



The Struggle for Equal Rights from the Founding to Today

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Overview

In this two-part lesson, students will be introduced to the idea of equal rights and explore the historical roots of the idea, times where it has fallen short in American history, and movements to better live up to its standard.



Learning Objectives

- Understand the origin of equal rights in the American founding
- Describe its influence on early American history
- Explain the relationship between its influence and attempts to secure rights

Part I: Equal Rights in the American Founding

In this first part of the lesson, students will explore the idea of equal rights in early American history by examining primary source documents and by using their knowledge of early American history to discuss the limits of this idea.

PRE-READING

Read the following items in the beginning of class or before class:

- Declaration of Independence
- Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 (Preamble, Articles I, IV–VII, IX–10)
- Gettysburg Address

WARM-UP ACTIVITY

- Individually or in small groups, students should answer the following questions:
 - What does it mean to be “born free and equal” as it says in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780? What does this have to do with equal rights?
 - Using your prior knowledge, what are some examples of groups at the time of the American Revolution that had limited rights?

CLASS ACTIVITY

As a class, discuss the following questions. Use the pre-readings to make your argument, as well as knowledge from other sources.

- What is the argument made by the American colonists in the Declaration of Independence?
 - What is the relationship between equality, liberty, and rights?
 - How had the British king revoked these rights?
- The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, drafted by John Adams, was the among the earliest attempts to create a constitution on the basis of the ideas of the American founding and informed the drafting of many other state constitutions.
 - How does it describe the relationship between the people and the government?
 - What is the relationship between freedom, equality, and rights that it describes?

- President Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address in 1863 in the midst of the Civil War, in which he famously declared that the United States was a country “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”
 - What does that phrase mean?
 - In what way is the Civil War an indication of where the country had fallen short of that dedication?
- Lincoln said that America is a people dedicated to the idea of equal rights for all (though one that has often fallen short). What are some other examples of equal rights movements in American history?

HOMEWORK FOR PART I

- Individually or in small groups, pick a movement for equal rights in American history. Let the students pick what seems most compelling to them, but suggest options such as women, minority groups, immigrants, etc., Research the following:
 - The ways in which that group was prohibited from exercising equal rights
 - How those working for equal rights explained their struggle (identify at least two primary source documents in doing so)
 - How those opposed to the change described their efforts
 - Major tipping points in the movement for equal rights
- Come prepared to class to present those ideas. This could include a short essay, a speech, a visual demonstration, etc.

Part II: The Continued Fight for Equal Rights

In Part II, students will learn from each other about the story of American history as a continuing effort to live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence and the idea of equal rights.

WARM-UP ACTIVITY:

- Pair and Share. Have students or multiple small groups pair up (depending on how your structured the homework) to discuss what they learned. Keep this activity under 10 minutes total.
- Share out. Take turns going around the room and having each pair or group share the key points they learned from the other pair or group in their pair and share. Capture key points on a whiteboard, flip chart, etc.

CLASS ACTIVITY:

- Have two to three students or groups volunteer to share their research in more detail. Keep these presentations to around five minutes each.

After each presentation, ask the rest of the class to answer the following questions:

- What surprised you the most about what you learned?
- What were some of the biggest obstacles to equal rights faced by the group that was studied?
- How did that group describe their experience at the time?
- What obstacles still remain to equal rights?
- As a class, discuss the continuing debates for equal rights.
 - What are some areas where students think America has yet to live up to that idea?
 - How is the conversation about equal rights today similar to or different from previous movements for equal rights?
 - How might polarization or tribalism make today's efforts challenging? What lessons can historical approaches provide to inform us about how to overcome that polarization?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Explore more the complicated history of equal rights through learning about and from individuals that have both historically disagreed and those who may have alternative perspectives to you now.

- Reach out to a member of your community to talk about their historical perspective. Learn about what it was like to live through various periods of history and how they experienced these debates.
- Pick an issue that you care about and find someone that takes an alternative perspective. This could be through reading books or articles by an author who disagrees with you or finding someone in your community to talk about this issue with. Try to understand their perspective first. Put their argument in your words in such a way that they'd say you've faithfully replicated it. How did they say you did? What did you learn?