

OLYMPIADS SCHOOL – SAT PREP – HANDOUT 3 – PART 2

Fill in the blanks.

The Stylistic Artistry of the *Declaration of Independence* by Stephen E. Lucas

The Declaration of Independence is perhaps the most masterfully written state paper of Western civilization. As Moses Coit Tyler noted almost a century ago, no assessment of it can be complete without taking into account its extraordinary merits as a work of 1) _____ prose style. Although many scholars have recognized those merits, there are surprisingly few sustained studies of the stylistic artistry of the Declaration.¹ This essay seeks to illuminate that artistry by probing the discourse microscopically--at the level of the sentence, phrase, word, and syllable. By approaching the Declaration in this way, we can shed light both on its 2) _____ qualities and on its 3) _____ power as a work designed to convince a "candid world" that the American colonies were justified in seeking to establish themselves as an independent nation.²

The text of the Declaration can be divided into five sections--the introduction, the preamble, the indictment of George III, the denunciation of the British people, and the conclusion. Because space does not permit us to explicate each section in full detail, we shall select features from each that illustrate the stylistic artistry of the Declaration as a whole.³

The introduction consists of the first paragraph--a single, lengthy, periodic sentence:

*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.*⁴

Taken out of context, this sentence is so general it could be used as the introduction to a declaration by any " 4) _____ " people. Seen within its original context, however, it is a model of subtlety, nuance, and implication that works on several levels of meaning and allusion to orient readers toward a 5) _____ view of America and to prepare them for the rest of the Declaration. From its magisterial opening 6) _____, which sets the American Revolution within the whole "course of human events," to its 7) _____ that "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" entitle America to a "separate and equal station among the powers of the earth," to its quest for sanction from "the opinions of mankind," the introduction elevates the quarrel with England from a petty political dispute to a major event in the grand sweep of history. It 8) _____ the Revolution as a contest of principle and implies that the American cause has a special claim to moral legitimacy--all without mentioning England or America by name.

Rather than defining the Declaration's task as one of persuasion, which would doubtless raise the defenses of readers as well as imply that there was more than one publicly credible view of the British-American conflict, the introduction identifies the purpose of the Declaration as simply to "declare"--to announce publicly in explicit terms--the "causes" impelling America to leave the British empire. This gives the Declaration, at the outset, an 9) _____ of philosophical (in the eighteenth-century sense of the term) objectivity that it will seek to maintain throughout. Rather than presenting one side in a public controversy on which good and decent people could differ, the Declaration purports to do no more than a natural philosopher would do in reporting the causes of any physical event. The issue, it implies, is not one of interpretation but of observation.

The most important word in the introduction is "necessary," which in the eighteenth century carried strongly deterministic 10) _____. To say an act was necessary implied that it was impelled by fate or determined by the operation of inextricable natural laws and was beyond the control of human agents. Thus Chambers's Cyclopaedia defined "necessary" as "that which cannot but be, or cannot be otherwise." "The common notion of necessity and impossibility," Jonathan Edwards wrote in *Freedom*

of the Will, "implies something that frustrates endeavor or desire. . . . That is necessary in the original and proper sense of the word, which is, or will be, notwithstanding all supposable opposition."

11)_____ the Revolution as necessary suggested that it resulted from constraints that operated with lawlike force throughout the material universe and within the sphere of human action. The Revolution was not merely preferable, defensible, or justifiable. It was as inescapable, as inevitable, as unavoidable within the course of human events as the motions of the tides or the changing of the seasons within the course of natural events.⁵

Investing the Revolution with 12)_____ of necessity was particularly important because, according to the law of nations, recourse to war was lawful only when it became "necessary"--only when amicable negotiation had failed and all other alternatives for settling the differences between two states had been exhausted. Nor was the burden of necessity limited to monarchs and established nations. At the start of the English Civil War in 1642, Parliament defended its recourse to military action against Charles I in a lengthy declaration demonstrating the "Necessity to take up Arms." Following this tradition, in July 1775 the Continental Congress issued its own Declaration Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms. When, a year later, Congress decided the colonies could no longer retain their liberty within the British empire, it adhered to long-established rhetorical convention by describing independence as a matter of absolute and inescapable necessity.⁶ Indeed, the 13)_____ of necessity was so important that in addition to appearing in the introduction of the Declaration, it was invoked twice more at crucial junctures in the rest of the text and appeared frequently in other congressional papers after July 4, 1776.⁷

Labeling the Americans "one people" and the British "another" was also 14)_____ with implication and performed several important strategic functions within the Declaration. First, because two alien peoples cannot be made one, it reinforced the notion that breaking the "political bands" with England was a necessary step in the course of human events. America and England were already separated by the more basic fact that they had become two different peoples. The gulf between them was much more than political; it was intellectual, social, moral, cultural and, according to the principles of nature, could no more be repaired, as Thomas Paine said, than one could "restore to us the time that is past" or "give to prostitution its former innocence." To try to perpetuate a purely political connection would be "forced and unnatural," "repugnant to reason, to the universal order of things."⁸

Second, once it is granted that Americans and Englishmen are two distinct peoples, the conflict between them is less likely to be seen as a civil war. The Continental Congress knew America could not withstand Britain's military might without foreign assistance. But they also knew America could not receive assistance as long as the colonies were fighting a civil war as part of the British empire. To help the colonies would constitute interference in Great Britain's internal affairs. As Samuel Adams explained, "no foreign Power can consistently yield Comfort to Rebels, or enter into any kind of Treaty with these Colonies till they declare themselves free and independent." The crucial factor in opening the way for foreign aid was the act of declaring independence. But by defining America and England as two separate peoples, the Declaration 15)_____ the perception that the conflict was not a civil war, thereby, as Congress noted in its debates on independence, making it more "consistent with European delicacy for European powers to treat with us, or even to receive an Ambassador."⁹

Third, defining the Americans as a separate people in the introduction eased the task of 16)_____ the right of revolution in the preamble. That right, according to eighteenth-century revolutionary principles, could be invoked only in the most 17)_____ of circumstances--when "resistance was absolutely necessary in order to preserve the nation from slavery, misery, and ruin"--and then only by "the Body of the People." If America and Great Britain were seen as one people, Congress could not justify revolution against the British government for the simple reason that the body of the people (of which the Americans would be only one part) did not support the American cause. For America to move against the government in such circumstances would not be a justifiable act of resistance but "a sort of Sedition, Tumult, and War . . . aiming only at the satisfaction of private Lust, without regard to the public Good." By defining the Americans as a separate people, Congress could more readily satisfy the requirement for invoking the right of revolution that "the whole Body of Subjects" rise up against the government "to rescue themselves from the most violent and illegal oppressions."¹⁰

Like the introduction, the next section of the Declaration--usually referred to as the preamble--is universal in tone and scope. It contains no explicit reference to the British- American conflict, but outlines a general philosophy of government that makes revolution justifiable, even meritorious:

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.

Like the rest of the Declaration, the preamble is "brief, free of verbiage, a model of clear, concise, simple statement."¹¹ It capsulizes in five sentences--202--words what it took John Locke thousands of words to explain in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Each word is chosen and placed to achieve maximum impact. Each clause is indispensable to the progression of thought. Each sentence is carefully constructed internally and in relation to what precedes and follows. In its ability to compress complex ideas into a brief, clear statement, the preamble is a paradigm of eighteenth-century Enlightenment prose style, in which purity, simplicity, directness, precision, and, above all, perspicuity were the highest rhetorical and literary virtues. One word follows another with complete inevitability of sound and meaning. Not one word can be moved or replaced without disrupting the balance and harmony of the entire preamble.

The stately and dignified 18)_____ of the preamble--like that of the introduction--comes partly from what the eighteenth century called *Style Periodique*, in which, as Hugh Blair explained in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, "the sentences are composed of several members linked together, and hanging upon one another, so that the sense of the whole is not brought out till the close." This, Blair said, "is the most pompous, musical, and oratorical manner of composing" and "gives an air of gravity and dignity to composition." The gravity and dignity of the preamble were reinforced by its conformance with the rhetorical precept that "when we aim at dignity or elevation, the sound [of each sentence] should be made to grow to the last; the longest members of the period, and the fullest and most sonorous words, should be reserved to the conclusion." None of the sentences of the preamble end on a single-syllable word; only one, the second (and least euphonious), ends on a two-syllable word. Of the other four, one ends with a four-syllable word ("security"), while three end with three-syllable words. Moreover, in each of the three-syllable words the closing syllable is at least a medium- length four-letter syllable, which helps bring the sentences to "a full and 19)_____ close."¹²

The preamble also has a powerful sense of structural 20)_____. This is achieved partly by the latent chronological 21)_____ of thought, in which the reader is moved from the creation of mankind, to the institution of government, to the throwing off of government when it fails to protect the people's unalienable rights, to the creation of new government that will better secure the people's safety and happiness. This dramatic scenario, with its first act implicitly set in the Garden of Eden (where man was "created equal"), may, for some readers, have contained mythic overtones of humanity's fall from divine grace. At the very least, it gives an almost archetypal 22)_____ to the ideas of the preamble and continues the notion, broached in the introduction, that the American Revolution is a major development in "the course of human events."

ESSAY WRITING SKILLS

Write a paragraph analyzing the aesthetic features in the painting, “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” which is an 1851 oil-on-canvas painting by German American artist Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze. It commemorates General George Washington’s crossing of the Delaware River on the night of December 25–26, 1776, during the American Revolutionary War. Your teacher will project an image of it on the screen so that you can see the colours used as well.

