



National showcase for student journalism

*American Academy of Arts & Sciences
will showcase outstanding student journalism
about the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence*

This year, for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, **the American Academy of Arts & Sciences will recognize and showcase outstanding student and local journalism projects** that engage local communities in discussing that document's key ideas and relevance today. We invite you to adapt and assign this module to your students and to submit the results to our showcase. The selected students' pieces will be **displayed as part of a lasting national collection of timely civic journalism narratives**, alongside the work of community, local, and regional news outlets.

A smaller group of journalism students and local reporters whose work is showcased will be invited to a national convening, all expenses paid, with nationally recognized journalists (including Kimberly Atkins Stohr, James Fallows, and Deborah Fallows), historians, and other civic experts.

We have outlined this assignment module for your convenience, and have no intention of intruding on academic freedom or prescribing particular points of view. Should this module interest you, please feel free to adapt it in any way that works for your college or university, your course or for any student newsrooms that you might advise. For instance, it could be a spring break assignment, with students traveling to spend time with a community they have identified.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions at ourcommonpurpose@amacad.org. Please put "student journalism project" in the subject line.

Introduction

This is a four-week reporting assignment module suitable for advanced reporting, feature-writing, audio or visual journalism or community journalism classes. Students are asked to work in small teams to cover community responses to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

If students' assignments meet the requirements laid out below, students may submit their completed projects to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences to be considered for a) showcasing on a permanent, national Academy website about 250th anniversary stories and b) an invitation to discuss their work at a formal convening with community and local reporters as well as outstanding journalists, historians, and experts on civic life.

I. Project.

For this year's 250th anniversary of the [Declaration of Independence](#), The American Academy of Arts & Sciences is [encouraging local civic conversations](#) about freedom, equality, democracy, disagreement, collaboration, history, and the meaning of being American. Such civic events are already planned in many parts of the country: in state, local, and community historical commissions, societies, and museums; in libraries and schools; in city halls and town squares.

Good journalism engages communities in conversations like these about self-government, about disagreements, about our shared and different identities, about large and small decisions that narrate our history and decide our future: monuments, school curriculums, public buildings, community celebrations, and more. The Academy seeks stories that reflect this ambition.

II. Assignment

As part of a team of at least two journalism students, report a feature story exploring a local civic project or community discussion of the Declaration of Independence's key topics and questions. Your project should appear on the platform and in the medium of your choice. We seek projects that **explore differences and collaboration about how civic life should unfold**.

Follow basic journalism principles in your reporting, including accuracy, openness, diversity of sources, clarity, and lively storytelling. Avoid reducing the story into two opposing sides; focus on community members' efforts to find common ground. The goal is to explore varying views as people work to move forward. For visual, audio, or audiovisual journalism, follow the highest production standards in your course.

Possible projects: Note that this list is intended to be suggestive, not exhaustive. Your team should spend time working to uncover a compelling story before diving into the reporting. These are options, not prescriptions.

- **Cover your community's 250th event.** You may wish to explore how those involved work together; how community members participate in and reflect on the Declaration's principles or the history of the community; or some other approach.
- **Interview key members of a community** about how they see the Declaration of Independence's principles at work in that community. What ideas do they have in common? What differences do you find? How does that influence the way they work together?
- **Report on civic democracy in action.** This might be a university controversy over a planned public speaker, a town's disagreement over the placement of a local monument or religious building, a neighborhood group cleaning up a vacant lot to start a community

garden and who have some differences. How are they tackling the conflict? How does this exemplify ideas about life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and self-government in action?

- **Tell a story of competing historical narratives.** How do different parts of the community tell the history of, say, a historic log cabin, an annual fireworks display, a dilapidated house of worship, a well-known barbecue joint, a hiking trail, a football field?
- **Convene a community discussion of the Declaration of Independence's principles** at a local library or other appropriate venue. Report on what emerges from this community engagement project. Ask key questions about liberty, equality, self-government, and freedom. Report on the common themes, surprises, disagreements, conflicts, and civic willingness (or lack thereof) that you find.

Schedule

Week 1:

Decide what community you will report on.

- **Define the community** as you wish, by geography, interests (birding, gaming, stock car racing, salsa dancing), ethnic heritage, religious identity, native language, occupation, or in some other way. *Any group is acceptable so long as those involved perceive themselves as belonging to a meaningfully connected community.*
- **Seek a community with an interesting story.** To find an interesting story, consider talking with sources at a town hall, library, school, sports league, historical society, farmers' cooperative, veterans' organization, community nonprofit, religious group, community theater or arts project. Maybe a local band and its fans have lost their usual performance space and are trying to find another. Or the kids who hang out at a nearby basketball court are trying to help a friend who was evicted. Or your grandma's weekly card game or quilting group disagrees about a town rezoning plan.
 - **Make phone calls or talk to people in person.** Emailing or texting will be less likely to yield good stories.
- **Look for a mix of conflict and collaboration** over key civic principles, personalities, or purposes. How do those involved handle disagreement and decision making?
- **Research** the background of this story: check government records, minutes of meetings, or otherwise examine the facts about whatever might be under discussion.

Week 2:

Select your main subjects.

- **Observe** these people within their community.
 - Find a few significant characters who seem influential in this community and who see things from different perspectives. Take notes on what kinds of characters they are so you can evoke them if you feature them.
 - Take good "atmospheric" notes (whether that's in writing, B-roll, background audio or scene-setting photos) that will enable you to give a feeling of their gathering. Use these to help the audience sense what it's like to be with them.
- **Interview** at least five people at the center and at the peripheries of the community you've selected.

- What are the differences in how they see the community and the disagreements at hand? How does the community tackle those differences?
- Ask open-ended questions and listen closely to the answers so you can ask informed follow-up questions.
- Explore differences of opinion in the definition of the community and of the community project.
- **Check the facts.** Cover all the elements of a good news story in your feature: who, what, where, when, how, and why. If someone makes a factual claim, check it against a reliable source. Double check for accuracy any dates, places, names, history, regulations, and quotes.
- **Examine how they enact or grapple with** the Declaration's principles:
 - each individual's right to life, equality, liberty, and freedom;
 - belief in a community taking shared action based on the consent of the governed;
 - organizing a community based on the group's own ideas of safety and happiness;
 - pledging to work together.

Week 3:

Submit a first version to your professor or advisor. Discuss this in class. Revise.

Week 4:

Final project due.

Assignment rubric:

- Interview at least five people.
- Include a scene that you have observed of people discussing their different ideas
- Provide context: briefly describe the community you're covering, its history and any current programs, conflicts, etc.
- Include an appropriate number of direct quotations or soundbites.
- Attach a summary of each member's contributions to the reporting and production of the finished work.
- [We invite photography, audio, and audiovisual journalism professors to add their course's production requirements here.]

Suggested grading rubric for written stories:

Grades will be assessed as follows.

(90 to 100 percent): The story has virtually no style, spelling, grammar or punctuation errors and is ready to be published or posted by a professional news outlet with very little editing. The lead is strong, the point of the story is clear and it is well organized. It contains all the important elements, leaving out information that is off point or redundant.

(80 to 89 percent): The story has a few style, spelling, grammar and/or punctuation errors but with minor editing is ready to be published or posted by a professional news outlet. The lead is acceptable, main points are explained and the story is well organized. The writing, video, audio, or photos may need to be improved and some word or visual choices may need to be clearer.

(70 to 79 percent): The story has some style, spelling, grammar and/or punctuation errors but with some editing can be published by a professional news outlet. The lead may be buried, main points may not be clearly articulated, and the story may have left out one or two important facts or included information not germane.

(60 to 69 percent): The story has multiple style, spelling, grammar and/or punctuation errors. It does not have a clear lead, main points may be missing and the story is poorly organized and written. Key points may be missing, requiring more interviews/calls. The story would have to be substantially reworked to be published.

(<60 percent): The story is inaccurate, late or libelous, or it is of such poor quality that another journalist would be required to re-report and write the piece in order for it to be published.

III. Teaching resources

Declaration of Independence:

- [Full text of the document.](#)
- For our purposes, the Declaration includes these key ideas:
 - a. All human beings have natural rights to **life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness**.
 - *What do these mean to different people in the community you're covering?*
 - b. The **governed choose the form of government** they believe will guarantee their own **safety and happiness**
 - *How does the community agree or disagree on what these things mean? How do they govern their joint project?*
 - c. Changing one's government requires good cause, including a **list of grievances**
 - *What grievances is your community tackling together?*
 - d. Those who will govern together **pledge to work honorably with one another**.
 - *What does working together across differences look like in your story?*

General resources:

Poynter, [12 basics of interviewing, listening, and notetaking](#)

Poynter, [10 tips for using audio more effectively in multimedia stories](#)

Poynter, [50 timeless lessons of good journalism](#)

The Guardian, [Tips for feature writing](#)

[Balance and false balance](#) in reporting

How to do a [video interview](#)

How to do an [audio interview](#)

NBCU Academy, [How to do research](#)

- Note that this video refers to an outdated version of Twitter. Use whatever form of social media is best for the community you are covering: Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, whatever it may be.
- Do not trust AI summaries or Wikipedia. Use primary sources for any research.

Note that further resources are below.

IV. Submitting to the Academy

Please submit *only* projects that have received an A, or have been revised to meet the standards for an A. **The Academy committee will be looking for** compelling and accurate stories about civic life, told in a lively manner, based on the principles outlined above.

Academy deadline: May 15. Please submit your project to ourcommonpurpose@amacad.org.

Include:

- A cover letter that includes your name(s), your project's title, category (video, audio, photo, or written), release/publishing date and outlet (if any), and the hosting url, if it is online. In this cover letter, in 300 words or less, tell us:
 - what community you covered
 - what aspect of the Declaration their efforts embodied
 - what you believe your project achieved
 - what reaction your project may have received after it appeared
- A featured photo that captures a sense of the project. This illustrative photo would go with the story on a website if it is selected.
- The project (or a link to it) in its original form.
- Any corrections that were required
- Any letters to the editor or audio or video comments that your outlet may have received

Categories include:

- **Video** (single episode or series) of between four and 10 minutes, total. Short videos (TikTok- or Instagram reel-length) are acceptable if they are included in a series featuring small moments or interviews.
- **Audio only** (single episode or podcast or radio series) of between four and 10 minutes long, total.
- **Photo essay** (including captions, information, any necessary permissions, and a short explanatory essay of up to 350 words) of between 3 and ten photos.
- **Writing** (print or online, single essay or series) of between 800 and 2000 words.

Further resources:

These resources are designed for institutions that intend to host discussion events, but they may suggest a direction in which you wish to ask questions.

- [Our Nation's Story](#). You may wish to reflect the principles in the American Academy of Arts & Sciences' 250th project in your interviewing.
- Oregon Humanities' "Beyond 250" discussion [guide](#). These are questions intended to spark intriguing conversations. See pages 9-12 for sample questions on equality, freedom, the next 250 years, etc. Consider adapting them for your use.
- The American Association for State & Local History's [field guide](#). This is for a museum, but you may wish to adapt some of their questions in each theme's section.

Suggested questions about **equality**

- What is a word or phrase that comes to you when you hear "equality"?
- What is equality?
- What does the ideal of equality stand for?
- Why does it matter?
- How does our country live up to and fall short of the ideal of equality?
- What do we hope for as the country moves forward?
- Over the past few weeks, what is one way our beliefs or practices related to equality have show up in your life? What are ways where you've felt the opposite?
- What does equality mean, 250 years after that phrase "all men are created equal" was written? What should it mean, for you and your community?
- What's one way you've benefited from the expectation that all men (people) are created equal? One way you've felt reality come up short against this truth?
- What's your sense of how understandings of equality have changed over the past couple hundred years—and how do you hope understandings will continue to change?
- What's good about the claim that it is self-evidently true that all men are created equal?
- Would this be one of the first "truths" you would name, if asked?
- Why has "equality" largely gotten a bad name, or been replaced (e.g. by "equity")?

Suggested questions about **monuments & memories**

- Why do we build monuments?
- What stories do monuments tell? Whose stories are not told in our current monuments?
- What is important to memorialize?
- How do monuments and memorials teach history? What is needed to teach history?
- How is a monument different from a memorial?
- What would be a reason to remove a monument?
- Who should be involved in deciding what monuments are created and where they are placed?
- What is the significance of monuments existing in public spaces?
- How do we know if/what we should add context or update monuments and memorials to reflect new understandings?
- How can we transition from old ideals to new ones?

Suggested questions about **liberty & freedom**

- What does “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” mean to you?
- What limits should there be to personal freedoms?
- Who does not have the same access to freedom and liberty as you do?
- How does your idea of freedom fit with the idea of having rules?
- What is freedom worth?
- Whose freedoms and liberties are centered?
- Who has had access to the promises in the Declaration of Independence?
- What is needed to continue to have our liberties and freedoms?

Suggested questions about **the next 250 years**

- What are your hopes for the next 250 years?
- What feels “met” as you think about the hopes in the declaration of independence? What feels “missing”?
- What places or space should be preserved?
- What do you envision as the “future” for your community?
- How might America’s role globally evolve over the next 250 years?
- How could governance structures adapt to meet the needs of a changing society?

Suggested writing, discussion, or activity prompts

- What is the community you want to live in?
- How do you practice independence in your life? How do you practice interdependence? What do these words bring up for you?
- If we were to update the Declaration of Independence, what parts or words would you change? What would you add? Take out?
- If a “declaration of interdependence” were to be written, what would you want to be written in that document?