

# Jefferson's Truths

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## A Three-Part Structure

Jefferson wrote the *Declaration of Independence* as a three-part structure, beginning with the self-evident truths about human nature, followed by the specific list of abuses and grievances against King George III, and concluding with the resolution Richard Henry Lee had introduced into the Continental Congress.

### Part One: These Truths

The *Declaration of Independence* begins with what have been called the magic words of the American democracy. Here Jefferson explained what people are, what a government is, what is right, and what people may do if their government is harming them. Jefferson had originally written that “We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable,” but it was changed to “self-evident”; we are not certain whether the change was Jefferson’s idea or whether it was suggested by one of his colleagues.

### Part Two: A Long Train of Abuses

The longest part of the *Declaration* is the enumeration of the long train of abuses attributed to King George. There were other comments in Jefferson’s original draft, but these were deleted by Congress before publication, and Jefferson was wounded over the changes, particularly, he wrote in his autobiography, the removal of the clause “reprobating the enslaving of the inhabitants of Africa.”

### Part Three: We Do Solemnly Publish and Declare

Jefferson concluded the *Declaration* by incorporating Richard Henry Lee’s resolution that “these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved of all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

### *The Declaration of Independence*

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly, for opposing, with manly firmness, his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the state remaining, in the mean time, exposed to all the dangers of invasions from without and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has obstructed the administration of justice, by refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made judges dependent on his will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies, without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation:

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;

For cutting off our trade with all parts of the world;

For imposing taxes on us without our consent;

For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury;

For transporting us beyond seas, to be tried for pretended offenses;

For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these colonies;

For taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments;

For suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here, by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow-citizens, taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has excited domestic insurrection among us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have we been wanting in our attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them, from time to time, of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity; and we have conjured them, by the ties of our common kindred, to disavow these usurpations which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They, too, have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our separation, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

**We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that, as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.**

A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for <sup>one</sup> people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to ~~assume among the powers of the earth the same station to which the laws of nature & of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to do so.~~ <sup>separate and equal</sup> ~~station~~ <sup>station</sup> to which the laws of nature & of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to do so.

We hold these truths to be <sup>self-evident</sup> that all men are created equal, that <sup>they are endowed by their creator with certain</sup> ~~unalienable~~ <sup>rights, that</sup> among <sup>these</sup> ~~these~~ are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these <sup>rights</sup>, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. prudence indeed will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes: and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. but when a long train of abuses & usurpations [beginning at a distinguished period] & pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them <sup>under absolute Despotism</sup> ~~to absolute Despotism~~, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such ~~government~~ & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & such is now the necessity which constrains them to <sup>alter</sup> ~~change~~ their former systems of government. the history of <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ present <sup>King of Great Britain</sup> ~~King of Great Britain~~ is a history of <sup>repeated</sup> ~~repeated~~ injuries and usurpations, [among which, <sup>appears no solitary fact</sup> ~~appears no solitary fact~~] to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, <sup>in Hall</sup> ~~all of which~~ <sup>have</sup> in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, for the truth of which we pledge a faith not unallied by falsehood.

## Revolutionary Words

The language Thomas Jefferson chose for the *Declaration of Independence* is consistently formal, measured, and serene. This is no wild-eyed tirade against the King but rather a dignified statement announcing with philosophical precision a view of social and moral reality, a series of legal-sounding charges of abuse, and a formal declaration of both the fact of independence and the freedoms that are included in that independence.

For many of the statements in the *Declaration of Independence*, there are common words that would have been as clear, but unlike Lincoln, who relied upon one-syllable words in the *Gettysburg Address*, Jefferson chose powerful, educated, elevated words—words that would aggressively assert the revolutionaries' intellectual equality with their British rulers. We are your equals, this document states, even in our sentences.

Much of the reputation of the Revolution would rest on the reputation of the *Declaration*. It had to be an impressive, intelligent statement, and Jefferson knew it. In drafting the *Declaration*, Jefferson relied on all of his experience reading law, philosophy, and the Latin and Greek classics. The world would awaken to discover that independence had been declared by a group of educated Americans who were highly competent and who knew precisely what they were doing.

A careful examination of the more advanced vocabulary of the *Declaration of Independence* shows that Jefferson relied upon English words that were derived from Latin, an ancient language he knew well. His mind bore the heavy imprint of his Latin scholarship, where he lingered over words such as *impellere*, *alienatus*, *sufferens*, *constringere*, *mercenarius*, *evincere*, *dissolutio*, *transiens*, *relinquere*, *insurrectio*, and *instituere*:

**impel** • to drive forward

“they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation”

From the Latin *impellere*; *im*, in, and *pellere*, to drive

**endow** • to furnish with a gift

“they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”

From the Latin *en*, in, and the French *douer*, to endow

**unalienable** • incapable of being transferred to another

“certain unalienable rights”

From the Latin *alienatus*; *un*, not, and *alienus*, foreign

to **institute** • to establish

“to institute new government”

From the Latin *instituire*, to place in; *in*, in, and *sta*, to stand or set

**transient** • brief, momentary

“governments long established should not be changed  
for light and transient causes”

From the Latin *transiens*, passing over; *trans*, across

**usurpation** • the illegal seizure of sovereign power

“a history of repeated injustices and usurpations”

“to disavow these usurpations”

From the Latin *usurpatio*, making use

**despotism** • tyranny

“to reduce them under absolute despotism”

From the French *despotisme*; *de*, down, and *potent*, power

**evince** • to show clearly, make evident

“evinces a design”

From the Latin *evincere*, vanquish completely;

*e*, out, and *vincere*, to vanquish

**sufferance** • enduring pain

“the patient sufferance of these colonies”

From the Latin *sufferens*

## Revolutionary Grammar

The more we read Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, the more aware we become of the Jefferson effect: the beautiful phrasing, the consistently elegant tone, the quiet dignity of the words chosen, the air of philosophical reflection. We are reminded of the social dictum that gentlemen do not raise their voices. Other men in the Continental Congress might have assembled enough relevant ideas to create a serviceable declaration, but it would not have been like this. The screaming Patrick Henry certainly could not have written it. Jefferson's words are almost mesmerizing; courteous, logical, and rhythmical, they announce defiant revolution against the world's superpower with a serenity and confidence that is almost impudent.

As we have seen, this effect is in large part created by the extreme politeness of the words. The announcement of what was certain to be revolutionary war is expressed as dissolving political bands. The *Declaration* itself, an unprecedented assault on the existing machinery of power, was made with a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind." And the violent overthrow of Great Britain's rule in the colonies was permissible because, when they are "impelled" to, the people can "alter or abolish" their government and "institute" a new one that will "effect their safety and happiness." It is almost a shock to realize to what these pleasant words refer; after all, the new government would be "instituted" with guns. The very grace, the elevated tone, must have been a presumptuous slap in the face to the British monarchy, who were not accustomed to being addressed with such equality.

This confident air of self-sufficiency is seamless in the document and extends not only throughout the vocabulary but also to the grammar. The grammar of the *Declaration* is not elementary, not crude, not choppy; it is refined, elegant, and harmonious with the choice of words. Here too Jefferson was presenting a statement of advanced thinking, effortlessly assembling an array of ideas into deceptively easy-to-read complex

sentences that seem—but are not—simple. From the opening words of the *Declaration*, Jefferson used complex grammar to assert a tone not just of philosophical clarity but of intellectual power. As an accomplished document, the *Declaration* would stand up against anything then being written in Great Britain, and Jefferson knew it.

### The First Sentence

Jefferson's first sentence, even though it contains seventy-one words, is actually a simple *When A, then B* idea, as we might see in any D,I complex sentence. *When it becomes necessary to do X and Y, then respect for others requires Z.*

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

The two parts of the idea, if separated into the dependent part and the independent part, are:

1: *When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them...*



*2: ...a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

It seems simple enough, but as architect Mies van der Rohe said, “God is in the details.” Knowing that the first words would establish the persona of the *Declaration*, Jefferson elaborated within this simple *When A, then B* structure to form a justification that would respectfully persuade “mankind” to understand and support the Revolution. This separation is “necessary” and is one to which people are “entitled” by both the “laws of nature” and of “nature’s God.” We see that even the first sentence is steeped in the egalitarian ideas of the Enlightenment; Jefferson presents the dissolution of the political bands as a simple matter of voluntary arrangements between one people and another people.

For these words, in every country in Europe, Jefferson would have been executed. In England, France, Russia, or Prussia, the ruling autocracies would not have looked kindly upon the idea that a “separate and equal” station could be assumed. They would not have permitted such a station to be assumed. They would not have permitted it to become separate, and they would not have permitted it to be equal.

Prior to Jefferson’s words, in spite of the fact that John Locke had developed earlier forms of these concepts, there were no separate and equal stations in the world for a people without a monarch. This was something, if taken literally, entirely new.

## **The Second Sentence**

Jefferson’s second sentence continues the tone of the first but goes even further. Let us examine the grammar of it in detail.

**We hold these truths to be self-evident:**

Parts of Speech:	pron.	v.	adj.	n.	---adj.---	adj.
Parts of Sentence:	subj.	pred.		D.O.		
Phrases:					-----infinitive phrase-----	
Clauses:						one independent clause; a simple declarative sentence

We are now too familiar with Jefferson’s words to feel the shock that they delivered at their inception. In *We hold these truths*, the full boldness of the active voice transitive action verb *hold* communicates a certainty; there is nothing ambivalent here—these are *truths*, and we hold them. Likewise, the plural subject pronoun *we* steps forth boldly; the sentence was announcing political and philosophical revolution, and those who would sign the *Declaration* would be bold about it. It is a brave sentence: *We hold these truths....* Much of the shock value of the sentence comes from the fact that, up until the day Jefferson wrote the sentence, these were not truths. No government in Europe or America would have regarded the propositions as truths; rather, they would have been criminal ideas. Finally, these newly proclaimed truths were certainly not, traditionally, *self-evident*. What had been self-evident was that power belonged to kings by divine right, and ordinary people were incapable of self-government. The infinitive phrase *to be self-evident*, which modifies the noun *truths*, was the master phrase of revolution.

**that all men are created equal;**

Parts of  
Speech:

pron.    adj.    n.    v.    v.    adj.

---

Parts of  
Sentence:

subj.    -----pred.-----

---

Phrases:

no phrases

---

Clauses:

This passage is a dependent clause used as a noun.

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This clause, the core of the truths that Jefferson enumerated, is the passage cited by Abraham Lincoln as the proposition to which the new nation was dedicated. Jefferson knew that the ideas he was putting together might change the world. He knew that his statements of self-evident equality were not universally self-evident, even to the ordinary human beings they would benefit, and he knew that the words would take hold slowly in the world. He wrote that this new concept of freedom and equality would come “to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,” and history has borne him out. “All men,” Jefferson wrote, and he coupled that with a statement deploring slavery and blaming the slave trade on the King; the antislavery passage was deleted before the *Declaration* was published, but Jefferson succeeded in getting the words “All men” into the document, where they continued to inspire and raise consciousness generation after generation. Today we have continued to focus on this clause as the central proposition of democracy, and “All men are created equal” has become perhaps the most powerful single sentence in world history.