

Whose “We”?

PODCAST – STUDENT HANDOUT

Equality, Power, and the Limits of a Founding Narrative

Support Note: *If you are teaching these materials in Los Angeles County and would like an ES Resources representative to assist with your planning or classroom application, please email contact@ESResources.org.*

What’s Inside?

The following pages offer more than **30 questions** for educators to choose from while teaching the podcast: [Is Equality “A Radical Idea”? A Historian’s Discussion Between Walter Isaacson and Shilo Brooks | The “Mission Statement” of the United States](#). An **answer key** is provided for teachers at the end.

1. Retrieval Questions (Podcast - While listening)
2. Synthesis, Argument, and Research Questions (Podcast – After listening)
3. Collaborative Poster Walk (Activity #1)
4. Fishbowl (Activity #2)
5. Answer Keys

These activities are part of the ES Resources curriculum project.

About the Project

The Declaration of Independence made a historic claim, but history is an ongoing conversation – not a settled narrative. Every generation inherits the past, wrestles with its contradictions, and leaves behind new interpretations for future generations. From the Civil Rights Movement to disability rights, Sojourner Truth to the 19th Amendment, the ES Resources curriculum project invites students to investigate how meaning is constructed, contested, and reconstructed across generations. Students discover that they, too, inherit the ideas, debates, and unfinished aspirations of the past.

Podcast Questions: Argument & Student Synthesis

1. What is a “mission statement”?
2. According to Walter Isaacson, why is “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” the “mission statement” of the United States?
3. Do you agree that sentence is or should be the mission statement of the United States? Explain your answer using examples and evidence. If you consult other sources besides what is covered in class, provide a citation.
4. In 1776, why was “created equal” a “radical idea”?
5. What is the relationship or difference between “common ground” and “compromise”? What is one example Isaacson discusses? Provide your own additional example and explain.
6. Look up the term “abolition” in the context of slavery. What does Isaacson mean that the Founders “compromised”?
7. Why is the change of the word “sacred” into “self-evident” in the final version of the Declaration important for interpreting the document and its founding ideals?
8. According to Isaacson, the Founders “knew” the institution of slavery “was an enormous, problematic contradiction ... the Founders all knew, even John Adams, who was an abolitionist ... *it's not as if they didn't get it*. They knew this was this huge problem, but they also knew, perhaps incorrectly, that it couldn't have been solved right away.” Isaacson argues: **“That’s something historians have to debate. Did they have to compromise as much as they did?”**
What do historians need to debate and why?
9. The interviewer asks Isaacson whether the idea of equality in the Declaration of Independence is “merely an American phenomenon” or whether it refers to “All people everywhere in the world.” What do you think – are these universal values, or should the founding democratic ideals of the United States be specific to life and people in this country?
10. After listening to the podcast, why do *you* think the Founders began the sentence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” with the word “**We**” and used the word “**all men**”? Use examples and evidence to explain your position.
11. In the podcast, Walter Isaacson thanks former-First Lady Laura Bush for helping “get the electricity back on” in New Orleans. What happened in New Orleans in 2005 when “the levies broke”? Why did New Orleans need “help” to “recover”?

Podcast Questions: Retrieval Only

1. The now-famous pamphlet by Thomas Paine, called *Common Sense*, was published in early 1776. Before then, according to Isaacson, how did most people in the American colonies likely feel about pursuing a revolution against the British?
2. What argument did Thomas Jefferson make to insist that he was *not* plagiarizing? How did Jefferson use the concept of *audience* to defend his position?

Extra credit: Define *plagiarism*.

3. On what day did John Adams die?
4. On what day did Thomas Jefferson die?
5. List at least 3 people Isaacson mentions as having “quoted that sentence” from the Declaration of Independence across history?
6. What does Isaacson mean when he says that Thomas Jefferson initially wrote “sacred” instead of “self-evident,” but the term in the first version was “a flourish”?
7. Why was Benjamin Franklin in Britain?
8. What is a social contract?
9. List the names of three founders of *social contract theory* that Brooks mentions.
10. Why was the concept of “consent of the governed” so different from the norm? In other words, in 1776 what was the **dominant** form of government?
11. Under social contract theory, what defines the right of the people governing to govern people?
12. Why do people form a social contract?
13. What makes a *truth* “self-evident”?
14. Over the course of generations, what can we do with a “narrative”?
15. According to Isaacson, why do we need to find “common ground”?

Synthesis #1: Do you agree, disagree, or feel uncertain with Isaacson’s argument? Use examples and evidence to explain your position.

16. Brooks says, “created equal” was a “radical idea” and asks, what does “equality consist” of? How does Isaacson answer the question, “What did the founders think they were claiming when they said ‘created equal’?”
17. List at least 2 examples for “common ground” everybody may “share” or be “entitled” to under a social contract, according to Isaacson.
18. According to Isaacson, what does “equality” *not* mean?
19. According to Brooks, what is the “elephant in the room”?
20. What or who did Jefferson denounce in his first draft of the Declaration of Independence?
21. Why was Thomas Jefferson “complicated” according to Isaacson?
22. Isaacson argues that if President Abraham Lincoln were alive today, he would see the United States as still working to fulfill its founding “mission statement.” Isaacson suggests Lincoln might say, “You’re still trying to prove it.” What does “it” refer to in this statement?
 - A. The United States’ military strength and global power
 - B. The idea that “all Men are created equal” and that all people should have equal rights
 - C. The creation of the Constitution and the structure of government
 - D. The belief that the United States should expand its territory

HOW TO CITE YOUR SOURCES

I think X because, according to Y, ... (name of source).”

Examples of parenthetical citations:

- “Jefferson originally wrote the word “sacred,” but it might have just been a “flourish” (Class Podcast).
- “A mission statement is defined as ... “ (Dictionary.com).
- “I disagree / agree because there was a story in the news that said ...” (*Los Angeles Times*)

Collaborative Poster Walk

With this activity, students can practice the historian’s habit of identifying and generating questions before searching for answers. Return students’ attention to the sentence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”

Place four large posters around the room. Write one question on each poster.

1. What is a “self-evident” truth? (What makes it so?)
2. Who does “men” refer to in the Declaration of Independence? What types of people are included?
3. Why does the Declaration of Independence begin this sentence with the word “We”?
4. Who is included in “We”?

Students move around the room to write one answer and one follow-up question on each poster.

Fishbowl

Students practice using evidence while generating answers. Each fishbowl must end in group consensus; students learn to debate not for ego, but together to land upon the language of a collaborative interpretation they can all feel confident about.

Inside circle prompt: “Are the words ‘We’ and ‘men’ in this sentence aspirational or limiting? Defend and/or explain your position with evidence.

Outside circle: Explain that their job is to observe and synthesize the argument made by the inner group. After 8 minutes, invite the outside circle to chime in as support / referees. ***For the second half, the outer circle will guide the inner circle to reach a collaborative agreement or group consensus.***

What counts as evidence? Information from today’s videos, class discussion, and collaborative poster walk; prior historical knowledge; specific words / phrases from the Declaration itself; family history, cultural references, or lived experience, when used to explain perspective rather than to establish historical facts).

Pedagogy Note: Encourage students to agree or disagree but ensure the classroom environment fosters honesty, integrity, and respect while students answer authentically from their own perspectives using evidence-backed rationale. *Differentiated Instruction:* Consider a 5-minute quick-write if kinesthetic / movement is not the right fit for your class. You may also use digital platforms and keep the style of gallery responses to maintain the collaborative element but enable students to remain seated and/or keep written answers most legible and accessible to everyone in the room.

Answer Key

Stop playing audio at 23:28.

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Podcast Questions: Argument & Student Synthesis

1. A mission statement is a brief statement that explains an organization's or group's core purpose, values, and goals.

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Extended Enrichment: When you offer students an example, consider using your school's own mission statement. You might also pick one from an organization that is relevant to student interests, your classroom makeup, or corresponds to a national heritage celebration which coincides with when you are teaching this material.

2. Isaacson argues that the use of the word, "We" is the most fundamental evidence that the Declaration of Independence is a social contract: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..."
3. What counts as evidence? Information from the podcast, today's videos, class discussion, and collaborative poster walk; prior historical knowledge; independent research (with source citations); specific words / phrases from the Declaration itself; family history, cultural references, or lived experience, when used to explain perspective rather than to establish historical facts).

How to cite sources:

- I think X because according to Y, ... (name of source)."
 - "Jefferson originally wrote the word "sacred," but it might have just been a "flourish" (podcast).
 - "A mission statement is defined as ... " (dictionary.com).
 - "I disagree / agree because there was a story in the news that said ..." (*Los Angeles Times*)
4. In 1776, the claim that "all men are created equal" was considered radical because it challenged the dominant political systems of the time. Most governments claimed legitimacy

through hereditary monarchy, conquest, empire, or the Divine Right of Kings. The Declaration / Founders of the U.S. instead argued that all people possess equal natural rights and that governments derive their legitimate authority from the consent of the governed. Although the United States did not initially apply these principles equally to everyone in practice, the Declaration established an aspirational standard that later generations repeatedly invoked to argue for expanding rights and inclusion. Students might mention Thomas Paine's argument in *Common Sense*.

5. Isaacson and Brooks discuss the issue of the institution of American slavery. Student answers should provide an additional, original example with explanation.
6. **Answers to questions #6 and #8 will be similar, so assess the two answers together.**

“Abolition” = The movement to legally end the institution of slavery and free enslaved people Isaacson argues that many of the Founders recognized that slavery fundamentally contradicted the Declaration's ideals of liberty and equality, but they chose not to abolish it when creating the new nation.

Instead, they accepted political compromises that allowed slavery to continue in order to preserve unity among the thirteen states and secure support for independence in order to create a new nation at all. Isaacson argues that historians continue to debate whether these compromises were politically necessary or whether the Founders could have taken stronger action against slavery at the nation's founding.

Extended Enrichment: In the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, abolition may refer either to ending the trade in enslaved people or abolishing slavery itself; these are related but distinct historical developments, which students can explore further in the ES Resources “The Deleted Passage” activity.

7. The change in language represents compromise among the Founders. The change from “sacred” to “self-evident” illustrates that the Declaration emerged through debate, revision, and compromise during the drafting process. It also showcases a distinction between monarchy / Divine Rule versus the consent of the governed / social contract theory.

Changing “sacred” to “self-evident” shifted the Declaration's foundational ideology from religious authority to Enlightenment reasoning. "Sacred" suggests that human equality is true because it is established by God. "Self-evident" argues instead that equality and natural rights can be recognized through reason and logic—they do not require divine revelation or religious authority to be true.

This change reinforces the Declaration's broader argument that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed rather than from hereditary monarchy, conquest, or the Divine Right of Kings.

8. Historians need to debate whether the Founders' compromises over slavery were necessary to create and preserve the new nation, or whether they could have taken stronger action against slavery from the beginning.

Extended Enrichment: This debate matters because certain Founders recognized that slavery contradicted the ideals of liberty and equality expressed during the American Revolution, yet they chose – through compromise – not to abolish it nationally. Historians examine the political, regional, economic, and social conditions of the time to determine whether these compromises were unavoidable (i.e. necessary, such as the Virginia example, to even create a union) or whether different choices could have been possible.

That a debate existed and a “compromise” was reached helps us understand how historical actors balanced competing priorities and that those decisions shaped the development of the United States, the continued institution of slavery, and parts of social structures that continue today. These historical topics also showcase that historical figures were individuals with agency, making argument and making choices – just like people today are individuals with agency to make arguments, choices, and change.

9. Personal student reflection question.
10. Hurricane Katrina.

Podcast Retrieval Questions

1. Isaacson argues that before “Common Sense,” revolution was likely not a majority opinion in the American colonies. **“Most people in the colonies were probably not in favor of revolution, but the pamphlet got it started.”**

Extended Enrichment: Discuss why Isaacson says, “probably not,” rather than making a firm, definitive claim. Historians can uncover and recover a lot of information from the past, but measuring the sentiment of entire groups of historical people is not something they can do retroactively with one hundred percent certainty. *Why do you think that is?*

2. Plagiarism is presenting someone else's words or ideas as your own without giving credit. Jefferson argued that he was not trying to create original political ideas. Instead, he was expressing ideas that were already widely accepted during the Enlightenment in clear, persuasive language. Because his audience was ordinary Americans—not philosophers or scholars—he wrote in a way that was accessible and convincing rather than novel or academically original. He argued that his goal was to unite people around shared principles, not to claim credit for inventing them.
3. July 4th, 1826
4. July 4th, 1826
5. Lincoln, Abigail Adams, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, LBJ, etc.
6. Calling Jefferson’s phrase “a flourish” suggests that it functions primarily as a rhetorical or stylistic device rather than expressing the author's central philosophical claim. The distinction between "sacred" and "self-evident" is significant. Sacred draws on the same religious vocabulary that supported ideas such as the Divine Right of Kings. By contrast, self-evident reflects Enlightenment thinking - it suggests that certain truths can be recognized through reason and logic rather than established by religious authority or requiring further demonstration.

Extended Enrichment: Students may ask whether kings could make a similar claim about the Divine Right to Rule. In one sense, yes — both appeal to foundational truths that are presented as certain. The key difference is where that certainty comes from. The Divine Right of Kings grounds political authority in Divine will, whereas Enlightenment thinkers grounded political legitimacy in reason, natural rights, and the consent of the governed. This shift from divine authority to human reason and consent was one of the defining features of European Enlightenment.

7. As an “envoy,” pre-Revolutionary War, to try to quell conflict and represent the American colonies in Great Britain.
8. A *social contract* is the Enlightenment theory that the power or “right” to rule over a people must be given/granted by the people being governed *with their* consent; rather than claimed or taken by a king, empire, or power that does not have the consent of the governed to rule over them. Therefore, instead of claiming power through inheritance, conquest, or divine right, this theory argues that a legitimate government receives its authority to govern from the people it governs. In return, that government is bound by a contract: it is expected to protect the people's rights and serve the common good. People agree to be governed in exchange for protection of their rights.
9. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau
10. **“A new type of nation based on values, not the Divine right of kings or the sword of conquerors.” “There was no nation really [except perhaps Plato’s] in which the consent of the governed is how the rights arrived.”**
11. Consent of the governed. [Related to prior answer]

Extended Enrichment: If students are unfamiliar with the concept of "Divine Right of Kings," explain that many European monarchies defended the belief that a king or queen received the right to rule directly from God, rather than from the people, and therefore could not be legitimately challenged by their subjects. This authority was believed to be hereditary and passed to future generations.

Kingdom: A political state ruled by a king or queen. Some kingdoms govern only their own territory, while others expand into empires by ruling additional peoples and territories beyond their original borders. Kingdom ≠ Empire, but a kingdom can become an empire.

Students should understand that the Declaration of Independence was unusual because it argued that a government's legitimacy comes from shared political principles and the consent of the governed, rather than hereditary monarchy, divine authority, or conquest.

Ask, *"What are those 'values'?"*

12. People form a social contract by agreeing to establish a government that protects their rights and serves the common good in exchange for obeying its laws. [Extra credit answers add: By agreeing to create a government, they seek protection, stability, cooperation, and / or a way to resolve disputes peacefully.]
13. **“true by virtue of logic” – “Since we all came together in a social contract, it’s self-evident we’re all equal in that social contract”**

14. Isaacson calls the opening principle of the Declaration of Independence the United States' "mission statement" because it expresses the nation's founding ideals—that all people are created equal and have basic rights.

He argues that these ideals provide a guiding purpose for the country, even if the nation has not always lived up to them: **“It is a narrative and over the course of generations we take this sentence and expand it, so more people are included.”** Isaacson means that the Declaration's statement of equality is an ideal rooted in “self-evident” truth and “social contract” theory that has been interpreted more broadly over time. Although the phrase originally did not include everyone in practice—such as enslaved people, women, and many others—later generations have used those same words to argue for expanding rights and equality.

Movements for abolition, women's suffrage, Civil Rights, disability rights, and LGBTQ+ rights have all appealed to the Declaration's principles to advocate for greater inclusion. (All primary source readings in this chapter show examples of that.) According to Isaacson, the nation's story is one of continually working to extend those founding ideals to more people.

15. Common ground is the area of shared values, interests, goals, or understandings between people who may disagree on other issues. Compromise is the process or outcome in which each side gives up something in order to reach an agreement.
16. **“Each person is an individual. They have their rights of their life, their liberty, and their pursuit of happiness ... all people, *equally*, share those rights. And then we try to find some common ground (what else do we share?). By saying they’re created equal everybody, if you have the commons, it means everybody is entitled to certain things ... It just means the rights...under the rule of law...nobody’s favored.”**
17. Defense, police protection, good schools, fire protection
18. Equality **“does not mean everybody should have the same amount or everybody’s gonna end up equally. It just means the rights...under the rule of law...nobody’s favored.”**
(Only the first half of this sentence is required for student answers, as the second half should have been answered in question #16).
19. “The elephant in the room” is the institution of American slavery.
20. According to Isaacson, Jefferson denounced slavery.

Extended Enrichment: Refer to the ES Resources Curriculum materials on “The Deleted Passage.” Jefferson denounced the King’s position on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the hypocrisy of the king of Great Britain offering freedom to enslaved people and other Black

people who joined the British side in the Revolutionary War, while continuing to use his veto power to block colonial legislative attempts to prohibit or restrain the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This is different than claiming “Jefferson denounced slavery.” Some historians argue that Jefferson's deleted passage condemns both the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery's moral consequences, while others emphasize that he was primarily condemning the trade while shifting responsibility onto George III and away from colonial slaveholders. To explore this issue further with students, refer to “The Deleted Passage” materials on ESResources.org

21. Because he denounced slavery and denounced the King for permitting it while also enslaving 400 people and not manumitting most of them upon his death. (Manumit = to release an enslaved person from bondage.)
22. In this sentence, “it” refers to the Declaration of Independence’s central promise or “mission statement,” especially the idea of human equality and equal rights (**B**). *Extended engagement:* Isaacson’s point is that Lincoln would see American history as an ongoing effort to make reality match that ideal, meaning the country has not fully achieved it yet, but that the mission statement allows constant innovation to expand access and inclusion.