

## Declaration of Independence OR U.S. Constitution Activity – Instructions for Teachers, grades 6-8

**Essential Question: How do the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States differ in their purpose, content, and impact on the nation's history and governance?**

### **Prep:**

- Print cards from “Task Card” pdf file attached to this activity. Printing cards on cardstock or taping cards to construction paper will increase durability.
- Decide if you’d like the students to play independently or in pairs (i.e., one card per pair so they can discuss their card).
- Briefly review the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution with the students.

### **Directions for play:**

1. Distribute cards among students (independently or in pairs).
2. Tell the students to read the words on their card and then decide which document their statement belongs to. Instruct them to use what they know about each of the documents to make their decision.
3. Identify one area in the classroom/park as “Declaration” and a different one as “Constitution.”
4. Instruct the students to stand in the area they think their card corresponds to.
5. Once all the students have selected an area, go one-by-one asking the students to read their card aloud and explain why they chose the side they did. Involve the larger group by asking all the students (or even just select students) if they believe the student is correct. If the student is incorrect, have that student/pair move to the correct location (Declaration or Constitution).

### **Background Information:**

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are two fundamental documents in American history, each serving distinct but interconnected purposes. The Declaration of Independence, adopted in 1776, marked the nation's formal break from British rule and established the foundational principles of individual rights, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It articulated the colonies' grievances and declared their independence. In contrast, the Constitution, drafted in 1787 and ratified in 1788, outlines the framework of the federal government and its structure, including the division of powers, the system of checks and balances, and the establishment of key institutions. While the Declaration represents the spirit of revolution and principles of freedom, the Constitution lays out the practical framework for governance, creating a lasting and adaptable foundation for the United States.

### **Task Card Answer Key:**

#### **Declaration of Independence cards**

- Mainly written by Thomas Jefferson
- Listed grievances against King George
- Adopted on July 4, 1776

- Signed by members of the Continental Congress
- Declared the United States as a sovereign nation independent of British rule
- Used to rally support for the American Revolutionary War
- This document describes the concept of “unalienable rights” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”
- “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights...”
- Anyone who signed this document could be arrested for treason
- This document inspired the women's suffrage movement to say that 'all men and women are created equal'

### **U.S. Constitution cards**

- “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this \_\_\_\_\_ for the United States of America.
- Created after the failure of the Articles of Confederation
- Main author was James Madison
- This document divides the government into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial
- Formed after compromises such as the Great Compromise and the Three-Fifths Compromise
- Written in 1787, this document became the supreme law of the land in 1789
- Established the framework of the federal government which divided powers between the national government and state governments
- Created a system of checks and balances
- One of its amendments guarantees individual freedoms such as: freedom of speech, religion, and the press
- This document combined the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan to resolve issues of representation
- Anti-Federalists and Federalists fought over this document until the Bill of Rights was added
- We can amend or change this document, but it isn't easy. It's happened just 27 times.

### **Declaration of Independence or U.S. Constitution card (case could be made for either)**

- Influenced by Enlightenment ideas such as John Locke’s concept of natural rights