Name _____ Date _____

Declaration of Independence: Main Ideas, Rights and Grievances

Directions: Read the passage. Then answer each question.

The Declaration of Independence

Why the Colonies Declared Independence

When fighting began in April 1775, most colonists still hoped to stay in the British Empire. They wanted Britain to respect their rights, not to break away. Over the next year, that hope faded. King George III declared the colonies to be in rebellion, and the fighting went on. In January 1776, a pamphlet by Thomas Paine called *Common Sense* convinced many readers that the colonies should rule themselves.

In June 1776, Congress chose five members to write a statement explaining a break with Britain. Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft, and John Adams and Benjamin Franklin suggested changes. Congress voted for independence on July 2. It made more changes to the draft and approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4.

The Declaration can be read in four main parts. It opens by saying that a people who break away from their rulers owe the world their reasons. Then comes its most important idea. It argues that all people are born equal. Everyone has certain rights that no government may take away. These include the right to live, the right to be free and the right to seek happiness. Many thinkers of the time called these natural rights. Governments exist to protect these rights, and their power comes from the people they govern. When a government destroys these rights, the people may change it or replace it.

The longest part is a list of grievances, or complaints, against King George III. It accuses him of many wrongs. He taxed the colonists without their agreement and kept soldiers among them in peacetime. He also blocked their trade and denied many of them trials by jury. The list was meant to prove that the king had attacked the colonists' rights again and again. The colonists had asked him for help many times, but he had ignored them.

The final part announces that the colonies are now independent states, free of British rule. They no longer owe loyalty to the British king. They have the power to make war and peace, form alliances and trade on their own. Britain did not accept American independence until a peace treaty in 1783.

The Declaration's promise of equal rights did not yet apply to everyone. Jefferson and many other signers enslaved people. Women and Native Americans were not treated as equals. Even so, its ideas lasted. In later years, women, Black Americans and many others pointed to the Declaration to demand the rights it promised.

1. Which statement best expresses the central idea of "Why the Colonies Declared Independence"?

A. The Declaration asked King George III to forgive the colonies and take them back.

B. In 1776, the Declaration explained why the colonies were breaking from Britain, based on the idea that governments must protect people's rights.

C. The Declaration of Independence ended the war with Britain in 1776.

D. Thomas Paine wrote a pamphlet called *Common Sense* in January 1776.

2. What was one reason many colonists gave up hope of staying in the British Empire?

A. King George III declared the colonies to be in rebellion, and the fighting went on.

B. France had ordered the colonies to break away.

C. Britain had already agreed to let the colonies go.

D. The colonies had already won the war.

3. Match each part of the Declaration to what it does, as the passage describes it.

Write the letter of the matching answer on each line.

1. _____ The opening
2. _____ The part with its most important idea
3. _____ The longest part
4. _____ The final part

Choices for question 3

A. Asks the king to forgive the colonies

B. Says that a people who break away owe the world their reasons

C. Lists complaints against King George III

D. Announces that the colonies are now independent states

E. Sets out ideas about rights and government

4. Which sentence best summarizes the Declaration's most important idea, as the passage explains it?

A. People must obey their government even when it destroys their rights.

B. People are born with rights, governments exist to protect them, and people may replace a government that destroys them.

C. Kings hold their power for life, so the people can never replace them.

D. Only Parliament can decide which rights the colonists have.

5. Use the word bank to finish these two sentences about the Declaration.

Word bank
treaties • grievances • alliances • taxes • natural rights

The Declaration's list of _____ accused King George III of many wrongs. Rights that people are born with, such as the right to be free, were often called _____.

6. Why does the Declaration include such a long list of the king's wrongs?

A. To list the new laws the colonies planned to pass

B. To explain why the colonies wanted to join France

C. To ask the king for permission to collect their own taxes

D. To prove that he had attacked the colonists' rights again and again, so breaking away was justified

7. Which three complaints against the king does the passage say the Declaration made?

☐ A. Forcing them to adopt the Articles of Confederation

☐ B. Taxing the colonists without their agreement

☐ C. Denying many of them trials by jury

☐ D. Refusing to let the colonists elect a president

☐ E. Keeping soldiers among them in peacetime

☐ F. Banning them from building schools

8. What happened after Congress approved the Declaration?

A. Britain did not accept American independence until a peace treaty in 1783.

B. Britain accepted American independence right away.

C. The colonies rejoined the British Empire within a year.

D. The king agreed to every complaint in the list.

9. What was one way the Declaration's promise of equal rights did not yet apply to everyone?

A. Only members of Parliament could sign it.

B. It said that rights belonged only to the king.

C. It was kept secret from the colonists.

D. Jefferson and many other signers enslaved people.

10. How have later Americans used the Declaration?

A. They have used it to bring back rule by a king.

B. They have pointed to it to demand the rights it promised.

C. They have used it to end all trade with other nations.

D. They have treated it as a list of taxes to collect.