

Stamp Act Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

Why were the colonists upset about the Stamp Act?

Materials:

- Copies of Stamp Act Documents A, B, C
- Transparencies or electronic copies of Documents A and B
- Copies of Stamp Act Guiding Questions for Document C

Plan of Instruction:

Note: This lesson should follow a more thorough lecture on the lead-up to the American Revolution, including the idea of mercantilism, the French-Indian War, the Proclamation of 1763, etc.

1. Introduction:

After winning the French-Indian War in 1763, the British were in a lot of debt. They tried to raise money by taxing the American colonists. In March 1765, the British passed the Stamp Act. It went into effect on November 1, 1765. It placed a tax on all newspapers and other printed materials. The Stamp Act would have an effect on anyone who bought a printed item like a newspaper.

*Today, we're going to read documents and try to answer the question: **Why were colonists upset about the Stamp Act?***

2. Hand out Document A and project the electronic copy on your computer (or put the Document A transparency on overhead projector). Explain that you're going to model how to read a historical document.

*The first thing I want to do is read the **source information** at the top and bottom of the document. That means I want to think about who wrote it, what the author's perspective was, why it was written, when it was written, and where it was written. I also want to figure out if I this is a reliable source.*

I see here that (read background and source info). So I know that this was written in October 1765, which is before the tax went into effect, and that it was published in a Boston newspaper. I can predict some things by just looking at this information. I know that newspapers would have been really affected by the Stamp Act, so just based on that, I would predict this letter would oppose the act. I also see that it was in Boston newspaper, and I know that a lot of Patriot activity came out of Boston. I'm going to guess that a letter printed in this newspaper would oppose the Stamp Act. I don't know anything about the author, and the fact that they used "B.W." instead of a full name

*makes me wonder if it's a pen name. Since this is a public letter on the front page of a Boston newspaper, I think this is a reliable piece of evidence that can help me figure out why colonists were upset about the Stamp Act. This is called **sourcing a document**.*

*Next I want to contextualize the document. We've actually already done some of this! When we contextualize a document, we want to ask when and where the document was created. We already know this: October 7, 1765, Boston. We also want to ask how the circumstances in which the document was created might have affected its content. I know the Stamp Act was passed by Parliament on May 22, 1765 and was supposed to go into effect on November 1, 1765. I also know there had already been protests in the streets against the act and that in October a group of colonial delegates were having a the Stamp Act Congress to make a formal petitions against the act to Parliament and the king. These questions make up the skill of **contextualization**.*

*Now I'm going to read through the document and see if I can learn more about what was going on at the time, according to B.W. This will further help me **contextualize** the document.*

I see here B.W. calls Britain the "Land of Light" and America "the Land of Liberty"—this tells me that he or she is still proud to be a descendent of England. But B.W. also feels like America is truly the land of liberty. I wonder if this means that it was sort of hard for the colonists to decide to fight against the British. They probably felt that they themselves were British in a lot of ways.

Now I see here that B.W. urges the readers to speak to their representatives. That's confusing to me. I thought the colonists were upset about "no taxation without representation"—so I'm surprised that they have representation. Maybe this means that they have some sort of representation but not as much as they would like. I need to investigate this more.

I also see here that B.W. says "enemies of truth and liberty"—this tells me that he or she really believes that the British were violating American rights by passing the Stamp Act.

According to this document, I would say that colonists were upset about the Stamp Act because they thought that England was violating their rights.

3. Hand out Document B and project the electronic copy (or put the transparency on the overhead). Explain that students will now help you read for sourcing and contextualization.

Ask students the following questions and model for them how to mark up the document:

Sourcing Questions: Direct students to read background information and sourcing information first.

Who wrote this? What do we know about him?

- We know Will Alfred wrote this, but we don't have further information about him. We can say with some confidence that he was British, since this appeared in a London newspaper and is directed to a British government official.

What newspaper does this come from?

- This is tricky because it's from a London newspaper, but it was reprinted in the *Boston-Gazette*.

What would you predict the author's perspective will be on the Stamp Act?

- Based on the fact that the letter was first written in a London paper, students should predict that it would support the Stamp Act; however, that begs the question of why the *Boston-Gazette* would reprint a letter from a London paper—perhaps to show its readers what the British were saying about them? Or maybe this is an article sympathetic to the protesting colonists?

When was it written? Was it before or after the Stamp Act went into effect?

- It says that it was published in the *Boston-Gazette* in January 1766, so that would be after the Stamp Act went into effect, but we don't know when it was originally written in the London paper.

Is it reliable? Why? Why not?

- It would be helpful to know more about Will Alfred and to have information on what newspaper the article originally appeared in, but since it's a public letter to a government official that was run in two newspapers, it's probably a reliable piece of evidence that can help us answer figure out why colonists were upset about the Stamp Act.

Context Questions: *Through sourcing, we've already done some important contextualization. We have an idea of when and where this was written. We also know the political climate in which it was written. Let's read the document to learn more about what was going on at the time and answer the following questions:*

What happened in Boston according to this article?

Why was the author surprised?

Who reads the newspapers, according to the author?

According to this document, why were colonists upset about the Stamp Act?

4. Hand out Document C and have students answer questions individually.

5. Discussion:

*After historians have read multiple documents on a subject, they **corroborate** them, or cross-check. They ask: Do the documents agree? Do they tell the same or different stories? Which is more believable?*

*Let's **corroborate** these three documents. According to all three documents:*

- *Why were colonists upset about the Stamp Act?*
- *Was the Stamp Act an unreasonable and unfair tax?*
- *Were the British violating colonists' rights?*
- *How were the colonists behaving in response to the Stamp Act?*
- *Some historians have argued that the American Revolution happened because a few rich leaders riled up all the poor people. Do these documents provide evidence for argument? Is that evidence believable?*

Citations

Document A

B.W. "To the Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay," *Boston Gazette*, October 7, 1765. Retrieved from <http://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/1/sequence/221>.

Document B

Alfred, W. "To Mr. Secretary Conway," *Boston-Gazette Supplement*, January 27, 1766. Retrieved from <http://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/1/sequence/335>.

Document C

Hughes, J. Letter of the Stamp Tax Collector in Philadelphia to London, January 13, 1766. Retrieved from http://facstaff.columbusstate.edu/gardiner_richard/hughes.htm.

Document A: B.W.'s Public Letter (Modified)

This public letter appeared on the front page of The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal, a colonial newspaper, on October 7, 1765. The author's name was printed as "B.W."

To the Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay

My Dear Countrymen,

It is a standing **maxim** of English Liberty "That no man shall be taxed but with his own consent," and you very well know we were not, in any **sober** sense, represented in parliament, when this tax was imposed.

AWAKE! Awake, my Countrymen and defeat those who want to enslave us. Do not be cowards. You were born in Britain, the Land of Light, and you were raised in America, the Land of Liberty. It is your duty to fight this tax. Future generations will bless your efforts and honor the memory of the saviors of their country.

I urge you to tell your representatives that you do not support this terrible and burdensome law. Let them know what you think. They should act as guardians of the liberty of their country.

I look forward to congratulating you on delivering us from the enemies of truth and liberty.

Source: *B.W. "To the Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay," The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal, October 7, 1765.*

Vocabulary

maxim: a statement expressing a general truth

sober: serious

Document B: From a London Newspaper (Modified)

Will Alfred wrote this public letter to Secretary Henry Seymour Conway. Conway was one of two of Britain's Secretaries of State and was responsible for relations with the American colonies. The letter was first published in a London newspaper and then was published in the Boston Gazette Supplement on January 27, 1766, nearly three months after the Stamp Act went into effect.

From a late London paper.

To Mr. Secretary Conway:

The riotous behavior of the people in Boston is remarkable. I would have been less surprised by their behavior if we had taxed their beer, because everyone drinks beer. But the Stamp Act is a tax on none of the necessities of life. It does not affect the poor. And even a poor person can afford this little amount of money. The tax on newspapers only affects the rich—common people do not purchase newspapers. Isn't it surprising, then, that the mob in Boston has begun to riot against this tax even before it has officially gone into effect? I was expressing my wonder at this, when I was informed, that it was not the burden of the tax to be raised, but the *manner in which it was imposed*, that created the discontent: If this is so, the matter is more serious than it may first appear. . . .

The colonists are our brethren and fellow-subjects. . . . We should ask therefore whether we have behaved to them as brethren. . . . The first birth right privilege of a Briton is, that he cannot be legally tried but by his peers. One of the next is, that he cannot be taxed but by a parliament in which he is represented. . . . Do these who impose taxes on the colonists pay also themselves a share of these taxes? If this is not the case, what have the colonists done that they are to be stripped of one of the most valuable privileges of Britons? Have the parliament of Great Britain a right to take from any, the lowest of the subjects, the smallest privilege, which he inherits by birth-right, unless forfeited by law?

Source: *Will Alfred, "To Mr. Secretary Conway," Boston Gazette Supplement, January 27, 1766.*

Document C: A Stamp Act Collector's Letter (Modified)

John Hughes, a stamp tax collector in Philadelphia, wrote this letter to his bosses in London.

My Lords,

The colonists have been insulting His Majesty, saying that the Stamp Act was unconstitutional, and oppressive.

It is apparent to many people here that the **Presbyterians** are at the head of these riots. They are opposed to Kings and some cry out—'No King but King Jesus.' The leaders fill every newspaper with **inflammatory** pieces, so that the minds of the common people are kept in a continual **ferment**. . . . No one dares write anything that would calm the people down. Doing so would put the writer's life and fortune in danger.

I am convinced the Presbyterians intend nothing less than the throwing off their **allegiance** and obedience to his Majesty, and forming a Republican Empire, in America, and being Lords and Masters themselves.

I am daily threatened by verbal messages and anonymous letters, with a mob of several thousand people, from the Jerseys, New York, and New England.

I conclude with praying, that the Almighty may secure the **allegiance** of America to the Crown of Britain, by destroying the seeds of rebellion, and by punishing the ringleaders of these riots.

Source: *John Hughes, written in Philadelphia, January 13, 1766.*

Vocabulary:

Presbyterians: a religion that gained popularity during the Great Awakening

inflammatory: causing angry or violent feelings

ferment: agitation or excitement, typically leading to violence

allegiance: loyalty

Guiding Questions:

Name _____

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote this, and what is his job? Does he side with England or with the colonists? How do you know?
2. (Contextualization) Based on his account, what's going on in America in 1766? How has the Stamp Act affected him personally? Provide evidence from the document to support your answer.
3. Do you believe his account? Give one reason why you would trust his account and one reason why you might not trust his account.
4. (Corroboration) How does the account in this document compare to the accounts in Documents A and B? Do you think most colonists were upset about the Stamp Act, or do you think a few leaders riled up everyone?