Reading Comprehension Worksheet

Grade 11

Name: _____ Date: _____

The Declaration of Independence (1776): Opening Paragraphs

Background: The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. Drafted mainly by Thomas Jefferson, it explained why the thirteen American colonies were separating from Great Britain. Below are its opening paragraphs in their original wording and spelling.

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 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 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.

Glossary: *impel*: force or drive · *unalienable*: unable to be taken away · *transient*: short-lived · *usurpations*: wrongful seizures of power · *evinces*: clearly shows · *despotism*: rule by one person with total power · *candid*: fair and unbiased

Part A: Multiple Choice

Circle the best answer.

1. What is the main purpose of the first paragraph?
    a) To list the King's crimes
    b) To explain that the colonists owe the world an explanation for separating
    c) To announce a declaration of war
    d) To describe the new government

2. According to the Declaration, where do governments get their just powers?
    a) From the King
    b) From the consent of the governed
    c) From the army
    d) From the Continental Congress

3. As used in the text, what does "unalienable" mean?
    a) Foreign
    b) Unable to be taken away
    c) Granted by the government
    d) Temporary

4. Why do the authors include the sentence beginning with "Prudence, indeed"?
    a) To show they are not changing governments lightly
    b) To praise the King's patience
    c) To argue that all governments should change often
    d) To end the argument

Part B: True or False

Write T for true or F for false.

5. The Declaration says governments should be changed for light and transient causes. _____

6. The text names Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness as unalienable rights. _____

7. The authors promise to submit facts "to a candid world" to prove their claims. _____

Part C: Rhetoric and Structure

The opening of the Declaration builds a logical argument: a general principle, a condition for applying it, and a claim that the condition has been met. It also uses appeals to logic (logos), credibility and shared values (ethos), and emotion (pathos).

8. Trace the argument in three steps: the general principle, the condition, and the claim about the colonies.

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9. Identify one word or phrase that appeals to emotion (pathos) and explain its effect.

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Part D: Think and Explain

10. The Declaration states that "all men are created equal," yet in 1776 many people, including enslaved people and women, were denied these rights. How should modern readers understand this contradiction? Explain your thinking.

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