# Thomas Paine: *Common Sense*

What is your favorite book? What is it about the book that makes it your favorite? Perhaps it's a plotline that keeps you on the edge of your seat, or maybe it's the loveable or heroic characters you admire, or perhaps it's the enchanting setting that invites you to get lost in exploring a new world.

Now, remember the first time you finished reading your favorite book. What did you do? Did you talk with your friends and family about it and encourage them to read it, too?

Before smartphones, social media, and television, this is how written ideas would spread — through word of mouth. In the American colonies, people would pass around papers, pamphlets, and books and talk about them in their homes, churches, local restaurants, and shops. It may seem difficult to believe, but at this time in history — hundreds of years before the internet was invented — it was possible for writings to spread so widely and become so popular that they would be considered to have gone "viral."

In this lesson, we will learn about one of the first viral pamphlets in American history that led the colonists toward independence from Britain and helped to inspire the American Revolution. This 47-page pamphlet that helped to unite the colonies in the cause for liberty was called *Common Sense* and was written by a man named Thomas Paine.

Thomas Paine was born in 1737 in Thetford, England. His family had financial difficulties, so he left school when he was 13 years old to work as an apprentice in his father's corset shop. Thomas struggled in his career throughout his young adulthood. When he was 20 years old, he worked as a sailor on a privateer ship for a short period of time. He then attempted to start a craftsman business — which failed — and then got a job as an excise tax collector which he was fired from twice. (He was fired the second time because he tried and failed to get the government to pay him and his colleagues more money for their work. This failure left a bitter taste of the British government in his mouth.)

While in London in 1774, Thomas met Benjamin Franklin, whom he convinced to write him a letter of recommendation. With no prospects at age 37, he set off for America, where he secured a job as a journalist in Philadelphia.

Keep in mind what was happening in the colonies when Thomas arrived. The colonists were furious with the British government for forcing them to pay taxes without any representation in

Parliament and for infringing on their liberties and freedoms. The colonists had been dealing with this British oppression for nearly ten years, and they couldn't get the government to listen to their complaints and make changes that respected their rights, liberties, and freedoms as British citizens living in America.

Put another way, when Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia, the colonists were teetering on the edge of their breaking point — and he saw it firsthand.

With encouragement from Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush (a physician, activist, and later, a signer of the Declaration of Independence), Thomas decided to write a pamphlet addressing what was happening between the colonists and Great Britain. Unlike other writers at the time who were advocating that the relationship between the colonies and Great Britain should be mended and repaired, Thomas called for independence (a position that many saw as unthinkable).[12]

[Editor's note: According to Jack Fructman, Jr., author of *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Paine* and *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, "It was the first published piece that I know of advocating separation from the British Empire."[3]]

Published in Philadelphia in January 1776, the pamphlet was called *Common Sense*. Thomas wrote in a way that people from all different backgrounds could understand and used popular and religious references that were common during that time. *Common Sense* was written in a clear, no-nonsense way so that many people could understand what was being said. (If *Common Sense* were written today, it would be infused with memes, hashtags, and movie quotes.)

Thomas Paine's writing style was an invitation to all colonists to participate in the argument for independence. They didn't need a special school degree, political experience, or a wide-ranging expertise in historical topics to have an opinion. All the colonists needed to have the ability to decide on the question of independence was their common sense — something that everyone has!

In his pamphlet, Thomas Paine denounced monarchies, argued for colonial independence, and urged the establishment of a democratic government with a written constitution.

Let's break these ideas down a bit further and look at some of the key ideas that Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*:
1. Government is a "necessary evil," but one which the people "furnish." People need a government to ensure "freedom and security."
2. Monarchies are "exceedingly ridiculous." There is "no truly natural or religious reason" to explain the division between kings and subjects. Elevating a monarch above everyone else "cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature," nor "can it be defended on the authority of scripture."

So, according to Thomas, people need a government. However, a monarchy, which is a type of government, is a bad idea because, according to the laws of nature and God's law, all people are equal — one is not above the other. Got it so far? Let's keep going.

3. America was facing some irreconcilable differences with Great Britain, which, as Thomas illustrated, was governing like a bad parent. He argued it would only get worse. Therefore, separation from the mother country was inevitable and "would take place one time or other."

4. Mending the relationship was not an option. "Reconciliation is now a fallacious dream… Every quiet method for peace hath been ineffectual. Our prayers have been rejected with disdain."

5. "*The time hath found us,*" according to Thomas, to seek independence. The colonists had what they needed — raw materials and manpower — to build up their defenses. But they had to declare independence soon, because "'Tis not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies: yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world."

So, Thomas said the time had come to seek independence from Great Britain because there was no other choice, and their chances of success were higher now than they would be in the future. But who would be in charge of governing America if they broke off from Great Britain? We know that Thomas said that government was necessary and that monarchies were a bad form of government. Instead, he wrote, "a government of our own is a natural right."

So, what were his suggestions for the system of government that came after independence?

6. Thomas argued for a strong central government where "the law is king." In other nations, laws are forced upon people by rulers who conquer them. The colonists had an opportunity "to begin government at the right end" where the laws are created first and rulers enforce the law.

7. The law that Thomas had in mind was a written constitution, which would serve as "a bond of solemn obligation, which the whole enters into, to support the right of every separate part, whether of religion, professional freedom, or property." Everyone is subjected to the law — not just some people.

   o Thomas also wrote, "it is the will of the Almighty that there should be a diversity of religious opinions among us." He also wrote that it was the "indispensable duty of government to protect" religious freedom.

   o He also wanted the people to have a say in government through "large and equal representation." (Much different from what the colonists were currently experiencing with Great Britain!) [4]

Thomas Paine's ideas in *Common Sense* spread like wildfire throughout the colonies and became very popular. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson read the pamphlet.[5] And John Adams wrote to Abigail in April 1776, "*Common Sense*, like a ray of revelation, has come in seasonably to clear our doubts, and to fix our choice."[6]

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* unified colonists around the idea of independence and marked a critical turning point in America's road to revolution.

# Footnotes

1. https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/thomas-paine
2. https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/thomas-paine-common-sense-1776
3. https://www.history.com/news/thomas-paine-common-sense-revolution
4. https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/1776-paine-common-sense-pamphlet
5. https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/1776-paine-common-sense-pamphlet
6. https://www.history.com/news/thomas-paine-common-sense-revolution