Introduction

- On a June day in 1776, Thomas Jefferson set to work in a rented room in Philadelphia. His task was to draft a document that would explain to the world why Great Britain's 13 American colonies were declaring themselves to be "free and independent states."
- ideals. An ideal is a principle or standard of perfection that we are always trying to achieve.
- Yet, throughout the years, Jefferson's words have continued to provide a vision of what it means to be an American.

Section 2.1 – The First Founding Ideal: Equality

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

- this "truth" was anything but self-evident, or obvious.
- Throughout history, almost all societies had been divided into unequal groups, castes, or social classes.
- Equality, or the ideal situation in which all people are treated the same way and valued equally, was the exception, not the rule.

Defining Equality in 1776

- For many Americans of Jefferson's time, the ideal of equality was based on the Christian belief that all people are equal in God's eyes.
- In 1776, there was no equality for the half million slaves who labored in the colonies. Nor was there equality for women, who were viewed as inferior to men in terms of their ability to participate in society.

Debating Equality Today

- Many laws today ensure equal treatment of all citizens, regardless of age, gender, physical ability, national background, and race.
- Yet some people—both past and present—have argued that achieving equal rights does not necessarily mean achieving equality.

1. Where in the Declaration of Independence can you find references to equality, rights, liberty, opportunity, and democracy?
2. Why is the Declaration of Independence an important document?
3. Where did founders like Thomas Jefferson get inspiration for the ideals in the Declaration of Independence?

Section 2.3 – The Second Founding Ideal – Rights

"They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

- Rights are powers or privileges granted to people either by an agreement among themselves or by law.
- The colonists believed, with some justice, that having these rights set them apart from other peoples in the world.

Defining Rights in 1776

- Such rights were not, in his view, limited to the privileges won by the English people. They were rights belonging to all humankind.
- Writing a century earlier, Locke had argued that all people earned certain natural rights simply by being born.
- Locke identified these natural rights as the rights to life, liberty, and property.
- Locke further argued that the main purpose of governments was to preserve these rights.

Debating Rights Today

- The debate over what rights our government should preserve began more than two centuries ago, with the writing of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and continues to this day.
- The Constitution (and its amendments) specifies many basic rights, including the right to vote, to speak freely, to choose one's faith, and to receive fair treatment and equal justice under the law.
Section 2.4 – The Third Founding Ideal – Liberty

"That among these [rights] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

- war waged in the name of liberty, or freedom.

Defining Liberty in 1776
- Liberty meant different things to different colonists.
- However colonists defined liberty, most agreed on one point: the opposite of liberty was slavery.

Debating Liberty Today
- If asked to define liberty today, most Americans would probably say it is the freedom to make choices about who we are, what we believe, and how we live.
- They would probably also agree that liberty is not absolute.

Section 2.5 – The Fourth Founding Ideal – Opportunity

"That among these [rights] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The destiny that Jefferson imagined was one of endless opportunity, or the chance for people to pursue their hopes and dreams.

Defining Opportunity in 1776
- The idea that America was a land of opportunity was as old as the colonies themselves.

Debating Opportunity Today
- More than two centuries after the Declaration of Independence was penned, the ideal of opportunity still draws newcomers to our shores.
- For all Americans, the ideal of opportunity raises important questions.

Section 2.6 – The Fifth Founding Ideal – Democracy

"That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

- In these few words, Jefferson described the basis of a democracy—a system of government founded on the simple principle that the power to rule comes from the consent of the governed.
- Power is not inherited by family members, as in a monarchy.
- Nor is it seized and exercised by force, as in a dictatorship.
- In a democracy, the people have the power to choose their leaders and shape the laws that govern them.

Defining Democracy in 1776
- The colonists were familiar with the workings of democracy.
- But two questions remained.
  - First, could democracy be made to work in a country spread over more than a thousand miles?
  - The second question was this: Who should speak for "the governed"?

Debating Democracy Today
- The debate over who should speak for the governed was long and heated.
- Having gained the right to vote, however, many people today do not use it.
- Their lack of participation raises challenging questions.
Section 2.7 – In Pursuit of America’s Ideals

- Ideals represent the very highest standards, and human beings are far too complex to achieve such perfection.
- As long as our founding ideals endure, the United States will always be striving to meet them.

Summary

Throughout their history, Americans have been inspired and guided by the ideals in the Declaration of Independence—equality, rights, liberty, opportunity, and democracy. Each generation has struggled with these ideals. The story of their struggles lies at the heart of our nation’s history and who we are as Americans.

Equality The Declaration of Independence asserts that "all men are created equal." During the past two centuries, our definition of equality has broadened to include women and minority groups. But we are still debating the role of government in promoting equality today.

Rights The Declaration states that we are all born with "certain unalienable Rights." Just what these rights should be has been the subject of never-ending debates.

Liberty One of the rights mentioned in the Declaration is liberty—the right to speak, act, think, and live freely. However, liberty is never absolute or unlimited. Defining the proper limits to liberty is an unending challenge to a free people.

Opportunity This ideal lies at the heart of the "American dream." It also raises difficult questions about what government should do to promote equal opportunities for all Americans.

Democracy The Declaration of Independence states that governments are created by people in order to "secure these rights." Governments receive their "just powers" to rule from the "consent of the governed." Today we define such governments as democracies.