



## Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, 1776

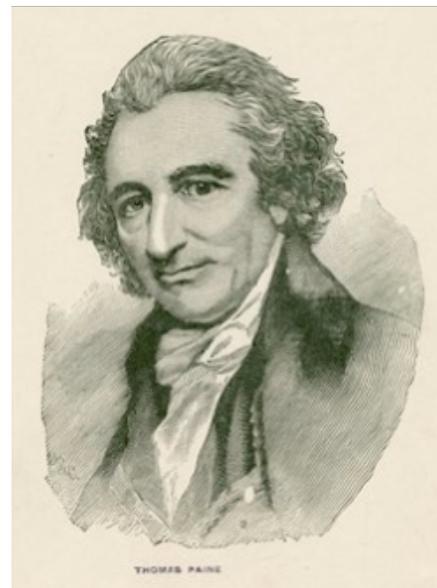
Advisor: Robert A. Ferguson, George Edward Woodberry Professor in Law, Literature and Criticism, Columbia University; National Humanities Center Fellow.

### Framing Question

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?

### Understanding

By January 1776, the American colonies were in open rebellion against Britain. Their soldiers had captured Fort Ticonderoga, besieged Boston, fortified New York City, and invaded Canada. Yet few dared voice what most knew was true — they were no longer fighting for their rights as British subjects. They weren't fighting for self-defense, or protection of their property, or to force Britain to the negotiating table. They were fighting for independence. It took a hard jolt to move Americans from professed loyalty to declared rebellion, and it came in large part from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Not a dumbed-down rant for the masses, as often described, *Common Sense* is a masterful piece of argument and rhetoric that proved the power of words.



### Text

[Thomas Paine, \*Common Sense\*, 1776](#)

### Background

The man above does not look angry. To us, he projects the typical figure of a "Founding Father" — composed, elite, and empowered. And to us his famous essays are awash in powdered-wig prose. But the portrait and the prose belie the reality. Thomas Paine was a firebrand, and his most influential essay — *Common Sense* — was a fevered no-holds-barred call for independence. He is credited with turning the tide of public opinion at a crucial juncture, 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. How did Paine achieve this?

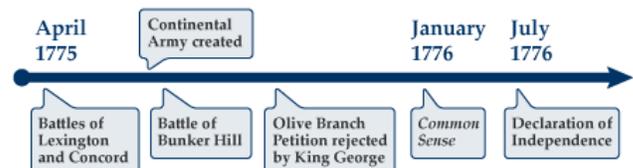
### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

## 1. Timing

Over a year elapsed between the outbreak of armed conflict and the Declaration of Independence. During these fifteen months, many bemoaned the reluctance of Americans to renounce their ties with Britain despite the escalating warfare around them.

“When we are no longer fascinated with the Idea of a speedy Reconciliation,” wrote Benjamin Franklin in mid-1775, “we shall exert ourselves to some purpose. Till then Things will be done by Halves.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, there remained much discord among the colonies about their shared future. “Some timid minds are terrified at the word independence,” wrote Elbridge Gerry in March 1776, referring to the colonial legislatures. “America has gone such lengths she cannot recede, and I am convinced a few weeks or months at furthest will convince her of the fact, but the fruit must have time to ripen in some of the other Colonies.”<sup>2</sup> In this environment, *Common Sense* appeared like a “meteor,” wrote John Adams,<sup>3</sup> and propelled many to support independence. Many noted it at the time with amazement.



“Sometime past the idea [of independence] would have struck me with horror. I now see no alternative;... Can any virtuous and brave American hesitate one moment in the choice?”

—*The Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 13 February 1776

“We were blind, but on reading these enlightening works the scales have fallen from our eyes.... The doctrine of Independence hath been in times past greatly disgustful; we abhorred the principle. It is now become our delightful theme and commands our purest affections. We revere the author and highly prize and admire his works.”

—*The New-London [Connecticut] Gazette*, 22 March 1776

## 2. Message

What made *Common Sense* so esteemed and “enlightening”? Some argue that *Common Sense* said nothing new, that it simply put the call-to-war in fiery street language that rallied the common people. But this trivializes Paine’s accomplishment. He did have a new message in *Common Sense* — an ultimatum. Give up reconciliation now, or forever lose the chance for independence. If we fail to act, we’re self-deceiving cowards condemning our children to tyranny and cheating the world of a beacon of liberty. It is our calling to model self-actualized nationhood for the world. “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”

Paine divided *Common Sense* into four sections with deceptively mundane titles, mimicking the erudite political pamphlets of the day. But his essay did not offer the same-old-same-old treatise on British heritage and American rights. Here’s what he says in *Common Sense*:

**Introduction:** 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.

**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.

**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.

**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!

**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.

A month later, in his appendix to the third edition, Paine escalated his appeal to a utopian fervor. “We have it in our power to begin the world over again,” he insisted. “The birthday of a new world is at hand.”

### 3. Rhetoric.

“It is necessary to be bold,” wrote Paine years later on his rhetorical power. “Some people can be reasoned into sense, and others must be shocked into it. Say a bold thing that will stagger them, and they will begin to think.”<sup>4</sup> Keep this idea front and center as you study *Common Sense*.

As an experienced essayist and a recent English immigrant with his own deep resentments against Britain, Paine was the right man at the right time to galvanize public opinion. He “understood better than anyone else in America,” explains literary scholar Robert Ferguson, “that ‘style and manner of thinking’ might dictate the difficult shift from loyalty to rebellion.”<sup>5</sup> Before Paine, the language of political essays had been moderate. Educated men wrote civilly for publication and kept their fury for private letters and diaries. Then came Paine, cursing Britain as an “open enemy,” denouncing George III as the “Royal Brute of England,” and damning reconciliation as “truly farcical” and “a fallacious dream.” To think otherwise, he charged, was “absurd,” “unmanly,” and “repugnant to reason.” As Virginian Landon Carter wrote in dismay, Paine implied that anyone who disagreed with him “is nothing short of a coward and a sycophant [stooge/lackey], which in plain meaning must be a damned rascal.”<sup>6</sup> Paine knew what he was doing: the pen was his weapon, and words his ammunition. He argued with ideas while convincing with raw emotion. “The point to remember,” writes Ferguson, “is that Paine’s natural and intended audience is the American mob.... He uses anger, the natural emotion of the mob, to let the most active groups find themselves in the general will of a republican citizenry.”<sup>7</sup> What if Paine had written the Declaration of Independence with the same hard-driving rhetoric?

#### AS JEFFERSON WROTE IT:

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.

#### IF PAINE HAD WRITTEN IT:

NO man can deny, without abandoning his God-given ability to reason, that all men enter into existence as equals. No matter how lowly or majestic their origins, they enter life with three God-given RIGHTS — the right to live, to right to live free, and the right to live happily (or, at the least, to pursue Happiness on earth). Who would choose existence on any other terms? So treasured are these rights that man created government to protect them. So treasured are they that man is duty-bound to destroy any government that crushes them — and start anew as men worthy of the title of FREE MEN. This is the plain truth, impossible to refute.

### Activity: From Resistance to Revolution

Compare Paine’s message and rhetoric in 1776 with that of a moderate Patriot in 1768.



## Text Analysis

Underlined words are defined in the Glossary at the end of this document.

### Excerpt 1

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader than that he will divest [rid] himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer [permit] his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves: that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day.

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

Why does he write “I offer nothing more” instead of “I offer you many reasons” or “I offer a detailed argument”?

How does Paine ask you to prepare yourself for his “common sense” arguments?

What does he imply by saying a fair reader “will put *on*, or rather than he will not put *off*, the true character of a man”?

**Activity: The Common Sense of *Common Sense***

Examine Paine’s “common sense” reasoning in his arguments for complete independence.



The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. ’Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent – of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. ’Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed time of continental [colonies] union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.

This paragraph begins with one of the most famous hyperboles in American writing. A hyperbole is an overstatement or exaggeration to emphasize a point. What are the two examples of hyperbole in this paragraph?

With the hyperboles, how does Paine lead you to view the “cause” of American independence?

What tone does Paine add with the phrases “The sun never shined” and “even to the end of time”?

Let’s consider Paine as a wordsmith. How does he use repetition to add impact to the first part of the paragraph?

Paine ends this paragraph with an analogy: What we do now is like carving initials into the bark of a young oak tree. What does he mean with the analogy?

By referring the matter from argument to arms, a new area for politics is struck; a new method of thinking hath arisen. All plans, proposals, etc., prior to the nineteenth of April, i.e., to the commencement of hostilities [Lexington and Concord], are like the almanacs of the last year which, though proper [accurate] then, are superseded and useless now. Whatever was advanced by the advocates on either side of the question then, terminated in one and the same point, viz. [that is], a union with Great Britain. The only difference between the parties was the method of effecting it — the one proposing force, the other friendship; but it hath so far happened that the first hath failed and the second hath withdrawn her influence.

Paine includes multiple repetitions in this paragraph. What word repetition do you find?

What sound repetitions do you find?

Read the sentences aloud. What impact does the repetition add to Paine's delivery?

Paine compares the attempts to reconcile with Britain after the Battle of Lexington and Concord to an old almanac. What does he mean?

As much hath been said of the advantages of reconciliation, which, like an agreeable dream, hath passed away and left us as we were, it is but right that we should examine the contrary [opposing] side of the argument and inquire into some of the many material injuries which these colonies sustain, and always will sustain, by being connected with and dependent on Great Britain. To examine that connection and dependence, on the principles of nature and common sense, to see what we have to trust to [expect] if separated, and what we are to expect if dependent.

Paine compares the goal of reconciliation to an “agreeable dream [that has] passed away and left us as we were.” Why doesn’t he aim harsher criticism here at the goal of reconciling with Britain?

With this in mind, what tone does he lead the reader to expect: cynical, impatient, hopeful, reasonable, impassioned, angry?

How does his tone prepare the resistant reader?

While Paine promises a fair appraisal, look how he describes the two options in the last sentence.

Option 1: “if separated” from Britain / Option 2: “if dependent on Britain”

Why didn’t he use the usual terms for the two options — “independence” and “reconciliation”?

I have heard it asserted by some that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, that the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had anything to do with her.

### Activity: The Metaphor of Youth

Study Paine’s metaphors that compare the colonies’ readiness for independence to a child’s maturation into adulthood.



Here Paine rebuts the first argument for reconciliation—that America has thrived as a British colony and would fail on her own. How does he dismiss this argument?

Paine follows his utter rejection of the argument with an analogy. Complete the analogy: America staying with Britain would be like a child \_\_\_\_\_.

Paine goes one step further in the last sentence. What does he say about America's "childhood" as a British colony?

## Excerpt 2

Men of passive tempers [temperaments] look somewhat lightly over the offenses of Britain and, still hoping for the best, are apt to call out, "Come, come, we shall be friends again for all this." But examine the passions and feelings of mankind. Bring the doctrine of reconciliation to the touchstone of nature and then tell me whether you can hereafter love, honor, and faithfully serve the power that hath carried fire and sword into your land? If you cannot do all these, then are you only deceiving yourselves and by your delay bringing ruin upon posterity? Your future connection with Britain, whom you can neither love nor honor, will be forced and unnatural, and being formed only on the plan of present convenience, will in a little time fall into a relapse more wretched than the first. But if you say you can still pass the violations over [ignore or underrate them], then I ask, Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of [without] a bed to lie on or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover, and, whatever may be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward and the spirit of a sycophant.

Here Paine challenges his opponents to bring "reconciliation to the touchstone of nature." What does he mean? (A "touchstone" is a test of the quality or genuineness of something. From ancient times the purity of gold or silver was tested with a "touchstone" of basalt stone.)

At the start of this paragraph Paine mildly faults the supporters of reconciliation as unrealistic optimists "still hoping for the best." By the end of the paragraph, however, they are cowards willing to "shake hands with the murderers." How did he construct the paragraph to accomplish this transition?

Paraphrase the first challenge (sentences 2–5).

Paraphrase the second challenge (sentences 6–11).

With what phrase does Paine condemn those who would still hope for reconciliation even if they were victims of British violence?

Note how Paine weaves impassioned questions through the paragraph: “Are you only deceiving yourselves?” “Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands?” How do these questions intensify his challenges?

Rewrite sentences #4 and #11 to change the second-person “you” to the third-person “he/she/they.” How does the change weaken Paine’s challenges?

### Worksheet: The Question as Rhetorical Device

Use this worksheet to examine Paine’s use of questions as persuasive devices throughout *Common Sense*, specifically the *rhetorical question* and the *hypophora* (questions with implied or stated answers, used for rhetorical impact).



### Excerpt 3

A government of our own is our natural right, and when a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance. If we omit it now, some Massanello\* may hereafter arise who, laying hold of popular disquietudes [grievances], may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, finally sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge. Should the government of America return again into the hands of Britain, the tottering situation of things will be a temptation for some desperate adventurer to try his fortune; and in such a case, what relief can Britain give? Ere [before] she could hear the news, the fatal business might be done, and ourselves suffering like the wretched Britons under the oppression of the Conqueror [William the Conqueror in 1066]. Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do. Ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny by keeping vacant the seat of government....

O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her.—Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

*\* Thomas Anello, otherwise Massanello, a fisherman of Naples, who after spiring up his countrymen in the public marketplace against the oppression of the Spaniards, to whom the place was then subject, prompted them to revolt, and in the space of a day become King. [footnote in Paine]*

At this point, Paine pleads with his readers to write the constitution for their independent nation without delay. What danger do they risk, he warns, if they leave this crucial task to a later day?

What historical evidence does Paine offer to illustrate the danger?

As his plea escalates in intensity, Paine exclaims “Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do.” To what climactic moment in the New Testament does he allude?

Paine heightens his apocalyptic tone as he appeals to “ye that love mankind” to accept a mission of salvation (alluding to Christ’s mission of salvation). What must the lovers of mankind achieve in order to save mankind?

# Glossary

[including 18th-c. connotations]

**posterity:** all future generations of mankind

**superseded:** replaced something old or no longer useful

**precedent:** an action or policy that serves as an example or rule for the future

**touchstone:** as a metaphor, a test of the quality or genuineness of something. (in the past, the purity of gold or silver was tested with a “touchstone” of basalt stone.)

**relapse:** a return to a previous worse condition after a period of improvement

**sycophant:** someone who acts submissively to another in power in order to gain advantage; yes-man, flatterer, bootlicker

**precariousness:** uncertainty, instability; dependence on chance circumstances or unknown conditions

**deluge:** a cataclysmic flood

1. Benjamin Franklin, letter to Silas Deane, 27 August 1775. Full text in Founders Online (National Archives).
2. Elbridge Gerry, letter to James Warren, 26 March 1776.
3. John Adams, autobiography, part 1, “John Adams,” through 1776, sheet 23 of 53 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. [www.masshist.org/digitaladams/](http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/).
4. Thomas Paine, letter to Elihu Palmer, 21 February 1802; cited in Henry Hayden Clark, “Thomas Paine’s Theories of Rhetoric,” *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, 28 (1933), 317.
5. Robert A. Ferguson, “The Commonalities of Common Sense,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Series, 57:3 (July 2000), 483.
6. Landon Carter, diary entry, 20 February 1776, recounting content of letter written that day to George Washington. Full entry in Founders Online (National Archives).
7. Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Harvard University Press, 1994; paper ed., 1997), 113.

Portrait of Thomas Paine by John Henry Bufford (1810-1870), engraving by Bufford’s Lithography, ca. 1850. Record ID 268504.