Primary Sources for Elementary Students
1776 & Beyond

The Declaration of Independence is a brilliant and complicated document, but that doesn't mean elementary students can't engage with it in meaningful ways. In fact, I think younger learners are often more capable of wrestling with complex ideas than we sometimes give them credit for—especially when we scaffold the text thoughtfully and create opportunities for them to make meaning together. The preamble, in particular, is filled with rich language and big ideas that invite students to think about fairness, rights, equality, and freedom.

When I teach the Declaration with elementary students, I'm not necessarily expecting them to master every line of the text. Instead, I want them to practice the habits of historians: asking questions, interpreting language, connecting ideas across sources, and thinking critically about why this document mattered in 1776—and why it still matters today. Through visuals, collaborative annotation, paraphrasing activities, and discussion, students can begin to unpack difficult phrases and connect abstract concepts to concrete examples from their own lives and communities.

I also want students to understand that the Declaration is a living document. For nearly 250 years, Americans have returned to its language and ideals while pushing the nation to live up to its promises. Abolitionists, formerly enslaved people, women's rights activists, civil rights leaders, and countless others have used the Declaration's words to argue that the United States had fallen short of its founding principles—and to advocate for a more inclusive vision of freedom and equality. Helping students see those connections allows them to understand the Declaration not simply as a historical artifact, but as a document that continues to shape American life and civic discourse.

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Source & Citation	Brief Description & Context	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, 1776 National Archives. (1776/2025). Declaration of Independence: A transcription. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript	The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence is the opening section of the Declaration that explains why the colonies believed they were justified in separating from Great Britain. Rather than listing specific complaints immediately, the preamble introduces the broader ideas and principles that frame the document, including equality, natural rights, government by consent, and the right of people to change or overthrow a government they believe is unjust.	• What words or phrases stand out to you? • What does this document say people should be allowed to do? • Why do you think the colonists wanted to write this document? • What does the word *equal* mean in this source? • Which idea in the preamble do you think is most important? Why?	I mentioned this activity in my opening video for this unit, but one of my favorite ways to introduce younger learners to the Declaration of Independence is to help them associate difficult text with visuals. The language of the Declaration can feel intimidating at first, so I like giving students opportunities to break the text into smaller pieces and construct meaning collaboratively. To do this, I divide the class into groups and assign each group a line or phrase from the Declaration's preamble. Each group creates a single Google Slide that includes only their assigned phrase and a collection of images that they believe represent its meaning. Students have to think carefully about symbolism, tone, and word choice as they decide which visuals best communicate the ideas in the text. I love this activity because it encourages students to explicate the meaning of the Declaration in a way that feels creative and accessible. Rather than simply memorizing the words, students actively interpret the language and make meaning from it themselves. Once groups finish their slides, each group presents to the class and explains the choices they made. Those presentations often spark really rich conversations because students quickly realize that the same line of the Declaration can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the images and ideas emphasized.

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The Declaration of Independence, 1819 Trumbull, J. (1819). Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776 [Painting]. U.S. Capitol Architect. https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence	John Trumbull's famous painting depicts the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress rather than the actual signing of the document. Working with guidance from Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Trumbull included many of the delegates associated with the Declaration, even some who were not present at the event. Created over several decades, the painting reflects both historical research and artistic interpretation, making it one of the most recognizable images of America's founding.	• What do you notice first in this painting? • Who seems important in this image? What makes you think so? • What details help you figure out what is happening? • How do the people in the painting seem to feel? • What questions do you have about this scene?	After learning about the Declaration of Independence and the process of its creation, I ask students to engage in the INFER protocol by first imagining what the signing of the Declaration might have looked like. Students begin by sketching their own interpretation of the scene based only on what they know about the event, the historical context, and the people involved. Once students finish their sketches, they compare their imagined scenes to the *Declaration of Independence* by John Trumbull. Students are often surprised by the differences between their interpretations and Trumbull's famous painting, which opens the door for rich discussions about artistic interpretation, historical memory, and the ways historical events are visually represented over time. From there, students move through the remaining stages of the INFER thinking routine by closely observing details in the painting, identifying differences between their assumptions and the artwork, and evaluating what messages or perspectives Trumbull may have been trying to communicate. The activity works especially well because it encourages students to think like historians and artists simultaneously while recognizing that even iconic historical images are interpretations—not photographs of the past.

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Elizabeth Freeman miniature portrait, 1811 Massachusetts Historical Society. 1811. Elizabeth Freeman (Mumbet) miniature portrait [Portrait]. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=23&pid=42	Elizabeth Freeman, often known as "Mumbet," successfully sued for her freedom in 1781. Her case helped establish the legal foundation for ending slavery in Massachusetts, with her attorney arguing that the state's constitution guaranteed that all people were born free and equal and therefore could not be held in slavery.	• What do you notice about this portrait? • How is she portrayed? • What clues can you gather from her clothing, posture, or expression about who she is? • Why might someone have wanted to create this portrait?	Students could analyze the portrait itself and discuss how Freeman chose to present herself, while also examining how the language of equality in Revolutionary documents could be used to challenge slavery. This source pairs especially well with discussions about the promises and contradictions of the Declaration of Independence.
"Mumbett" Manuscript Draft, 1884 Sedgwick, C. M. (1884). *Memoir of Elizabeth Freeman (Mumbet).* Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=547&mode=transcript&img_step=1&pid=15#page1	The biography provides insight into Elizabeth Freeman's life, legal case, and broader significance during the Revolutionary era. Because the text is relatively approachable compared to many eighteenth-century documents, it offers students an opportunity to engage directly with historical writing while practicing close reading and paraphrasing skills.	• What important events happened in Elizabeth Freeman's life? • What challenges did she face? • What does this source teach us about freedom? • Why do you think Elizabeth Freeman's story is still remembered today? • What words or ideas seem most important in this text?	I really like using this manuscript with upper elementary students because the language is challenging but still accessible. Since the manuscript is relatively short, I divide students into groups and assign each group a page or two. Students work together to paraphrase their section into modern language before sharing their interpretations with the class. The activity helps build confidence with historical texts while reinforcing the importance of putting complex ideas into their own words. Afterward, each group creates a giant "field note" centered on what they determine is the most important word from their section. Students write the word in large letters in the center of chart paper and surround it with notes, sketches, quotations, symbols, paraphrases, and connections drawn from the text.

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19th Amendment, 1920 National Archives. (1920). *19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's right to vote*. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/19th-amendment	1920 Amendment that extended the right to vote to anyone regardless of sex.	• What right does this amendment protect? • Why do you think voting is important? • Who was affected by this amendment? • Why might some people have worked hard to pass this amendment? • How did this amendment affect life and politics in the United States?	Amendments are (often) great primary sources for younger students to explicate. They're short, which removes the length of the text as a barrier to entry, but they often contain complex vocabulary, which makes them rich texts for literacy and analysis. I love asking students to create field notes for unfamiliar vocab terms in an amendment, and then to connect those words back to the amendment and our unit.
"I Have a Dream" Speech Footage, 1963 King, M. L., Jr. (1963, August 28). I have a dream [Speech]. March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf	This video footage captures Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. Speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of hundreds of thousands, King called for racial equality, civil rights protections, and the fulfillment of America's founding promises. Throughout the speech, King references the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, arguing that the	• What dreams does Dr. King describe? • What does he believe should be different in America? • Why does he mention the Declaration of Independence? • What promises does he say America should keep? • How do you think people felt when they heard this speech?	One of my favorite ways to connect the "I Have a Dream" speech to the Declaration of Independence is through Martin Luther King Jr.'s "promissory note" metaphor. Before showing the speech, I ask students to think about what a promissory note is—a written promise that someone will eventually receive something they are owed. Then, as students watch the speech, we pause to closely examine this section: "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."

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	United States had failed to deliver the rights and equality promised to all citizens.		Students usually grasp the metaphor quickly because it's so concrete. We discuss how King argues that the Declaration promised liberty, equality, and justice to all Americans, but that those promises were not extended equally to Black Americans. I love this section because it helps students see that King is not rejecting the ideals of the Declaration—he's calling on the nation to finally live up to them. It becomes a powerful way to discuss how the promises of the Declaration have been challenged, expanded, and reinterpreted throughout American history. Afterward, I often ask students to respond to a prompt like: According to Martin Luther King Jr., what promises were made in the Declaration of Independence, and how does he argue America failed to fulfill them? This conversation almost always helps students recognize that the Declaration's ideals became powerful tools that later generations used to advocate for greater equality and justice. This text also makes an excellent primary source for a found poem or field note. 🙂

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