Activity 2

Decoding the Declaration of Independence

In National Treasure, Ben Gates gives a salute to the signers of the Declaration of Independence: “Here’s to the men who did what was considered wrong in order to do what they knew was right.” Then he steals the Declaration of Independence from the National Archives! Ben knows it contains clues and that other treasure hunters are after it. But he’s willing to risk his own freedom to keep the Declaration (and the treasure) from harm. Like the signers, Ben does what he knows is right.

PART ONE
Secret Messages

Ben discovers a code on the back of the Declaration that helps him uncover a secret message. It’s a code used by real spies in the Revolutionary War. Each word in the message is represented by numbers that identify words in another document. But you need the original document for the code to work. See if you can use this code to uncover a message in the original Declaration of Independence (on page 7). The numbers identify words by line number and word number. Find the right line, then count the words to find the right word.

1. 3-6 5. 8-4
2. 6-4 6. 10-22
3. 7-11 7. 12-23
4. 7-20

Write the secret message here:

Now use this code to make up your own secret messages.

PART TWO
Evolving Languages

Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. You can see part of his rough draft below and at the Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trt001.html). After Jefferson wrote the Declaration, John Adams and Ben Franklin changed some of the wording. Then more words were changed before the Continental Congress voted to approve the document. Compare Jefferson’s wording with the final version of the Declaration in the passages below. Would you vote for the changes? Why or why not?

Jefferson

1. “to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained….”
2. “we hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable…”
3. “that from that equal creation they derive in rights inherent and inalienable…”

Final Version

What if we were revising the Declaration of Independence today? How would you reword it? Underline some parts that are hard to understand. Then paraphrase or rewrite those passages so that they are much simpler and clearer for readers today.
On July 4, 1776, the Declaration was considered final. Forty-two signers were present to place their signatures on the document. Later, fourteen others squeezed their names onto the bottom. As you can see, there’s still room for more signatures.

Add your name to this list of liberty’s champions. Then visit the National Archives website to find out more about some of the original signers: www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/declaration_join_the_signers.html.

PART THREE Sign Here

Now use your code-cracking skills to uncover a secret message in the games section of the National Treasure website. You could be on your way to collecting real digital treasure. Visit www.NationalTreasure.com.