DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
The battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775 left 270 British soldiers and 95 colonists dead. It sent shockwaves throughout the colonies and across the Atlantic Ocean. Although there was strong sentiment in the American colonies for reconciliation with Great Britain, many considered compromise impossible; armed rebellion was their only remaining chance.

Still, not all Americans were convinced. British oppression was real, but a war for independence was an altogether different matter. Many of those who had protested British abuses still remained loyal to England. This was just a family spat, they reasoned. At the very same time that delegates were arriving at Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress, petitions were circulating in towns and villages throughout the colonies calling for reconciliation with Great Britain. Something needed to be done to convince more colonists to rebel—to move with force against the British and toward a system of self-governance.

Several delegates at the Continental Congress thought a clearly written rationale would help. A committee of five was formed, and the task of writing a draft was given to a young, rather shy, delegate from Virginia by the name of Thomas Jefferson. He was considered a thoughtful young man and an excellent writer. Also on the committee were John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.

Even today, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence is regarded as one of the clearest statements ever written on the rights of citizens and the proper role of government in a free society. It is one of the world's great democratic documents and has been the inspiration of people yearning for freedom around the globe. As one recent writer noted, even today, "You can still get a rush from those opening paragraphs. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.' The audacity!" The core of the statement can be found in just 83 words:

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 abolish it, and to institute new Government . . .

Rarely has more been said in so few words. First, Jefferson presents a notion of natural rights. Individuals possess certain privileges—certain guarantees by virtue of being human. Second, these rights are not granted by government but instead by God, whom Jefferson calls the Creator. They cannot be given, nor can they be taken away. Third, Jefferson draws upon the social contract theory, introduced in the writings of John Locke. To end this conflict and insecurity, people created governments, thereby giving up some of their freedoms in order to protect their lives and their property. Fourth, Jefferson agrees with Locke that governments, having been created by the people to protect their rights, are limited; they get their powers from the will of the people and no one else. Finally, says Jefferson (again following Locke), when a government fails to respect the will of the people—that is, when it appears to be no longer limited—it becomes the right, indeed the obligation, of citizens to change the government. This passage is Jefferson's call for revolution.

A vast majority of the Declaration is the List of Grievances. Jefferson, as well as the other delegates, understood that the power of the statement would depend on perceptions regarding the
indignities caused by King George III. Simply stated, if the problems caused by the king (and Parliament) were deemed extensive, support for the revolution would likely grow. So, the list is long.

It should be stated that Jefferson's assignment was not to create a grand, original statement on the rights of citizens or the proper nature of government. His task was to craft a document that would sum up his fellow patriots’ thinking and would provide a justification for colonists as they took up arms against British rule. His job was to write a persuasive statement, aimed at public opinion in America, in Britain, and in continental Europe. In fact, he did far more.

But was the Declaration of Independence effective in rallying support behind the Revolutionary cause? We do know that many New Yorkers were so inspired upon hearing these words that they toppled a statue of King George and had it melted down to make 42,000 bullets for war. Still, this is a difficult question to answer, because there was no accurate way to measure public opinion in those days. Many did take up arms and rally to the Patriot cause, but many balked at joining the Revolution and even enlisted in the British Army. We also know that public support for the Continental Army, headed by George Washington, lagged considerably throughout the Revolution. Most Americans were deeply suspicious of professional armies, fearing them as a threat to liberty.