

ESRESOURCES.ORG CURRICULUM

Discover

“

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”

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, these ES Resources classroom activities invite **students to investigate how meaning is constructed, contested, and reconstructed across generations.**

Learners discover that they, too, inherit the ideas, debates, and unfinished aspirations of the past.

Liberty, Agency, & Voice

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Compare

Which person changed your understanding of America's "mission statement" the most, and what responsibility—if any—does studying history place on you as someone who now inherits these ideas?

Students...

- Identify a primary source
- Practice the annotation steps
- Complete the analysis charts
- Conduct a written or creative project

Choose a historical figure you believe most effectively appealed to America's own ideals.

Guiding questions for capstone project:

- 1 Walter Isaacson describes the U.S. mission statement as "a new type of nation based on values, not the divine right of kings or the sword of conquerors." Based on what you've learned, what do you think those values are?
- 2 Is the sentence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..." the mission statement of the United States? Explain with evidence.
- 3 How have individuals and movements used American society's own founding ideals to argue for inclusion and to renegotiate the interpretation of justice?
- 4 Why do you think we are still reading these documents today?

Who is America?

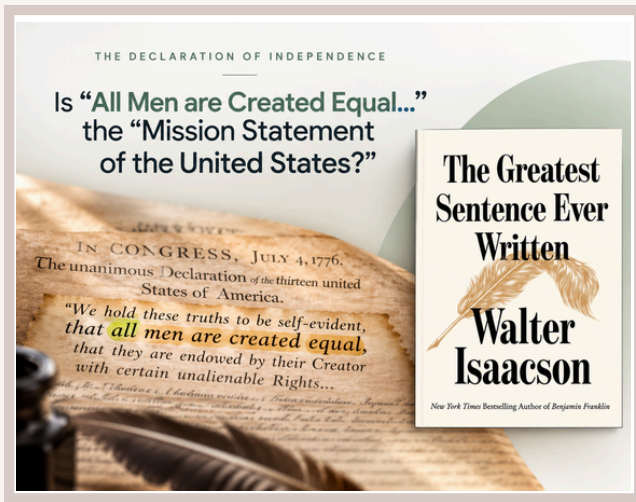


“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus | Recited by Immigrants - Read clients & employees at the Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) in Portland, OR.

While in everyday English, many people use the term *America* in reference to the United States in particular, this usage treats one country as though it stands in for the entire hemisphere, which can obscure the identities and histories of people from South America, Central America, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean, all of whom are also peoples of the Americas.

Using the more precise term *United States* helps students distinguish a particular nation-state from the larger and more diverse geography of the Americas. It also encourages educators to notice and recognize that language influences the way places, peoples, and histories are represented and absorbed by students.

Is Equality “a Radical Idea”?



In the history of the United States, movements for the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, civil rights, disability access, and LGBTQ+ rights have all appealed to the Declaration of Independence’s principles to advocate for greater inclusion. Walter Isaacson, Chairman Emeritus of the Board of Teach For America, describes the phrase, “all men are created equal,” as the **mission statement** of the nation and argues that it expresses a *founding ideal*. Every generation must work to expand access to that ideal.

In this podcast, Walter Isaacson argues that the Declaration of Independence provides an ongoing, guiding purpose for the United States. Even as the nation has not always lived up to its own ideal of human equality: “It is a narrative, and over the course of generations we take this sentence and expand it, so more people are included.” Isaacson contends that the nation’s story is one of continually working towards a **founding ideal**, meaning that if President Abraham Lincoln were alive today, he would likely see the United States as still working to fulfill that mission statement. Isaacson proposes that Lincoln might say, “**You’re still trying to prove it.**”

Isaacson explains that although the phrase did not originally include everyone in practice—such as enslaved people, women, and many others—later generations have used this “mission statement” to argue for expanding rights and equality over time. Notable examples can be seen in the writings and speeches of Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



LISTEN

[Download Activity
& Answer Key](#)



It is a narrative, and over the course of generations we take this sentence and expand it, so more people are included.

GUIDING IDEA

Liberty Tree

Every generation inherits ideas, institutions, language, and aspirations.

Those inheritances are neither static nor self-explanatory, but continually debated, challenged, expanded, and reimagined in response to new circumstances.

Thomas Paine