

A Rhetorical Analysis of the Declaration of Independence: Persuasive Appeals and Language

by Jim Stover

Jim Stover, an English teacher at the Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, takes an unusual approach in this analysis of the Declaration of Independence, one of the most famous and important documents ever written. Stover combines a stylistic analysis with a classical approach to examine the arguments forwarded in the Declaration. Instead of a conventional essay, however, Stover presents his analysis in a table format, using different colors to identify and explain the different persuasive appeals and stylistic devices in the document. The substance of Stover's analysis is traditional, but its form is not. Stover produced this analysis for his high school students. As you read, decide whether this format makes his analysis more or less effective for his intended audience.

Color Key

Persuasive appeals

- Green: appeal to ethos (the standing of the writer or speaker).
- Red: appeal to pathos (emotion).
- Blue: appeal to logos (reason): deductive reasoning (navy blue) and inductive reasoning (dark blue).

Language analysis

- Light blue: diction (word choice).
- Orange: syntax (sentence structure).
- Light green: images (figurative language, imagery, and the like).

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

1 When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

In the long first sentence of the declaration, the writers set their revolution in the context of human history ("the Course of events"). They also establish their ethical standing—that they are men of good sense, good Zcharacter, and good will—first, by acknowledging that they need to explain to the world the reasons for their actions.

2 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 to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.—Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation

In the first sentence of the second paragraph, the parallel structure and repetition of *that* enable the writers to enunciate with great clarity their fundamental beliefs, which become the major premise in a deductive argument:

Major premise: the role of government is to protect the rights of the people; when government fails to do so, the people have the right to change it.

Minor premise: the British government has usurped the rights of the colonists.

Conclusion: the colonists have a right to overthrow that government.

The personification of prudence emphasizes how reasonable the writers are. But logic drives them to conclude that they have no choice but to overthrow a tyrannous government. The negative diction about the actions of the British king and his subjects begins in this paragraph —and carries an emotional appeal.

What follows in the body of the document is an inductive proof of the minor premise above: a list of ways in which the British government (and especially the King) has stripped the colonists of their rights.

till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to

Through most of the document, the writers appeal to pathos through the words they use in their list of the King's wrongs: check out all the negative words in this section of the document.

The long list of grievances reads like hammer blows because of the parallel structure and anaphora, the vilifying verbs, and the choice of other words that arouse the emotion of the audience.

harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:
For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

3 In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

4 Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably

The list climaxes with “He is”—the only phrase other than “He has” in the list. The present tense lends urgency to the need for revolution; otherwise, only “death, desolation, and tyranny” await.

The emotional language reaches a crescendo in the final paragraphs citing the King’s actions. He has shown “Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages,” and he is “totally unworthy [to be] the Head of a civilized nation.”

The two paragraphs following the list of grievances are packed with effective rhetorical devices that only heighten the ethical appeal: the writers are intelligent and eloquent men.

Again, the writers assure the world of their honest efforts to avoid independence. But the King, whose injustices they have just listed, has given them no choice. The colonists have made every appeal, not only to the King, but to “our Brittish brethren.” Again—to no avail. They too “have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.”

interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

5 We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

In the concluding paragraph, the writers (and signers) of the Declaration appeal to God (“the Supreme Judge of the world”) and rely “on the protection of divine Providence.” God, they argue, is on their side. Furthermore, they are men willing to pledge “our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” for the principles enunciated in the declaration.

Like the second paragraph, the concluding paragraph relies on parallel structure and repetition of *that* in declaring the colonies “Free and Independent States.” The climax of the last line effectively portrays the signers as heroes: men who will risk everything to support the rights of man established by God. Thus the writers of the declaration appeal in a most effective way to ethos (they are reasonable and honorable men), pathos (they have proven emphatically the outrages of the King and Parliament), and logos (they state their beliefs and prove that the King has trampled on their rights).