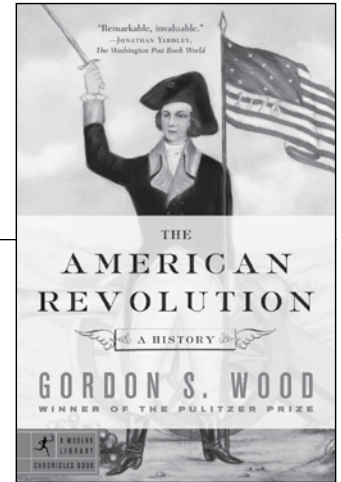




The American Revolution

A History

by Gordon S. Wood



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Also available as an E-Book

Reading Level: 12

“An elegant, concise and lucid summary of the Revolution’s origins, the war itself, and the social and political changes wrought by the struggle for American independence.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

“This slim book tells a big story: one that invites the reader to contemplate the relationships between liberty, power, rights and the unpredictable outcomes of human action.” —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

about the book

When Abraham Lincoln sought to define the significance of the United States, he naturally looked back to the American Revolution. He knew that the Revolution not only had legally created the United States, but also had produced all of the great hopes and values of the American people. Our noblest ideals and aspirations—our commitments to freedom, constitutionalism, the well-being of ordinary people, and equality—came out of the Revolutionary era. Lincoln saw as well that the Revolution had convinced Americans that they were a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty. The Revolution, in short, gave birth to whatever sense of nationhood and national purpose Americans have had.

No doubt the story is a dramatic one: Thirteen insignificant colonies three thousand miles from the centers of Western civilization fought off British rule to become, in fewer than three decades, a huge, sprawling, rambunctious republic of nearly four million citizens. But the history of the American Revolution, like the history of the nation as a whole, ought not to be viewed simply as a story of right and wrong from which moral lessons are to be drawn. It is a complicated and at times ironic story that needs to be explained and understood, not blindly celebrated or condemned. How did this great revolution come about? What was its character? What were its consequences? These are the questions this short history seeks to answer. That it succeeds in such a profound and enthralling way is a tribute to Gordon Wood’s mastery of his subject and of the historian’s craft.

about the author

GORDON S. WOOD is the Alva O. Way University Professor and professor of history emeritus at Brown University. His 1969 book, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, received the Bancroft and John H. Dunning prizes and was nominated for the National Book Award. Wood’s 1992 book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, won the Pulitzer Prize and the Emerson Prize. His 2009 book, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, won the New-York Historical Society American History Book Prize. In 2011, Wood was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Obama. He contributes regularly to the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books*.

note to the teacher

Gordon S. Wood is an experienced historian and talented storyteller, with a passion for the American Revolution that is evident in all his books; *The American Revolution: A History* is no exception. This book is an instrumental tool for examining this time period. His account of the war is both based in solid research and a highly engaging read without being dry. It addresses the themes of identity, the desire for change, and the persisting effects of individual actions. Wood attempts whenever possible to link the book's historical accounts to the ongoing struggles experienced in contemporary society, and in this way he ensures that students in the classroom will be able to connect with the text and apply its lessons to their own lives. In *The American Revolution: A History*, he approaches the daunting question of how much control the government should have over its subjects by examining the deleterious effects of Parliament's decisions during their governance of the colonies. He also addresses the dangers of divided leadership, as seen in the distrustful, harrowed relationship between King George III and the British Government. In this way, the American Revolution is set up almost as a parable, warning future leaders of repeating the mistakes made during this volatile time in America's history and reminding citizens of the need to take responsibility for their own government.

Throughout *The American Revolution: A History*, Wood strives to offer readers an unbiased accounting of the Revolutionary War. He occasionally voices his own speculations about the war's causes, events, and prominent figures, but always makes explicit in the text when he is sharing opinions instead of facts. Gordon's careful handling of the book's material and his strict adherence to fact make this work equally useful for writing classes. *The American Revolution: A History* is a puissant example of the intricate art of writing engaging narrative nonfiction.

The American Revolution: A History is an appropriate choice for 11th and 12th grade students and can be easily used in either a Language Arts or Social Studies class. It supports the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading Informational Texts for high school curricula. It also can be used to fulfill some standards in Writing and Literacy or History/Social Studies for Grades 11 and 12. At the postsecondary level, this book can be used in American Literature, Early American History, and general Literature and Composition classes. In a post-secondary environment, it is best reserved for first- or second-year classes.

In the following "Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards" section of this guide, activities and writing prompts that encourage critical analysis of *The American Revolution: A History* have been provided for use in the classroom. They are organized based on the Common Core Standards they support. These classroom activities and prompts are designed to encourage students' thoughtful analysis and interaction with the text.

For a complete listing of Common Core State Standards, go to: www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards.

pre-reading activities

The American Revolution: A History includes information addressing many disparate aspects of the war, offering a comprehensive examination of the conflict. Before beginning an in-class analysis of the text, teachers will want to determine which areas of the book will require more attention in the classroom. As a pre-reading exercise, students should generate a list of the various facts they already know about the Revolutionary War in class. When introducing this activity, remind students that it is perfectly acceptable if some of the things they share are misconceptions: as they study the book in class, they will have the opportunity to correct or build upon their knowledge of the Revolution. Later, the class can return to the activity and compare what they originally knew to the new knowledge they have acquired. This activity will help them keep track of their progress as well as give the teacher a baseline to start with when discussing the book. It will also reveal which areas they will need to dedicate more time to in the classroom.

Since the book addresses the differences between the political systems in place during the Revolution and America's current political systems, the class should take time to examine how America's current government works, both in theory and in practice. After an overview of America's current political environment, the students should break into groups for a small group discussion, where the students will draw comparisons between the current political situation in

America and the political factors that led the colonists to rebel. How does the tension between America's political parties compare with the tension between the Tories and Whigs leading up to the Revolution? How did party rivalries influence daily life during the 1700s, and how does political division influence daily life today? Is competition a necessary part of government? What are some instances in America's history where party differences were more harmful than helpful? Once the small groups have finished their discussions, they should each share two observations or connections they have made with the rest of the class.

The first two chapters of the book may be confusing to some students, since they primarily address the trade agreements and political decisions that increased the tension between America and England. To help students gain a better understanding of the overall timeline leading up to the war and the various factors that caused the conflict, watch the following Crash Course video summarizing the events that led up to the Revolutionary War: tiny.cc/preluderev. (Note: The video contains one instance of adult language. To avoid it, begin the video at 1:37.)

Because this book touches on the topic of slavery in the United States, teachers should be aware that reading this book may provoke conversations about the topics of racism and America's relationship to slavery. For this reason, teachers should preface the book with a discussion of the political, economic, and social environment during the war, looking at both its strengths and weaknesses. This way, students will be able to discuss Wood's perspective on the issue as a class and share their ideas regarding America's decision to reclaim freed slaves in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

— examining content using common core state standards

— ELA standards: reading informational text: grades 11 & 12

— key ideas and details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

The Desire for Change: In his book, Wood sets up change as an ungainly, often violent process, but one that is often necessary. He argues that, considering the number of factors that caused the Revolutionary War, war with England was inevitable. Based on the arguments presented by Wood, what historical factors necessitated war with England? According to the book, what price did the colonists pay in order to change their nation? Is there evidence to support the idea that America's gains after the war outweighed the cost they paid for independence?

— classroom activity

In chapters one through three of *The American Revolution: A History*, Wood describes the various factors that led up to the American Revolution. This classroom activity will help the students understand these influential aspects of America's culture, history, and governance while also imparting them with experience drawing conclusions from a written text.

Have the students form groups of three to four. Each group will choose one of the factors that, according to Wood, led up to the Revolutionary War. These factors can include but are not limited to: taxation; unfair representation; trade expansion; population growth; the Stamp Act; the French and Indian War; cultural differences; religious beliefs; and political leanings. Utilizing the book as well as other resources and working as a team, the groups will each design a leaflet that describes their chosen factor and argues why their factor was the leading cause of the American Revolution. Once their leaflets are complete, the groups will present their arguments to the rest of the class.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

National Identity: In Chapter One, Wood argues that the American Revolution was in part prompted by Americans' changing perspective on their national identity, separate from British culture and politics. Prior to 1760, Americans had felt ashamed of their culture to some degree, which seemed primitive and backwards in comparison to Western Europe. However, during the next two decades, their national identity shifted. How did America's national identity evolve prior to the onset of the war, during the course of the war, as well as in its aftermath? How did this change in identity influence their decisions in Congress and on the battlefield?

Fate vs. Choice: In his book, Wood depicts the events leading up to the American Revolution like a row of dominoes waiting to fall. Each event leads directly into the next, setting up a distinct chain of cause and effect that can be traced back through history. How do Wood's allusions to fate impact his presentation of the Revolution?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

→ classroom activity

Throughout *The American Revolution: A History*, Wood compares and contrasts the different colonies' experiences in the Revolutionary War in order to demonstrate that the war was a complicated affair that affected the colonies in diverse ways. In order to help the students understand this idea and form a more detailed picture of how the war influenced different colonies, assign them the following project.

Pair students up and have them draw names of the different colonies. Using Wood's book and other academic sources on the American Revolution, they will research what the revolution looked like in their assigned colony. Then, acting in the persona of representatives of their colony, they will present their accounts of the war to the classroom, explaining their experiences during the war and how it affected their colony, just as colonists presented their perspectives before Congress after the conclusion of hostilities. They should attempt to convince the class that their colony suffered the worst during the war and therefore deserves increased attention from Congress. At the end of the presentations, the students will vote on which colony was most affected by the war and most deserves aid from Congress.

→ craft and structure

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

When presenting historical accounts, most authors arrange their accounts chronologically. Others structure their stories thematically, focusing on one specific subject or element at a time. In *The American Revolution*, Wood structures his book using a combined approach. He follows the war's general timeline, but shifts chronologically when dealing with specific subjects or themes such as Parliament's decisions regarding the colonies or America's desire for a new national identity separate from their parent country.

Once the students complete the book, they will construct a brief argumentative essay contending whether, in their opinion, Wood's choice to use a hybrid chronological and thematic structure was the most effective way to portray the war. Would his book have been more accessible to readers if he had used a purely chronological approach, like most history authors? What are the benefits and drawbacks of Wood's chosen structure?

This argumentative essay should evaluate Wood's authorial decisions regarding the book's structure and its effects on the overall efficacy of his writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

classroom activity

Before, during, or after the students' study of *The American Revolution*, they will read a fictional work set during the American Revolution. After completing both works, they will compare Wood's nonfictional representation of the American Revolution with another author's fictional representation. (A few examples of historical fiction based on the American Revolution are *Oliver Wiswell*; *Rise to Rebellion*; *April Morning*; and *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Vol. 2: The Kingdom on the Waves*. Since fictional representations of the war are written at myriad academic levels, the teacher will want to specify in class whether the students can choose any representation or whether they must reserve their selections to those written for their current grade level.)

Using a short essay or PowerPoint, they will then describe the similarities and differences of the authors' approaches, and argue what each author's writing choices reveals about his or her perspective on the Revolutionary War. In class, the students can discuss the drawbacks of fictional accounts, the limits of nonfiction writing, and different ways writers can actively engage their readers while remaining true to history.

If desired, the class can also examine film representations of the war such as the television series *Turn* or the movies *1776* or *The Patriot*. If you decide to evaluate film adaptations of the war in class, keep in mind that many adaptations include graphic content. Make sure the students and their parents/guardians are amenable to you showing graphic content in the classroom. Pairing Wood's novel with fictional depictions of the Revolutionary War, either in books or in films, will give students a better understanding of how different writers represent the same set of events based on their discrepant points of view, motivations, and decisions to favor historical facts or speculation.

research to present and build knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

Throughout *The American Revolution*, Wood highlights the distinct characteristics of the American Revolution and compares it with both past and future revolutions. In chapter three, he writes that "Those Americans who looked back at what they had been through could only marvel at the moderation and rationality of their Revolution. It was, said Edmund Randolph of Virginia, a revolution 'without immediate oppression, without a cause depending so much on hasty feeling as theoretic reasoning.'" He argues that the inciting events, political causes, and unique methods of the American Revolution set it apart from other struggles for independence. To better understand how the American Revolution compares with other historic revolutions, have students conduct a research project where they will analyze another famous revolution and compare it with the American Revolution.

While completing this research project, their main focus should be on the revolutions' motivations, tactics, and final results. A few revolutions they could research include the French, Iranian, Cuban, or Russian Revolutions, or the Scottish War for Independence. As they research both revolutions, they should use at least four authoritative digital sources and three print sources. They will then present their research to the class in the form of a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation.

This project will help students hone their investigative skills and encourage them to look at other cultures that have undergone significant political upheavals. It will also help them appreciate the radical nature of the American Revolution and its influence on subsequent revolutions.

resources

- “Taxes & Smuggling - Prelude to Revolution: Crash Course US History #6” (tiny.cc/taxtimeline)
This video sums up the events that led up to the American Revolution.
- “Revolutionary War Timeline” (tiny.cc/warhistory)
This website offers a timeline detailing the different contributing factors to the Revolutionary War.
- “The Effects of the American Revolutionary War on Britain” (tiny.cc/wareffects)
This article by Robert Wilde describes the financial, political, and imperial effects of the Revolutionary War on Britain.
- “Tea, Taxes, and The American Revolution: Crash Course World History #28” (tiny.cc/teatax)
This Crash Course video describes the primary factors that caused the American Revolution.
- “Slavery, the American Revolution, and the Constitution” (tiny.cc/slaveryrev)
This website offers more in-depth information about slavery during the Revolutionary War.

other works of interest

- The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government*, Fergus M. Bordewich
- The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities*, Colin G. Calloway
- “American Liberty,” Philip Freneau
- 1776, David McCullough
- The Spirit of '74: How the American Revolution Began*, Ray Raphael and Marie Raphael
- Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, Alexander Rose
- Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution Through the Eyes of Those That Fought and Lived It*, George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin
- “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” Phillis Wheatley

about this guide's writers

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