



## **John Adams, *Thoughts on Government*, 1776**

### **ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

*What makes a good government?*

#### **Standards**

##### Social Studies

(6-8 & 9-12) I.1.3, I.1.4

8.C&G.1, 8.C&G.1.1, 8.C&G.1.2, 8.C&G.1.3, AH.C&G.1, AH.C&G.1.1

8.H.1, 8.H.2, 8.H.2.2, AH.H.3

##### English Language Arts

RI.6 & 8-12.1, RI.6-12.3, RI.6-12.4, RI.6-12.6, RI.11-12.8, RI.9-12.9, RI.6-12-.10

L.6-12.4, L.6-12.6,

SL.6-12.1, SL.6-12.4

##### Visual Arts

6.V.3.2, 6-7.CX.1.2, 6.CX.2.2, B.CX.1.1, I.CX.1.1, P.CX.1.1, A.CX.2.2

#### **Standards for extension options**

##### Social Studies

(6-8) I.1.6, I.1.7, (9-12) I.1.5

AH.B.1.1, AH.H.3.2

##### English Language Arts:

L.6-12.1, L.6-12.2, L.6-8.3

RI.7-12.9

W.6-12.1, W.6-12.2

#### **Objectives**

- Analyze an influential source for North Carolina's political leaders, who gathered in 1776 to write the first state constitution.
- Identify and evaluate principles of good government.

## Lesson Contents

In March 1776 the Second Continental Congress reconvened in Philadelphia. North Carolina's delegates included William Hooper and John Penn. They knew they needed to lead the effort to create North Carolina's first state constitution. The men asked Massachusetts delegate, John Adams, for his advice on the subject. Adams first wrote a letter to Hooper, and then copied it for Penn. The advice was so well-received that leaders from other colonies also asked Adams for copies. *Thoughts on Government* became a pamphlet the next month and circulated far and wide. It influenced the formation of many state constitutions, including North Carolina's. In his letter to Hooper, Adams discussed many principles, including separation of powers and a system of checks and balances. These ideas became the foundation of American government. Hooper's copy of the letter is preserved in the State Archives of North Carolina.

### Primary Source

John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," March 1776,  
[digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/john-adams-thoughts-on-government/411653](https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/john-adams-thoughts-on-government/411653)

### Transcription

[founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0002](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0002)

### Folder Contents

- **Background: *Thoughts on Government***
- **Activity: Word Cloud**
- **Selections & Questions: *Thoughts on Government***
- **Activity: Broadside**
- **Exit Tickets**

## Supplies

- Projector (optional)
- 2 quills optional hands-on activity

## Lesson Preparation

- Review the primary source, transcription, related materials, and slides to determine which options are appropriate for your students. Note that this box contains a variety of options from which teachers can select, based on available time, learning goals, and student capacities.
- Access original document and transcription to project for the class and zoom in as needed.

- Keep answer keys at hand for any handouts you choose.
- Vocabulary terms for this lesson may be posted or projected to discuss as a class. If you prefer to distribute an individual handout, copy and modify the table in the “procedures” section below to print or create a quiz. The **Glossary** for all lessons can be found in the **Cross-Lesson Activities** folder. If handing out, print a copy for each student.
- Make copies of any handouts you choose.
  - **Document Analysis** sheet (found in the cross-lesson activity folder) is an optional assignment for individual work with the transcription. Print a double-sided copy for each student.
  - **Background: Thoughts on Government** can be printed out as a 1-sided worksheet or double-sided with the word cloud activity on the back. Note: slides can substitute for background worksheets and may be more appropriate for upper levels. If selecting this worksheet, print 30 copies for 30 students.
  - **Activity: Word Cloud**—if not using the background worksheet, print 30 copies for 30 students. If using both, print double-sided with the background worksheet.
  - **Selections & Questions** includes 4 paragraphs of the 5½-page original document. Transcriptions can be found on the back of each sheet, if using double-sided printing. Options:
    - Transcriptions can either be projected for the class or printed.
    - If using paper, use double-sided printing and cut out selections with enough copies of each for pairs or small groups to decipher the handwriting. For example, in a class of 30 students, make 3 or 4 copies and cut out the paragraphs.
  - **Activity: Broadsides**—print double-sided (30 copies for 30 students).
  - **Exit Tickets**—print and cut, 4 tickets per page (8 copies for 30 students)

## Background Knowledge

(5 minutes)

Ask students: *what is government? Why do we need it? Who decides its form?* Student answers will vary.

## Procedure

- Ask students what they remember about John Adams. *Has anyone heard of William Hooper?* Answers will vary.

(5 minutes)

Option—advanced students can review the brief bios on [Adams](#) and [Hooper](#) in the “Recommended Resources” section below and list facts about each to share with the class.

- Review information with the class about the gathering of delegates from 12 of the 13 colonies (except Georgia) as the [2<sup>nd</sup> Continental Congress](#) in Philadelphia, beginning in May 1775. (5 minutes)

Option—show the [2.5-minute](#) video, “[John Adams Dominates the Second Continental Congress](#).”

- Review by projecting or distributing vocabulary terms necessary to understand the document. Discuss any additional terms that cause students comprehension difficulty during the lesson. (10 minutes)

<b>conducive</b>	making a certain situation or outcome possible
<b>criterion</b>	a standard used to make decisions
<b>felicity</b>	intense happiness
<b>prerogative</b>	a privilege or a power that someone has
<b>sentiment</b>	a view or attitude toward a situation or event; an opinion
<b>virtue</b>	the quality of being morally good

- Pass out [Document Analysis](#) sheet, along with the transcription, found in the **Primary Sources** folder. Allow students time to work through the sheets individually. This activity may work best as an option to replace the [Selections & Questions](#) activity. (15 minutes)

- Pass out [Background](#) worksheets and allow students to complete. Review fact-check answers using key. (15 minutes)

- Pass out [Activity: Word Cloud](#) [may be on the back of background worksheet]. (15 minutes)

Option—complete the chart to identify feeling words and concept words as a class.

- Ask students: *What do we need to know to read documents from the 1770s?*  
Answers will vary and should include a reminder that spelling and grammar were not standardized and may be different than what we expect today. Reading cursive is a challenge that can be fun, like completing a puzzle, and is a way to look closely at the document and identify its meaning. The [long “s”](#) letter looks like an “f” and is a common stumbling block in transcription. (5 minutes)

- Put students in pairs or small groups for jigsawing. For example: in a class of 30, form 10-15 groups of 2 or 3. Distribute pre-cut **Selections & Questions** pieces for students to begin transcriptions. Have each group work to decipher the handwriting and write on a piece of notebook paper. After 5 minutes, have them flip their paragraphs over to see how the completed transcription compares with their own. 4 different students can then read a transcribed selection aloud to the class. Ask the class: *How hard was the selection to read? What was especially challenging?*  
(25 minutes; 10 for transcribing; 10 for reading aloud; 5 for discussion)
- Discuss reflection questions as a class or students may write answers on notebook paper. Possible answers can be found on the key. (45 minutes for 9 questions)  
Modification: skip the transcription activity and lead discussion from the transcribed passages using the Selections & Questions answer key.
- Pass out **Activity: BroadSides**. Students can cut borders or other images from the page to glue/ tape onto a blank page to create their own broadside, or they can use the images to inspire their own decorations with the words they choose from *Thoughts on Government* to motivate participation. Tape the broadsides to the walls for the class to view and discuss.  
Option: this activity can be done as a station, along with the quill pen and ink supplied in the DocsBox. (30 minutes)
- Lead a class discussing asking students to evaluate aspects of government to answer “*what makes a good government?*” (10 minutes)
- Pass out **Exit Ticket**. Two options are provided or for use if lesson extends multiple days. Allow time to complete before collecting (5 minutes)
  - *How does government limit freedom?*
  - *What good does government do for your family or community?*

## Modifications

- Student pages/worksheets could be shared with students needing to take notes individually, with vision issues, or who have issues focusing (even if the slides are being used collectively).
- Students could be paired with a higher-achieving or differently behaving student for extra support.
- Students could be given extension activities if they finish early or are high-achieving and need more challenging or independent work. These can be done independently or collaboratively.

## Extension Options (using notebook paper)

- Write an essay on what John Adams would think about our government today. *Would he approve or disapprove?* Discuss at least three components of government to support your argument and include evidence from the document, “Thoughts on Government.”
- Write a short essay to answer the question “*What makes a good government?*”
- Use additional primary sources with new perspectives to gather evidence for the essay. [George H. White’s speech](#) is one possibility (found in the 1901 suffrage amendment folder).

## Field Trip Connection

Visit **Historic Halifax**, where the 5<sup>th</sup> Provincial Congress met and William Hooper led the effort to create North Carolina’s first state constitution, <https://historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/historic-halifax/plan-your-visit>

## Recommended Resources

National Archives, “The Long S” in U.S. foundational documents, *Pieces of History* blog, [prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2021/12/14/the-long-s/](https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2021/12/14/the-long-s/)

“John Adams Dominates Second Continental Congress,” *Americana Corner*, 2.5-minute video [americanacorner.com/blog/john-adams-second-continental-congress-2](https://americanacorner.com/blog/john-adams-second-continental-congress-2)

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “Continental Congress, 1774-1781,” [history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/continental-congress#:~:text=Spurred%20by%20local%20pressure%20groups,the%2013%20colonies%20except%20Georgia](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/continental-congress#:~:text=Spurred%20by%20local%20pressure%20groups,the%2013%20colonies%20except%20Georgia)

National Park Service, “The Second Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence,” [history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/continental-congress#:~:text=Spurred%20by%20local%20pressure%20groups,the%2013%20colonies%20except%20Georgia](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/continental-congress#:~:text=Spurred%20by%20local%20pressure%20groups,the%2013%20colonies%20except%20Georgia)

The White House, “John Adams,” [whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/john-adams/](https://whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/john-adams/)

NCpedia, “Hooper, William,” [ncpedia.org/biography/hooper-william](https://ncpedia.org/biography/hooper-william)