

Reader's Theater: Big Ideas Conference

Parts	Thucydides (Thu-sid-uh-dees)	English citizen
Student 1	John Locke	English Lord or Lady
Student 2	King James	Thomas Jefferson

Setting: The readers are all seated at a conference table in a time machine. Two students are interviewing famous thinkers who have come from various time periods to discuss human rights. There is no need for costumes, props or sets, however, it is a good idea to provide name tags for the participants so everyone can have a clear picture of the sources of the ideas being presented.

Student 1: Through the magic of a time machine we are able to bring together in modern times a group of people who helped shape our famous American sentence from the Declaration of Independence.

Student 2: Let's all say that sentence together.

All: 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.

Thomas Jefferson: That really is a great sentence isn't it?

Student 1: I bet everyone thought you were pretty great when you wrote that.

Thomas Jefferson: Well, many people did like the Declaration of Independence. It established The United States of America as a new country and gave it a place on the world stage. But this particular sentence was something every American already knew and believed.

Student 1: So you didn't think this sentence up all by yourself?

Thomas Jefferson: No I did not. I was not trying to say anything new. I was just trying to express the American mind.. I wrote the words, but many Americans in 1776 were thinking these ideas before they ever read the Declaration of Independence.

Student 1: So where did these great ideas come from?

Thomas Jefferson: Well, some of the people are here at this table.

Student 2: So let's see who else the time machine has brought here today. Thucydides. Tell us about yourself.

Thucydides: I am Thucydides, a Greek historian. The history books I wrote are still around today. Have you read my books Mr. Jefferson?

Thomas Jefferson: Yes I have read every one of your works that I could.

Thucydides: I made a famous speech at the funeral of an important government leader in 429 BC: Would you like to hear what I said?

Everyone: Yes

Thucydides: "Our government favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy.

If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all.”

Student 2: Okay, can you say more about that?

Thucydides: Democracy means rule by the people. That means we care about everyone. There are not a few people who are important. We care about the rights of all.

Thomas Jefferson: That is a very important idea in America. Equal justice for all means the law treats everyone the same. No one has more rights than others.

English Lord or Lady: Well that's not how we looked at it in Europe. We always have had some people that were better than others. For example, me. I am an English Lord (or Lady). I really **am** better than everybody else. I was born that way.

Student 1: How did that come to be?

English Lord or Lady: Well, the king and queen have always wanted special people around them to help them out. In turn, we get special favors from the king and queen.

Student 1: Sort of like “You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.” Sounds like a good deal.

English Lord or Lady: And we like feeling better than everybody else. It's fun to “Lord it over” regular people and peasants.

Student 1: OK. I think I understand what you are saying.

John Locke: Wait a minute! It's not OK at all. That just is not right!

English Lord or Lady: And who are you?

John Locke: I am John Locke. I come to your from 1690. I do not believe it is right for some people to think they are better than others.

Thucydides: So you have not forgotten my words.

John Locke: I have read about the Greeks and Romans and their ideas about democracy. Mr. Jefferson, have you read my books?

Thomas Jefferson: Oh yes, I have read your books and many others from people who thought like you did.

John Locke. Then you know I wrote the sentence, “All men are created equal” before you were even born.

Thomas Jefferson: Yes. I know you wrote that. I knew you would not mind if I borrowed your words. When you first wrote them many people got excited! People quoted you so many times, I think they forgot you said it first.

John Locke: I'm glad the idea caught on. I don't mind if people used my words. The idea is much

bigger than I am! Besides, you know I learned from the Greeks and Romans.

Student 2: What else did you write in your book?

John Locke: "Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."

Student 2: That sounds like "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

Thomas Jefferson: Americans in my day knew this idea very well. Other writings of my time included this statement. When I wrote the Declaration of Independence I had to include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

King James: Silence, you common people! Speak not again!

Student 1: And who do you think you are?

King James: I know who I am! And you had better know it too! I am His Royal Highness the Mighty and Magnificent King James of England.

Student 1: Oh, I've heard of you. Didn't you start Jamestown or something?

King James: Yes I gave the royal charter allowing the establishment of a colony in Virginia in 1607. But I never intended for people to have ideas like the ones you are speaking.

Student: What ideas do you have?

King James: I wrote something called "The Divine Right of Kings" in 1598. It says that God made me King and set me over you peasants.

Student 2: Well have you heard of the Declaration of Independence? It says the creator gave certain unalienable rights to all men.

King James: That is not what I wrote in my book.

John Locke: Well just because you said something doesn't make it right. And don't think everyone believed in it just because you said it.

King James: What ever I say goes. It does not matter what you believe or say. "Kings were the authors and makers of the laws, and not the laws of the kings."

Student 1: Uh, King. Aren't you being a bit of a bully?

King James: Silence, you peasant! The king is lord of the whole land and master of everyone who lives there. I have power over your life and death!

Student 2: Well, actually, you don't. No one believes that any more in America or in England.

King James: How can we have order in the land if the people don't obey and fear the King?

Student 1: We believe what the Greeks said, that the people rule, and that the law gives equal justice to all.

English Citizen: May I say something here? I am an English citizen. In 1689 we wrote the "Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subjects." Subjects means us – the common people. We knew our country was ruled by a king, but we also knew we had rights that the king could not over step.

John Locke: You wrote that about the same time I wrote that all men are created equal.

English Citizen: We declared that the king or queen does not have more power than the law. We said that the English people, “do claim, demand and insist upon ... their undoubted rights and liberties.”

King James: Well, what is the world coming to?

Student: It looks to me that the world is coming to an understanding that all people have rights that no one should take away. Mr. Jefferson called them unalienable rights.

Student 2: Governments do not give people rights. Rights are God given. People have rights because they are human. Not because someone gave rights to them.

Student 1: And governments exist to protect people's rights.

Thomas Jefferson: Exactly! That 's why we had to put that famous sentence into the Declaration of Independence! It had to be written down for all people to read and understand.

Student 2: So now that we know a little bit more about where the ideas come from, let's all say that famous sentence one more time together.

All: 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.

Thucydides: Well, I need the time machine to take me back to ancient Greece. There must be more history for me to write!

John Locke: I too wish to return to my time, although I must say I am very happy with how my ideas are still important to you modern folks.

English Lord or Lady: I can not wait to get back to my time in the Middle Ages. I can't stand all you people thinking you are as good as me!

King James: I too desire to return to my time. I know I am meant to be the supreme ruler. I find your ideas to be very upsetting.

English citizen: Well king, I have a feeling kings in the future will be more willing to share power with the people. I'm going back to my time to work on that idea.

Thomas Jefferson: I too must depart. But I am proud of you young people and how you still cherish the ideas that make our country great. We were the first modern country to have rule by the people. When we entered the world stage all other nations had kings.

Student 1: Good bye to you all. Thanks for coming here today to help us see how ideas come from many people and times.

Student 2: Yes, we are proud to be Americans and proud to continue helping people what it means that “All men are created equal.”