and the New Nation: Understands the impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Time, Continuity, and Change
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Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the [Discoveryschool.com](http://www.discoveryschool.com) Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

