

From Grievances to Guarantees:

Tracing Rights Across Foundational Documents

Grade Level: 9–12

Time: 1–2 class periods

Skills Focus: Primary source analysis, comparison, cause-and-effect, historical continuity

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the **Declaration of Independence**
 - Connect to protections in the **U.S. Constitution**
 - Explain how ideas about rights and limits on government evolved over time
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Materials

- Excerpts from:
 - Declaration of Independence (1776)
 - U.S. Constitution (especially Article III and the Bill of Rights)
 - Comparison Chart (provided below)
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Activity Overview

Step 1: Hook (10 minutes)

Ask students:

“If a government keeps violating people’s rights, what options do the people have?”

Brief discussion, then introduce the idea:

- **Declaration** = complaints explaining *why* independence was necessary
 - **Constitution** = solutions and protections put into law
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Step 2: Document Markup (15–20 minutes)

Students work in small groups.

Each group highlights:

- **Declaration of Independence:** guiding principles listed in the introduction, grievances against King George III
- **Constitution:** protections of rights or limits on government power

Encourage students to write short margin notes explaining *what each protection or grievance is about*.

Step 3: Comparison Chart (20 minutes)

See the attached handout.

Students will compare grievances listed in the Declaration to protections found in the Constitution.

Example:

Declaration Grievance	U.S. Constitution Protection
“Depriving us... of the benefits of Trial by Jury”	6th Amendment

Students must quote or paraphrase directly from each document.

Step 4: Analysis & Discussion (15 minutes)

Whole-class discussion using guiding questions:

- Why do you think the Declaration lists grievances instead of protections?
 - How does the Constitution directly respond to the problems listed in the Declaration?
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Step 5: Creative Synthesis (Choose One – 20 minutes or homework)

Option A: Rights Timeline

Students create a visual timeline showing how one right (e.g., fair trial) appears in both documents.

Option B: Letter to the King

Students write a short letter explaining how the Constitution fixed the problems listed in the Declaration.

Option C: Claim–Evidence–Reasoning Paragraph

Prompt:

“The U.S. Constitution reflects and addresses the grievances in the Declaration of Independence.”

Assessment

Formative:

- Completed comparison chart
- Participation in discussion

Summative:

- Clear connections across documents
 - Accurate use of historical evidence
 - Strong explanation of continuity and change
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Extension / Differentiation

- **Advanced:** Add Magna Carta (1215) and/or the English Bill of Rights (1689) to the comparison.
- **Support:** Provide simplified excerpts or fill in the Declaration of Independence Column.
- **Debate:** “Which document most strongly protects individual rights?”

Comparison Chart

Instructions: Cite the statement found in the Declaration of Independence. Then find where it is rectified by the United States Constitution.

Declaration of Independence	United States Constitution

Comparison Chart – Answer Key

Instructions: Cite the statement found in the Declaration of Independence. Then find where it is rectified by the United States Constitution.

Declaration of Independence	United States Constitution
He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article III
He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article III
(For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us) For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6th Amendment
For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6th Amendment • 7th Amendment
For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article III • 6th Amendment
All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill of Rights in totality • 14th Amendment
That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5th Amendment • 8th Amendment • 14th Amendment