

Critical Analysis Document: The American Idea

LAUNCH: Day 1

Picture A



American Flag

1. Describe what you see when you look at Picture A.

2. What are three words that represent the **symbolism** of the American flag? Explain why you chose those words and their connection.

1. _____:

2. _____:

3. _____:

3. Do you feel a personal connection with the American Flag? How does it make you feel when you look at it?

4. How do you think African Americans might feel when they see the American Flag today? Why do you think they might feel that way?

End of Launch: Discuss as a whole class.

Directions: Read “Development of the American Ideal,” excerpted from the [History Channel](#), then answer guiding questions 1-3.

Development of the American Ideal

The Declaration of Independence was the first formal statement by a nation’s people asserting their right to choose their own government. The Declaration of Independence was largely the work of Virginian **Thomas Jefferson**. In justifying American independence, Jefferson drew generously from the political philosophy of **John Locke**, an advocate of natural rights, and from the work of other English theorists and Enlightenment thinkers. Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia on July 4, a date now celebrated as the birth of American independence.

American Colonists’ belief in natural laws produced revolutionary political thought in the last part of the 18th century. New generations of Americans, many born in the colonies, seized upon ideas like that of **John Locke’s “Social Contract”** which argues that all people naturally had a right to life, liberty and property, and that any created government is legitimate only with the consent of those people being governed. **Thomas Jefferson** built upon these ideas in the Declaration of Independence by proclaiming that “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” were. After the Revolution, the U.S. Constitution strongly encoded the protection of property within its words. It is within these twin founding documents that the **paradox** of liberty - the human right to freedom and the socially protected rights to property - became the foundation and essence of the American consciousness. The question(s) of **who could - and can - claim the *unalienable rights*** has been a question for America through time.

Guiding Questions

1. Who influenced Thomas Jefferson when writing the Declaration of Independence?

2. Why is the Declaration of Independence an important document in American History and Liberty?

3. Why did Thomas Jefferson believe that “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were ***inalienable rights*** (God-given rights to all men)?

Directions: Analyze the quote below of the Declaration of Independence to answer guiding questions 1-4.

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **inalienable 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.”*

Declaration of Independence 1776

Guiding Questions
1. What is the main idea from this passage of the Declaration of Independence?
2. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Highlight all the words that you associate with the term freedom or Liberty.● During this time in 1776, who did these words apply to? ● Who was purposely being left out and why?
3. The phrase “All men are created equal” was used in the Declaration of Independence. What did Jefferson mean by that?

4. Did our American forefathers really believe the democratic ideal that “**All men are created equal,**” or did they mean “**Some men are created equal**”? Explain your reasoning.

Directions: Read “The Next Fight for the American Ideal,” excerpted from the [History Channel](#). Then, watch the video below and answer the guiding questions.

The Next Fight for the American Ideal

The fate of enslaved people in the United States would divide the nation during the Civil War. And after the war, the racist legacy of slavery would persist, spurring movements of resistance, including the Underground Railroad, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the Black Lives Matter movement. *Plessy v. Ferguson* had legalized and forced segregation between the two races. During that time, segregation would be used as a tool to oppress Black citizens. *Brown v. Board of Education* would overturn forced segregation, but the long road did not end there. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. African Americans only wanted the same rights and opportunities that were afforded to their white counterparts. Through it all, Black leaders, artists and writers have emerged to shape the character and identity of a nation. African Americans have continued to fight for the true ideal of American democracy and freedom that our country was falsely founded on.

James Baldwin was a famous writer, poet, and civil rights activist. The video clip attached captures Mr. Baldwin at Cambridge University Union in 1965, where he debates whether the “American dream” has been achieved at the expense of African Americans. Watch the [full video clip](#) (3 mins) and answer guiding questions 1-6.

1. How did you feel after watching **James Baldwin’s** debate on the American Dream?

2. In school, **Baldwin** did not learn of any historical contributions made by African Americans. What are some of the contributions he mentions made by his ancestors?

<p>3. Who is the audience that James Baldwin is addressing in his speech?</p>	<p>4. What is the purpose or goal Baldwin is trying to achieve?</p>	<p>5. What emotion is he trying to evoke in his audience?</p>
<p>5. Who does Baldwin suggest <u>has been denied the American Dream</u> and why?</p>		
<p>6. This speech was given in 1965. Based on what you heard, how do you think African Americans felt about the American ideal of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” at this time?</p>		

End of Day 1: Closeout

What are **two takeaways** from today's lesson?

LAUNCH: Day 2

What is your idea of America? What do you think when you hear the title “The Idea of America”?

1619 Project Article – Excerpt: “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones

TEXT	GIST: Main Idea
<p>(1)</p> <p>My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.</p>	<p>(1)</p>
<p>(2)</p> <p>So, when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this Black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn’t understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed</p>	<p>(2)</p>

<p>me. I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing Black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.</p>	
<p>(3)</p> <p>Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.</p>	<p>(3)</p>
<p>(4)</p> <p>In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who</p>	<p>(4)</p>

<p>came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War.</p>	
<p>(5)</p> <p>Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage. Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire.</p>	<p>(5)</p>
<p>(6)</p> <p>Through back-breaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with</p>	<p>(6)</p>

<p>their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome.</p> <p>They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for White people North Island “slave trader.”</p>	
<p>(7)</p> <p>Profits from Black people’s stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world. But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of Black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage.</p>	<p>(7)</p>
<p>(8)</p> <p>Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country’s history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy. The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776, proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” But the White men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst. “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice</p>	<p>(8)</p>

<p>promised to all, Black Americans believed fervently in the American creed.</p>	
<p>(9)</p> <p>Through centuries of Black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — Black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights. Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all. My father...knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That Black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true “founding fathers.” And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.</p>	<p>(9)</p>
<p>End of Day 2: Closeout:</p> <p>Did your initial idea of America change after reading this article from <i>The 1619 Project</i>?</p>	

DAY 3: Text Questions

1. What is the main idea that the author Nikole Hannah-Jones is presenting in this article?

2. According to Nikole Hannah-Jones, why is the year 1619 so significant?

3. According to the article, explain **FOUR** contributions that enslaved African Americans made to the economic wealth and prosperity of the United States.

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4. Nikole Hannah-Jones was embarrassed of her father's patriotism and love for the American Flag. Why did she change her mind as she got older and start to agree with him?

5. How did African Americans have to fight for the equality and freedom that was stated in the Declaration of Independence, the ideals of American democracy?

6. How did African Americans' fight for freedom and democracy pave the way for other marginalized groups?

7. Why does Nikole Hannah-Jones believe that Black Americans should take pride in the American flag today?

8. Nikole Hannah-Jones' final statement is that ***“Black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’ And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.”*** Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your reasoning.

9. Is the American ideal of “all men are created equal” true today? Explain your answer.

DAY 4/5

Reflection Essay

Directions: Use the *1619 Project* article “The Idea of America” excerpt, texts, and video from this lesson, our class discussions, and your prior knowledge of the topic to write a three-paragraph essay that will answer the prompts listed below. Use evidence to support your writing. You may use the **Essay Graphic Organizer** to help organize your thoughts before you write your essay.

- (1)**
- Explain why African Americans are considered the true fighters for the American ideal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
 - Use two pieces of text-based evidence to show how African Americans fight for freedom, equality, and democracy paved the way for other marginalized groups.

(2) Explain your understanding of the contributions that enslaved Africans made to the overall success of the United States

(3) Do you agree with the author's main idea presented in “The Idea of America”? Why or why not?

Essay Graphic Organizer

(1) Why are African Americans considered the true fighters for the American Ideal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”	(1) How did African Americans fight for freedom, equality, and democracy pave the way for other marginalized groups?	(2) What were the contributions of enslaved Africans to the overall success of the United States	(3) Do you agree with the author’s main idea presented “The Idea of America?”
	<p>Evidence #1:</p> <p>Evidence #2:</p>	<p>Contribution #1:</p> <p>Contribution #2:</p> <p>Contribution #3:</p> <p>Contribution #4:</p>	<p><u>Main Idea:</u></p> <p><u>Circle one:</u></p> <p>AGREE DISAGREE</p> <p><u>Explanation:</u></p>

