

Workshop 2

Common Sense and the American Revolution: The Power of the Printed Word

This workshop explores the power and importance of America's first "bestseller," Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Using the language of ordinary folk, Paine called for revolution and challenged many commonly held assumptions about government and the colonies' relationship to England. By looking at *Common Sense*, comparing it with the local declarations of independence, and then comparing it with the Declaration of Independence, you can explore the growing support for American independence in the 1770s.

- What was the influence of *Common Sense* on rallying support for independence and in defining an agenda for revolutionary change?
- *Common Sense* is an example of colonial mass media. What elements in this pamphlet made it so effective?

Explore these and other questions by examining the original documents and images of the period.

Objectives

- To gain a deeper understanding of historical content of the revolutionary period through reading and discussing primary source documents.
- To gain greater familiarity with the mind of Thomas Paine and its expression in *Common Sense*.
- To explore the power and influence of *Common Sense* within its time and in relation to the American Revolution.
- To examine a range of print materials that influenced Americans to support the revolutionary cause.

Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment

Before viewing “*Common Sense* and the American Revolution: The Power of the Printed Word,” you should have already read the following primary source documents, while considering the accompanying questions. These materials represent a selection made by the professor based on the readings available to the onscreen teachers. For additional primary source readings, go to Resources on page 33.

These materials can be found online at www.learner.org/primarysources/revolution/before.html.

For Lecture and Activity One: Primary Source Documents

- **Common Sense**

Common Sense, a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine, makes a case, in accessible and stirring language, for independence.

Consider These Questions

1. What are the main arguments that Paine makes for independence?
2. If you were a colonist who was trying to decide between independence and continuing as a colony of Britain, do you think that Paine’s arguments would have persuaded you in favor of independence? Why or why not?
3. Paine was not an important figure in politics or society. Why do you think this did not affect the impact of *Common Sense* as it might today?
4. Why do you think *Common Sense* was so influential?

- **The Olive Branch Petition**

The Olive Branch Petition, adopted by the Second Continental Congress and submitted to King George III, attempts to assert the rights of the colonists while maintaining their loyalty to the British crown.

Consider These Questions

1. Why do you think the Second Continental Congress adopted the tone that it used in this document?
2. How do you think people who were already in favor of independence might have reacted to it?
3. How did Paine respond to this type of petition in *Common Sense*?

Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment, cont'd.

- **The Declaration of Independence**

Congress adopts the formal Declaration of Independence on July 4.

Consider These Questions

1. In what ways was the Declaration of Independence influenced by *Common Sense*?
2. In what ways was it influenced by the individual counties' statements of independence?
3. What other influences might have led to the statements and arguments set forth in it?
4. Thomas Jefferson later said that the declaration was "to be an expression of the American mind." What do you think he meant by that?
5. What kinds of circumstances, if any, might prompt people today to write such a declaration?

- **Buckingham County, Virginia, Statement of Independence**

Buckingham County, Virginia, gives these instructions to their delegates to the Second Continental Congress.

Consider These Questions

1. What are the primary arguments made for independence in this document?
2. Which of the arguments are similar to those in *Common Sense* and which are different?
3. What besides *Common Sense* might have influenced the points made in this document?

- **James City County, Virginia, Statement of Independence**

A majority of freeholders in James City County, Virginia, vote to give these instructions to their representatives to the Second Continental Congress.

Consider These Questions

1. What are the primary arguments made for independence in this document?
2. Which of the arguments are similar to those in *Common Sense* and which are different?
3. What besides *Common Sense* might have influenced the points made in this document?
4. What do you think of their use of the term "slavery"? What do you think a slave might have thought about this?

Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment, cont'd.

- **Malden, Massachusetts, Statement of Independence**

Malden, Massachusetts, residents unanimously adopt these instructions, which they give to their representative to the Second Continental Congress.

Consider These Questions

1. What are the primary arguments made for independence in this document?
2. Which of the arguments are similar to those in *Common Sense* and which are different?
3. What besides *Common Sense* might have influenced the points made in this document?
4. What do you think of the inhabitants' use of the term "slaves"? What do you think a slave might have thought about this?

For Lecture and Activity Two: Primary Source Documents

- **Common Sense**

Common Sense, a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine, makes a case, in accessible and stirring language, for independence.

Consider These Questions

1. What are the main arguments that Paine makes for independence?
2. If you were a colonist who was trying to decide between independence and continuing as a colony of Britain, do you think that Paine's arguments would have persuaded you in favor of independence? Why or why not?
3. Paine was not an important figure in politics or society. Why do you think this did not affect the impact of *Common Sense* as it might today?
4. Why do you think *Common Sense* was so influential?

Optional: Video Program From *A Biography of America*

The video programs from *A Biography of America* will provide you with context and detail for thinking about and using the *Primary Sources* videos and associated materials.

- **Program 4. The Coming of Independence (approximately 27 minutes in length)**

Professor Maier tells the story of how the English-loving colonist transforms into the freedom-loving American rebel. The luminaries of the early days of the Republic—Washington, Jefferson, Adams—are featured in this program as they craft the Declaration of, and wage the War for, Independence.

Visit Learner.org, the Annenberg/CPB Web site, for more information on *A Biography of America* at www.learner.org/go2bio.

On-Site Activities and Timeline

The video program “*Common Sense* and the American Revolution” includes two lectures and two onscreen teacher activities. This guide provides activities and reflection on these components. Follow the series and the approximate timelines on the following pages, depending on the length of your workshop session and whether you are watching a real-time broadcast or videotape.

Two-Hour Workshop Sessions (Real-Time Broadcast or Videotape)

You can receive graduate credit *only* if you take all eight workshops in two-hour sessions. Visit Learner.org (go to www.learner.org/4gradcredit) for details.

Choose the series of activities below based on whether you are viewing a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel or a videotape.

	Viewing Real-Time Broadcast	Viewing Videotapes
	Watch the full program, then do each of the activities below.	Watch each video segment listed below, pausing after each one to do the related activity.
Watch Full Program	58 minutes	—
Watch Lecture One: Thomas Paine and American Independence	—	20 minutes
Do Activity One: What Is Paine’s Argument?	25 minutes	25 minutes
Watch Onscreen Activity One: Paine’s Argument	—	11 minutes
Reflect on Onscreen Activity One: Paine’s Argument	10 minutes	10 minutes
Watch Lecture Two: Summarizing Paine’s Argument	—	18 minutes
Do Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	20 minutes	22 minutes
Watch Onscreen Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	—	4 minutes
Reflect on Onscreen Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	7 minutes	10 minutes

All times are approximate.

Note: Reading of homework assignments and viewing of *A Biography of America* programs are not included here. These should be completed prior to attending the workshop session. See Before You Watch/Homework Assignment beginning on page 24 for more information.

On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

One-and-a-Half-Hour Workshop Sessions (Videotape Only)

Select *either* Workshop A or Workshop B. Each is one-and-a-half hours long. If you choose Workshop B, you can follow it with Workshop C in another one-and-a-half-hour workshop. In Workshop A, you will watch lectures and do the related activities. In Workshops B and C, you will watch lectures and do the related activities, as well as watch onscreen activities and reflect on them.

	Workshop A	Workshop B	Workshop C
	Watch the video segments listed below, pausing after each one to do the related activity.		
			Do this workshop after Workshop B.
Watch Lecture One: Thomas Paine and American Independence	20 minutes	20 minutes	—
Do Activity One: What Is Paine's Argument?	27 minutes	35 minutes	—
Watch Onscreen Activity One: Paine's Argument	—	11 minutes	—
Reflect on Onscreen Activity One: Paine's Argument	—	24 minutes	—
Watch Lecture Two: Summarizing Paine's Argument	18 minutes	—	18 minutes
Do Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	25 minutes	—	40 minutes
Watch Onscreen Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	—	—	4 minutes
Reflect on Onscreen Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	—	—	28 minutes

All times are approximate.

Note: Reading of homework assignments and viewing of *A Biography of America* programs are not included here. These should be completed prior to attending the workshop session. See Before You Watch/Homework Assignment beginning on page 24 for more information.

On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

Forty-Five-Minute Workshop Sessions (Videotape Only)

If you can only meet for 45 minutes, you can take this workshop as two consecutive 45-minute sessions. Take Workshop A before Workshop B.

	Workshop A	Workshop B
	Watch the video segment listed below, then do the related activity.	
		Do this workshop after Workshop A.
Watch Lecture One: Thomas Paine and American Independence	20 minutes	—
Do Activity One: What Is Paine's Argument?	25 minutes	—
Watch Lecture Two: Summarizing Paine's Argument	—	18 minutes
Do Activity Two: Interpretations of <i>Common Sense</i>	—	27 minutes

All times are approximate.

Note: Reading of homework assignments and viewing of *A Biography of America* programs are not included here. These should be completed prior to attending the workshop session. See Before You Watch/Homework Assignment beginning on page 24 for more information.

Lecture One: Thomas Paine and American Independence

Lecturer: Professor Pauline Maier

View this portion of the video program. The transcript of this lecture can be found online at www.learner.org/primarysources/revolution/transcript01.html.

"This is a time when there weren't mass media; there was a mass medium, which is newspapers and pamphlets. It's the printed word that could appeal to large audiences. Colonial newspapers had only begun to be published in the eighteenth century. They were located in the port cities, by and large, and they did not even touch all of the population. So the only rival to the newspaper was the spoken word, and the spoken word is not a mass medium. Obviously it only deals with people within earshot, because there is not even any amplification equipment available."

—Pauline Maier

On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

Activity One: What Is Paine's Argument?

Analyze *Common Sense* and then compare it with local declarations of independence and the Declaration of Independence. Use the questions to guide your analysis.

Note: This activity has two sets of questions: those that relate to specific documents and appear on each document page and the Before You Watch/Homework Assignment pages, and the more general, "big picture" questions listed below. You may begin with general or specific questions depending upon your preference.

Consider These Questions

1. What are Paine's arguments for independence?
2. What is Paine's approach? Consider his use of language, his use of emotional versus logical arguments, and his intended audience.
3. What are the arguments made by the local and national declarations?
4. Do the declarations echo Paine's pamphlet other than in accepting his general conclusion?
5. What is the relationship between *Common Sense* and the other documents? Who influenced whom?

Facilitators: Divide the workshop participants into small groups. Each group should have a packet of the primary source documents for this activity. Encourage the participants to refer to specific documents to support their answers to the questions. At the end of the activity, groups can share key points they discussed with other groups.

Another way to conduct the activity is to focus on *Common Sense* using different lenses. Consider discussing the pamphlet using the following themes:

- Economics
- Language
- Engineering/Design
- Society/Community
- Communication/Technology

Onscreen Activity One: Paine's Argument

View this portion of the video program.

Reflection One: Paine's Argument

The teachers in the discussion groups explored Thomas Paine's arguments for independence. As you listen to the teachers analyze *Common Sense*, answer the questions below.

Consider These Questions

1. What insights did you gain?
2. What arguments do you agree or disagree with?
3. What other arguments did you find in *Common Sense* that the teachers did not mention?

On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

Lecture Two: Summarizing Paine's Argument

Lecturer: Professor Pauline Maier

View this portion of the video program. The transcript of this lecture can be found online at www.learner.org/primarysources/revolution/transcript2_01.html.

Activity Two: Interpretations of *Common Sense*

For this activity, create a song, rap, dramatic poem, short play, or other interpretation that brings Paine's message to a contemporary audience. Presentations should run about two to five minutes and should focus on two to three main themes, arguments, or points from Paine's writing. Use the questions below to prepare for this activity. If possible, present your work to an audience.

Facilitators: Divide the workshop participants into small groups for their presentations. Allow sufficient time for preparation, then have groups present their work to one another.

Note: This activity has two sets of questions: those that relate to specific documents and appear on each document page and the Before You Watch/Homework Assignment pages, and the more general, "big picture" questions listed below. You may begin with general or specific questions depending upon your preference.

Consider These Questions

1. What are Paine's philosophical, underlying, and universalized arguments for independence?
2. What is Paine's approach? Consider his use of language, his use of emotional versus logical arguments, and his intended audience.

Onscreen Activity Two: Interpretations of *Common Sense*

View this portion of the video program.

Reflection Two: Interpretations of *Common Sense*

You have seen the onscreen interpretations of *Common Sense*, created your own interpretation, and heard the rationale for the activity from *Primary Sources* curriculum developer Tamara Berman. Now consider the following questions:

Consider These Questions

1. What are the advantages to engaging in primary source documents through activities like role-play and presentations?
2. What other ways might you have your students engage with *Common Sense*?

"Teachers ask students to role-play, to do posters, to act for them, to do debates in the classroom all the time. Rarely does anyone ask a teacher to do it."

—Tamara Berman

Homework Assignment

Before the next workshop, “The Lowell System: Women in a New Industrial Society,” read the primary source documents listed beginning on page 36, and consider the accompanying questions. These materials can be found online at www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/before.html.

Classroom Applications

Reflect on how you teach Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* in your classroom. How would you teach it differently using primary sources?

Now consider this lesson idea contributed by a *Primary Sources* teacher.

Explore the Main Points of *Common Sense*

Contributed by Andrew Sullivan

The language in *Common Sense* is challenging for modern students, but not nearly as difficult as most colonial texts. This activity explores *Common Sense*, showing students an example of an appeal to average citizens, not writings meant only for the ruling elite.

I had my students read four pages of excerpts from *Common Sense*. I chose not to assign the full text because of time constraints and because I know my students will read four pages, but I don’t know if they will fully read 65 pages. I chose each excerpt based on what struck me as interesting. I also tried to cover the four or five main points of Paine’s thesis.

Next to each excerpt I wrote a number, and that number corresponded to a question that the students had to answer. The students submitted written answers to the questions. The questions, designed to lead them to an understanding of Paine’s main points, were:

1. What is the difference between society and government?
2. How do monarchies/dynasties get established? What is the king’s role in a limited monarchy?
3. Has America benefited from its ties to England? Will it in the future?
4. Does America need military alliances to further its economic interests?
5. Why is the time perfect for revolution?

My students seemed to enjoy the assignment. Paine’s writing style is like a puzzle that they had to unravel to find the meaning. I prefer to use primary sources when I can, and *Common Sense* is a source that truly engages students.

“For the professional, for the teacher, [personal interpretation of Common Sense] allows them to say, ‘Hey, this on the surface frivolous-looking exercise has some intellectual meat to it’—that a kid is really going to have to understand Common Sense, which is a complex document, which takes a lot of time to get through, which you really have to read if you’re going to have to create something else out of it.”

—Tamara Berman

Resources

Print Resources

Foner, Eric. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Fruchtman, Jack, Jr. *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994.

Keane, John. *Tom Paine: A Political Life*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1995.

Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Also published by New York: Alfred A. Knopf, distributed by Random House, Inc., 1997.

Web Resources

Thomas Paine National Historical Association

<http://www.thomas-paine.com/tpnha>

This site contains texts of biographies of Thomas Paine, information on the Paine Memorial Museum and the Thomas Paine Cottage, and links to other pages relating to Paine's life and work.

Chronicle of the Revolution: The Remains of Thomas Paine

<http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle/paine.html>

The site details how Paine's work acted as inspiration for the coming revolution. It also contains links and information on the Revolutionary War.

The American Revolution Home Page: Thomas Paine

<http://webpages.homestead.com/revwar/files/PAINE.HTM>

This site discusses Paine's writing as an inspiration for the revolution against Britain, his role and writings in the French Revolution, and his continued influence on politics today.

The American Revolution Home Page

<http://webpages.homestead.com/revwar/files/INDEX2.HTM#time>

This site contains general information and an extensive timeline on the battles and events of the American Revolution. It also includes biographies and links to information on the key players in the revolution: the Founding Fathers, American Patriots, and British and American Generals.

Resources, cont'd.

Curriculum Resources

Lesson Plan—Issues That Led to the War for Independence

<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~kl5r/lesson1.htm>

This lesson plan directs students to examine *Common Sense* and to create a timeline for the events and situations that led to the Revolutionary War.

Jigsaw Activity—Events Leading to the Revolution

<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~mdm4z/RevLessonPlan.htm>

In this lesson plan, students learn about important figures in American Revolutionary history and how they supported the cause for independence. Students will conclude the activity by writing a letter to King George III specifying why the colonies should seek independence from England.

"The people read Common Sense. It opened the debate on independence. But when they came to their own conclusion, they didn't come at it just like Paine did. They had their own arguments, their own experience that they brought into it."

—Pauline Maier