



2026 Essay Contest

To commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence

Sponsored by the New York County Lawyers Association

IF YOU COULD REWRITE THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, HOW WOULD YOU AND WHY?

After Richard Henry Lee of Virginia moved a resolution in the Second Continental Congress on June 7, 1776, that "these United Colonies are, and of right out to be, free and independent states. . . .", Congress formed the "Committee of Five" to draft a declaration of independence and assigned Thomas Jefferson as drafter. Jefferson wrote his draft in approximately two weeks. The draft was edited by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, both of whom were members of the Committee of Five, and then further edited by Congress. In total, there were 86 edits to Jefferson's draft. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence and thereby severed the political connections between the 13 American colonies and Great Britain.

The Declaration of Independence, as adopted, is comprised of an introduction, a preamble, a list of grievances, and a formal declaration of independence. The introduction, which explains the need for the Declaration itself states:

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 introduction is followed by the preamble, which contains an assertion of natural rights and an explanation of the core philosophy of government. The preamble's most famous line states: "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." The preamble continues:

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. . . .

After the preamble, the Declaration sets forth a list of grievances, i.e., unfair actions of King George III and the British Parliament. These include, but are not limited to, taxation without consent, the dissolution of colonial legislatures, the suspension of trial by jury, and the maintenance of a standing army during peacetime.

The Declaration's final paragraph contains a formal declaration of independence. It reads



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 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 to 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.

In a letter written nearly 50 years after the Declaration's signing, Jefferson characterized the "object" of the Declaration as "an appeal to the tribunal of the world" to justify the American colonists "resort to arms for redress." He further wrote that its purpose was

[n]ot to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject; [...] terms so plain and firm, as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independant stand we [...] compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the american mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. all it's authority rests then on the harmonising sentiments of the day. . . .

(Thomas Jefferson letter to Henry "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, May 8, 1825.)

TO COMMEMORATE THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SIGNING OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, STUDENTS ARE BEING ASKED TO ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

- **If you could rewrite the Declaration of Independence, how would you and why?**

IN ANSWERING THIS QUESTION, YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING:

1. How can the Declaration of Independence be improved? What makes the Declaration of Independence powerful? What sections had little impact?
2. Was the Declaration correct to have focused on the concept of "equal[ity]" and the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"? Are there any other natural rights that the Declaration should have included?
3. What meaning does the Declaration of Independence still have in modern times? Could it have been made more meaningful and relevant for a changing world?





THE HONORABLE ROBERT A. KATZMANN

JUSTICE FOR ALL

COURTS AND THE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

The Civic Education Project of the Federal Courts of the Second Circuit

New York
County Lawyers
Association

2026 ESSAY CONTEST INFORMATION AND RULES

Please visit <https://justiceforall.ca2.uscourts.gov/essay-contest-2026/> for additional contest information and rules.

WHO MAY ENTER

The contest will be open to high school students in New York. Students attending public, private, parochial, and charter schools, as well as home-schooled students of equivalent grade status, are all invited to participate. Note: Children of federal judges or federal judiciary employees are not eligible to participate.

ENTRY INFORMATION

Entries must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. on April 27, 2026. Essays must be submitted electronically as a PDF to justiceforall@ca2.uscourts.gov. Please submit the contest entry form, available at [here](#), as a separate PDF in your email. **Please do not put your name on your essay.**

LENGTH AND FORMAT

Essays must be between 500 and 1000 words. The essays must be double spaced and typed using size 12, easily readable font (e.g., Times New Roman, Garamond, etc.).

JUDGING

Judging will be based on the following criteria:

- Understanding of the Declaration of Independence's text
- Clarity, creativity, and effectiveness in expressing the theme
- Grammar, spelling, and composition

AWARDS

- First place: \$1,000
- Second place: \$400
- Third place: \$100

Winners will be presented with their awards at a federal courthouse.

Additionally, the first-place essay will be published by the New York County Lawyers Association.