

Thomas Jefferson

and the Writing of the *Declaration of Independence*

Imagine this. It's a sultry day in mid-June, and you've just received a challenging writing assignment. As you think about your assignment, you sit at your desk, your clothes clinging to your sweaty back. From the open window on the second floor, you can hear the neighing of the horses in the stable and fields across the street. Blood-sucking horseflies buzz around your head as you continually swat them away in frustration.

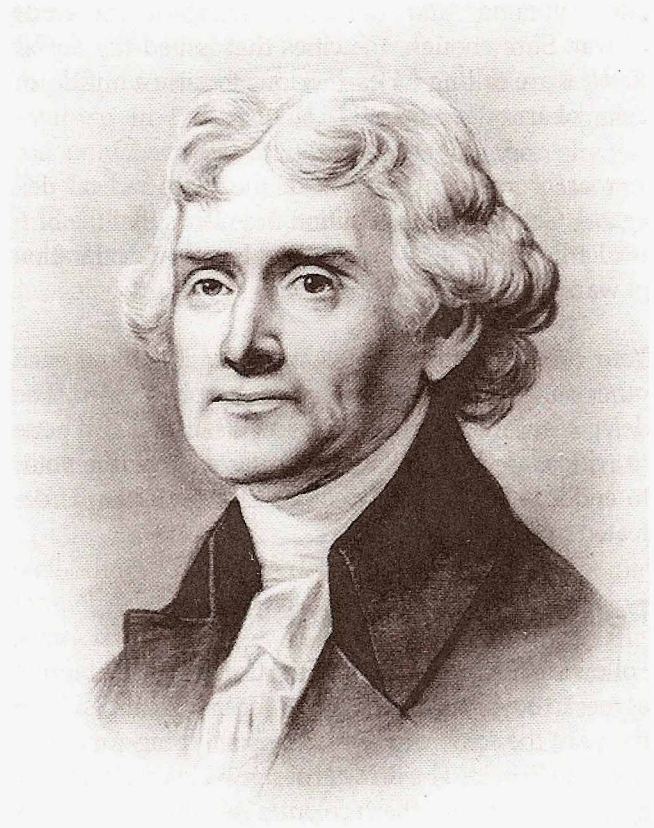
Thomas Jefferson didn't have to imagine any of this. For three weeks in June 1776, 230 years ago, he lived in such a house and worked at such a desk, in such weather, and in such conditions. What was his writing assignment? To write the *Declaration of Independence*!

At thirty-three years old, Thomas Jefferson was the second youngest member in the Second Continental Congress. He was also one of its quietest members. His appearance was awkward. He stood 6 feet 2 inches tall with angular features and poor posture. Add to that a red, freckled face framed by strawberry blond hair, and Jefferson could pass as a tall, large-boned farmer. How did such an unlikely man become an author? How was it that Jefferson was chosen to write the *Declaration of Independence*, a document of such importance in the American Revolution?

Seeking Independence

In the immediate months leading up to Jefferson's writing assignment, the majority of colonies decided it was time to seek independence. On June 7, 1776, at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed a resolution that declared the colonies' freedom and independence from England.

Congress postponed consideration of the Lee Resolution until after its three-week recess. But it did decide to form a committee that would draft a statement to the world presenting the colonies' case for independence. The statement's purpose was to gain support among the colonies and encourage assistance from the world by explaining the reasons why the colonies must act against England and the principles upon which such action would be based. If the colonies were to wage a successful war against England, they must first gain the world's support.



Thomas Jefferson

Choosing Jefferson

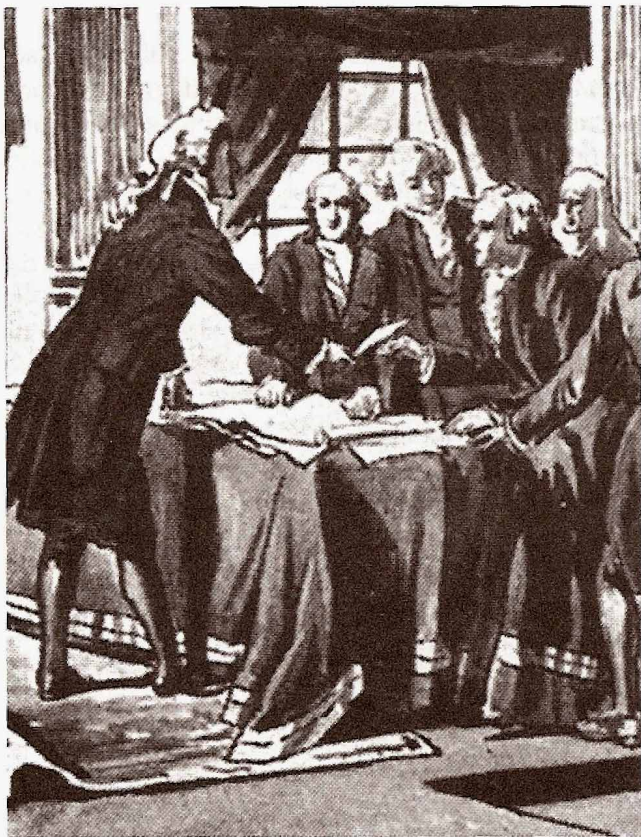
Thomas Jefferson had the superb ability to pick apart large volumes of information. He was also an eloquent writer and skillful with the pen. In fact, he was fluent in five languages and able to read two additional languages. His colleagues in congress noticed these abilities, enough so that when it came time to assemble the committee assigned to prepare the *Declaration*, they appointed Jefferson as one of the committee members. This Committee of Five, which also included Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, then chose Thomas Jeffer-

son, a representative from Virginia, to put together the draft *Declaration of Independence*. When asked why he should be the one to write it, John Adams answered him with the words, "You can write ten times better than I can." Jefferson now had a crucial writing assignment in his hands.

Writing the Document

Jefferson already had experience writing about freedom. Just one month earlier in May 1776, Jefferson drafted a constitution for Virginia. It was a stunning statement of Virginia's right to rebel against England and establish its own government. The call to establish a new government was based on the idea that men are created equal and have inalienable rights. Jefferson brought these same ideas to the *Declaration*. With these thoughts circulating in his mind, Jefferson took on the task of writing the *Declaration of Independence*.

To help him concentrate better and to escape the summer heat, Jefferson rented the entire second floor of a newly built brick house on the outskirts of Philadelphia.



Reviewing the *Declaration of Independence*

Discussion or Essay Questions

According to the article, Thomas Jefferson wrote his own epitaph. Look up the word epitaph in the dictionary. What do you want people to remember about you? Write your own epitaph. Try to limit it to fewer than thirty-five words.



Want to Read More?

Ages 9-12

Thomas Jefferson: Letters from a Philadelphia Bookworm (F) by Jennifer Armstrong

The Declaration Of Independence by Sam Fink

Thomas Jefferson: A Picture Book Biography by James Cross Giblin

Ages 12+

Thomas Jefferson by R. B. Bernstein

American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson by Joseph J. Ellis



What to Watch

Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns - PBS

Biography's Thomas Jefferson: Philosopher of Freedom - A&E



Online Fun

Declaration of Independence

<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/treasure/index.html>



The house was owned by Jacob Graff, a well-known bricklayer of the time. Every morning before Jefferson started the day's work, he soaked his feet in chilled water. He believed this ritual would prevent him from catching a cold. Once he decided it was time to work, Jefferson settled down in his revolving Windsor chair, a wooden chair with a high-spoked back and saddle seat. He worked on a mahogany lap desk, which he designed and had someone else build according to his drawings. Jefferson labored over the draft by continually crossing out, correcting, and rethinking his words until he was completely satisfied with the result.

The Declaration's Purpose

What is the *Declaration of Independence*? It stands as America's most cherished symbol of liberty. It includes a fundamental statement of what government is and from what source government derives its powers. It introduced a change in the way government was viewed: governments served the people and could only act with the people's consent.

The *Declaration* laid out reasons why America must sever its ties to England. Jefferson's intention was not to make up new ideas in the *Declaration*. Instead, he drew on ideas already expressed by philosophers such as John Locke, a British philosopher of the seventeenth century who declared the idea of a divine right monarchy as antiquated. Only a government that protected property rights and acted in responsible ways toward its citizens was legitimate. Jefferson also drew from numerous other sources, including George Mason's *Declaration of Rights*, Henry Home's *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.

Revisions and Adoption

Jefferson showed his first draft to both John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, members of the Committee of Five, and then to the entire committee. After the committee made its changes, Jefferson submitted the *Declaration* to the Continental Congress, which made additional edits and alterations. In all, eighty-six revisions by the Committee of Five and congress were made before congress finally adopted the *Declaration* on July 4, 1776. Although Jefferson was overjoyed when congress adopted the *Declaration of Independence*, the writer in him

was annoyed by the numerous edits made to his original draft.

The longest passage congress deleted was a paragraph that blamed King George III for bringing slavery to the colonies. Jefferson called the king a tyrant and the slave trade a "cruel war against human nature itself." Both South Carolina and Georgia – colonies that had never tried to end the slave trade – objected to Jefferson's scathing condemnation of the king and the British people. Congress agreed, reasoning that the *Declaration's* purpose was to make a case for independence without necessarily alienating and condemning the British people.

One of the Greatest Accomplishments

Jefferson lived for a half century more after writing the *Declaration of Independence*. During that time, he assembled a long list of accomplishments. He served as the governor of Virginia and the president of the United States. He was a lawyer, musician, scientist, architect, statesman, inventor, and more.

But toward the end of his life, Jefferson told James Madison that he wanted to be remembered for two accomplishments: writing the *Declaration of Independence* and founding the University of Virginia. Several months before his death, Jefferson designed his own tombstone and epitaph. The inscription on his tombstone read: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious toleration, and Father of the University of Virginia."

Jefferson died on July 4, 1826 – the day America celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the *Declaration of Independence*.



About the author
Joanne Liu is a freelance writer and attorney in Austin, Tex. She holds a B.A. in political science and economics from Brown University and a J.D. from Boston University.