

## 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
- Transparency of Documents A and B
- Copies of Stamp Act Guiding Questions for Document C

### Plan of Instruction:

1. [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.]

*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 put 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 Explain that you're going to model how to read a historical document.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** at the bottom of the document. That means I want to think about who wrote it, when it was written, who is the audience, and what the author's purpose might have been.*

*I see here that (read sourcing info). So I see that this is written in October 1765, so that's before the tax went into effect. I also see that it's 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 will oppose the Act. I also see that it's a 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. This is called **sourcing a document**.*

*Now I'm going to read through the document and see if I can learn what was going on at the time? What were people thinking and doing? What did people believe? These questions make up the skill of **contextualization**.*

*I see here he calls Britain the "Land of Light" and America "the Land of Liberty"—this tells me that he is still proud to be a descendent of England. But he 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 he 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 he says "enemies of truth and liberty"—this tells me that he really believes that the British were violating American rights by passing the Stamp Act.*

*What I just did was called **contextualization**. I was reading to see if I could learn and understand how people in the past thought and acted.*

*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 put transparency on overhead projector. Explain that now students will help you read for sourcing and contextualization.

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

**Sourcing Questions:**

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?)*

Was this written 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).*

**Context Questions:**

What happened in Boston?

Why is 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 a few documents, they **corroborate** 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 colonists treated like slaves?
- 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?

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Citation:

*Boston Gazette*, October 7, 1765, in David A. Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events of the Period*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. <http://books.google.com/books?id=bm6kNpvnnhgC> (p. 196).

*Boston-Gazette Supplement*, January 27, 1766, in David A. Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events of the Period*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. <http://books.google.com/books?id=bm6kNpvnnhgC> (p. 203).

## Document A (Modified)

*Boston-Gazette, October 7, 1765*

My Dear Countrymen,

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: This letter appeared in the Boston-Gazette newspaper on October 7, 1765.*

## Document B (Modified)

Boston-Gazette Supplement, 27 January 1766  
From a late London Paper.

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?

*Source: This letter was written in a London newspaper and then published in the Boston Gazette Supplement two months after the Stamp Act went into effect.*

## Document C (Modified)

Philadelphia January 13th 1766.

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.

I am, My Lords, Your most Obedient & Most Humble Servant,

John Hughes

**Vocabulary:**

Presbyterians: A religion that gained popularity during the Great Awakening

Inflammatory: Arousing angry or violent feelings

Ferment: Agitation or excitement, typically leading to violence

Allegiance: loyalty

*Source: The letter above was written by John Hughes, Stamp Distributor in Philadelphia, to his bosses in London. His job was to collect the tax on stamps.*

**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 Stamp Act 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?