

Common Sense

Actual Title = *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America*

Thomas Paine, 1776

BIG IDEA: *How did Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense convince reluctant Americans to abandon the goal of reconciliation with Britain and accept that separation from Britain — independence — was the only option for preserving their liberty?*

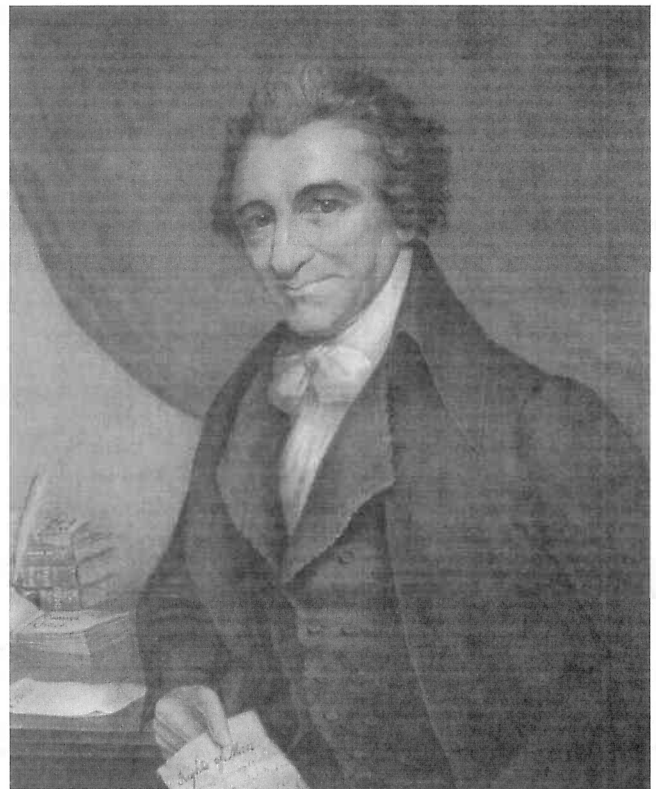
Answer after completing the back of this worksheet.

JUST SO YOU KNOW: After *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens* in 1791. In it he discusses and defines **Natural Rights**. He wrote, "**Government is nothing more than a national association acting on the principles of society.**" He believed that government should treat people equally and protect the rights of all.

Natural Rights: basic rights common to all people, given by God — all people are equal in God's eyes.
Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness (unalienable rights)

BACKGROUND: The man at right does not look angry. To us, he projects the typical figure of a "Founding Father" — composed, elite, and empowered. However, Thomas Paine was a revolutionary and a troublemaker, and his most influential essay — *Common Sense* — was a heated no-holds-barred call for independence. He is credited with turning the tide of public opinion at a crucial moment, convincing many Americans that war for independence was the *only* option to take, and they had to take it *now*, or else.

Common Sense appeared as a pamphlet for sale in Philadelphia on January 10, 1776, and, as we say today, it went viral. The first printing sold out in two weeks and over 150,000 copies were sold throughout America and Europe. It is estimated that **one fifth of Americans read the pamphlet** or heard it read aloud in public. General Washington ordered it read to his troops. Within weeks, it seemed, reconciliation with Britain had gone from an honorable goal to a cowardly betrayal, while independence became the rallying cry of united Patriots.



The following is annotated (edited) from the original text of *Common Sense*:

DIRECTIONS: Read the text and answer the questions below each section in complete sentences.

Introduction: In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense. The ideas I present here are so new that many people will reject them. Readers must clear their minds of long-held notions, apply common sense, and adopt the cause of America as the “cause of all mankind.” How we respond to tyranny today will matter for all time.

Imagine yourself sitting down to read *Common Sense* in January 1776. How does Paine introduce his reasoning to you?

Section One: The English government you worship? It’s a sham. Man may need government to protect him from his flawed nature, but that doesn’t mean he must suffocate under brute tyranny. Just as you would cut ties with abusive parents, you must break from Britain.

What did the British government impose upon the colonies that caused the colonies to “suffocate”?

Section Two: The monarchy you revere? It’s not our protector; it’s our enemy. It doesn’t care about us; it cares about Britain’s wealth. It has brought misery to people all over the world. And the very idea of monarchy is absurd. Why should someone rule over us simply because he (or she) is someone’s child? So evil is monarchy by its very nature that God condemns it in the Bible.

According to Paine, how do Britain and the King violate Natural Rights?

Section Three: Our crisis today? It’s folly to think we should maintain loyalty to a distant tyrant. It’s self-sabotage to pursue reconciliation. For us, right here, right now, reconciliation means ruin. America must separate from Britain. We can’t go back to the cozy days before the Stamp Act. You know that’s true; it’s time to admit it. For heaven’s sake, we’re already at war!

Does Paine believe that the colonies and the British can reconcile? Why or Why not?

Section Four: Can we win this war? Absolutely! Ignore the naysayers who tremble at the thought of British might. Let’s build a Continental Navy as we have built our Continental Army. Let us declare independence. If we delay, it will be that much harder to win. I know the prospect is daunting, but the prospect of inaction is terrifying.

How do you think this document helped to “turn the tide” of public opinion in favor of revolution?