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Primary Sources for Secondary Students
The Declaration of Independence & Beyond

The Declaration of Independence is often taught as a foundational document of American democracy, but it is also a living text that generations of Americans have returned to when advocating for greater freedom, equality, and justice. In this source set, students examine the Declaration alongside speeches, poems, manifestos, performances, and revised “declarations” created across different historical periods.

As they analyze these sources, students explore how abolitionists, women’s rights activists, civil rights leaders, Native American activists, and contemporary artists drew upon the Declaration’s language and ideals to expand its meaning and challenge the nation to more fully realize its promises. Together, these sources encourage students to think critically about historical memory, civic identity, protest, and social change while recognizing that the Declaration's principles have continued to shape American conversations about rights and citizenship for nearly 250 years. And be sure to check out our elementary source set for this topic as well, which has additional sources, which would be absolutely transferable for secondary students as well.

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Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
The Declaration of Independence Rough Draft, 1776 Jefferson, T. (1776). Original rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html	This Library of Congress source features Thomas Jefferson's "original Rough draught" of the Declaration of Independence, complete with edits and revisions from Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and members of Congress.	• Which passages were revised, removed, or added? • What do the revisions reveal about political priorities in 1776? • Why might Congress have removed Jefferson's criticism of slavery? • How do the edits change the meaning or tone of the document? • What does this source reveal about the challenges of creating a unified national statement?	This is a great primary source through which to analyze revision. I give students small sections of Jefferson's rough draft alongside the final version of the Declaration of Independence and ask them to highlight words, phrases, or entire sections that were changed, removed, or added and then annotate the possible purpose behind each revision. For example, students might examine the deleted passage criticizing slavery and discuss: Why might this section have been removed? What does this reveal about political compromise in 1776? How do these edits shape the message of the final Declaration? To conclude, students write a short reflection answering the question: What do the revisions to the Declaration reveal about the challenges of creating a unified national document? This activity helps students see the Declaration as a debated and negotiated text rather than a finished "perfect" document that appeared fully formed.

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The Declaration of Independence & Critical Analysis, 1776 Amar, A. R. (n.d.). The Declaration of Independence: A global statement of human rights. National Constitution Center. https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/declaration-of-independence-1776	This interactive resource from the National Constitution Center allows students and teachers to explore the Declaration of Independence through annotated text, historian essays, videos, signer biographies, and related primary sources. Constitutional scholar Akhil Reed Amar provides annotations that explain the meaning, historical context, and impact of key phrases throughout the document. The site also examines how the Declaration has been interpreted, challenged, and used by different groups throughout American history and around the world.	• What did the Declaration of Independence promise in 1776? • To what extent has the United States lived up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence? • Is the Declaration of Independence more important as a historical document or as a statement of ideals? • How has the meaning of the Declaration of Independence changed over time? • Who gets to define what the Declaration of Independence means? • How have Americans used the Declaration to challenge injustice? • Is the Declaration of Independence a finished document or an ongoing project?	For my older students, who may already be familiar with the Declaration of Independence as a text, I still ask them to engage in close reading with the document. However, I like to pair that close reading with a secondary source that offers a critical analysis of the Declaration and its legacy. I love these articles from the National Constitution Center because they're written by expert scholars and approach the document through thoughtful, nonpartisan historical analysis. These pieces help students grapple with the promises, contradictions, and evolving interpretations of the Declaration across American history.

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🪷 **Source Selection, Guiding Questions, and Classroom Application by Patrick Hussey, lilyPD Education Intern!** **The Boarding School Era, 1819 to the 1970's** Pelton, H. W. (1909). Indian School, Cherokee, N.C. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/resource/pan.6a25406	The chosen photograph captures a pivotal moment in the American Indian boarding school era. Captured in 1909 by copyright claimant Herbert Pelton, the image features students at an Indian School in North Carolina. This photograph serves to visualize the gravity and long-term consequences that the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 created for Indigenous peoples. When exploring the boarding school era, I find it helpful to mention the infamous motto "Kill the Indian, save the man," popularized by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, a U.S. cavalry officer and founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Allowing students to interpret and then build on their understanding during the lesson enhances what they take away from it.	• What is happening in this photograph? • Do you think it represents a peaceful period in American history? • How might Indigenous peoples describe this photograph? Would it be different from the description of the photographer? • Does anything surprise you or make you feel uncomfortable in regard to this photograph? If so, could you describe it? • What can this photograph teach us about government policies toward Indigenous peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? • What does this source reveal about the relationship between cultural identity and citizenship in American history?	I would begin by having students closely examine the photograph and share their observations, questions, and inferences before providing any historical context. Afterward, I would introduce the boarding school era, including the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 and later federal policies aimed at assimilating Indigenous children. Students could then revisit the image and consider how this new information changes their understanding of the source. To deepen the discussion, I would pair the photograph with additional sources that highlight Indigenous perspectives and experiences. Students could compare viewpoints, discuss the impact of boarding schools on Indigenous communities, and reflect on how this history connects to larger questions about liberty, rights, identity, and belonging in the United States.

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The Declaration of Sentiments, 1848 Stanton, E. C. (1848). Declaration of Sentiments. Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/senecafalls.asp	The "Declaration of Sentiments," written primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention, adapts the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to argue for women's equality and political rights.	• How does Stanton adapt the language of the Declaration of Independence? • Which grievances parallel those listed in the Declaration? • Why was the Declaration an effective model for women's rights activists? • What does the document suggest about citizenship and equality in 1848? • How does the Declaration of Sentiments expand the meaning of the DOI?	I give students excerpts from both the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of Sentiments and ask them to identify where Stanton mirrors, revises, or expands the language of the original document. Students highlight repeated phrases, annotate key changes, and discuss why those revisions matter. Then, students choose an issue they care about and write a "Declaration" of their own, using the Declaration of Independence as a mentor text. By borrowing its structure and rhetoric to advocate for change, students see how generations of Americans have reinterpreted the Declaration to push for expanded rights, justice, and reform.
What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?, 1852 Douglass, F. (1852, July 5). What to the slave is the Fourth of July? Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.22005/	"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" is an 1852 speech by Frederick Douglass in which he critiques the contradiction between America's celebration of liberty and the reality of slavery.	• How does Douglass characterize the relationship between American ideals and slavery? • What rhetorical strategies does Douglass use to persuade his audience? • How does Douglass invoke the Declaration of Independence? • Who is the intended audience, and how does that shape the speech?	I like using excerpts from this speech alongside the Declaration of Independence to help students grapple with the tension between American ideals and American realities. Students can closely read Douglass's language to analyze how he builds an argument, uses emotion and evidence, and challenges his audience to reconsider the meaning of freedom and equality. Through guided and student-led inquiry, students are able to discuss who was included—or excluded—from the promises of the Declaration and how different groups throughout history have used those promises to advocate for change.

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Celebrating Juneteenth (Emancipation Proclamation and "Day of Jubelo"), 1865 Library of Congress. (2015, June 18). Celebrating Juneteenth: Emancipation Proclamation and "Day of Jubelo." https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2015/06/celebrating-juneteenth/	This Library of Congress blog post explores the history and significance of Juneteenth, the commemoration of June 19, 1865, when enslaved people in Texas learned they were free—more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.	• What is Juneteenth? • Why is Juneteenth an important historical commemoration? • What does this source reveal about the uneven process of emancipation? • How did Black communities preserve the memory of freedom? • Why do communities create and maintain civic commemorations? • How does Juneteenth expand our understanding of freedom in American history?	I love using resources like this to help students understand that emancipation was not a single moment, but a long and uneven process experienced differently across the United States. I'd use excerpts from the article alongside primary sources like General Order No. 3, photographs, oral histories, or emancipation celebrations to help students analyze how freedom was communicated, celebrated, and remembered. This also opens up powerful conversations about historical memory, civic holidays, and why communities create commemorations like Juneteenth in the first place. *Note: some of the oral histories contain language that might not be appropriate for all age groups.
I, Too, 1926 Hughes, L. (1926). I, too. In The Weary Blues. Alfred A. Knopf. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too	"I, Too" is a poem by Harlem Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes, that reflects on racism, exclusion, and belonging in the United States.	• Who is Langston Hughes? • What vision of America does Hughes present in the poem? • How does Hughes use imagery and symbolism to convey exclusion and belonging? • What is the significance of the title, I, Too? • In what ways does Hughes connect to the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence?	One activity I use with students is a close reading of Langston Hughes's I, Too. Students annotate lines that stand out to them and discuss themes like exclusion, belonging, identity, and hope. Then, they select one line and create a visual representation of it in the margins of the text to communicate its tone, symbolism, or meaning. Afterward, students participate in a gallery walk and discuss how Hughes uses poetry to critique America while imagining a more inclusive future.

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1960 Declaration of Indian Purpose American Indian Chicago Conference. (1961). Declaration of Indian Purpose. In The Declaration Project. https://declarationproject.org	The Declaration Project is a digital archive that collects declarations, manifestos, and public statements from groups throughout history who have used the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to advocate for rights, freedom, and social change. This particular source, the "1961 Declaration of Indian Purpose," was created by Native American leaders who called for self-determination, cultural preservation, and equal rights during a period of growing Native activism.	• What concerns and goals do the authors identify? • How does the document draw upon the language of the Declaration of Independence? • What does the source reveal about Native American activism in the mid-twentieth century? • How does the document challenge or expand traditional ideas of citizenship and self-determination? • What continuities and differences exist between this declaration and the Declaration of Independence?	One activity I use with students is a "Declaration Remix" comparative analysis. I give students short, excerpted sections from both the Declaration of Independence and the "Declaration of Indian Purpose." Then, students work in small groups to annotate the texts for repeated ideas, phrases, and themes related to rights, freedom, government, identity, and self-determination. After annotating, students complete a side-by-side chart answering questions like: What promises or ideals from the original Declaration does this document reference? How does the "Declaration of Indian Purpose" challenge or expand those promises? What problems or injustices is this document responding to? What does this reveal about the experiences of Native Americans in the twentieth century? To wrap up, students write a short claim statement explaining how different groups throughout American history use the language of the Declaration to advocate for change. This works especially well as a bridge activity between the Revolutionary era and later civil rights movements.