

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

About the Book

Little was expected of young Thomas Paine growing up in Thetford, England. The son of a corset-maker, Thomas received only a few years of schooling before going to work full-time in his father's shop at the age of twelve. But the books Thomas had read as a boy ignited an ambition to see the world and to make a name for himself.

Thomas dared to change his destiny, enduring years of struggle until a meeting with Benjamin Franklin brought Thomas to America in 1774—and into the American Revolution. Within fourteen months, Thomas would unleash the persuasive power of the written word in *Common Sense*—a brash wake-up call that rallied the American people to declare independence against the mightiest empire in the world.

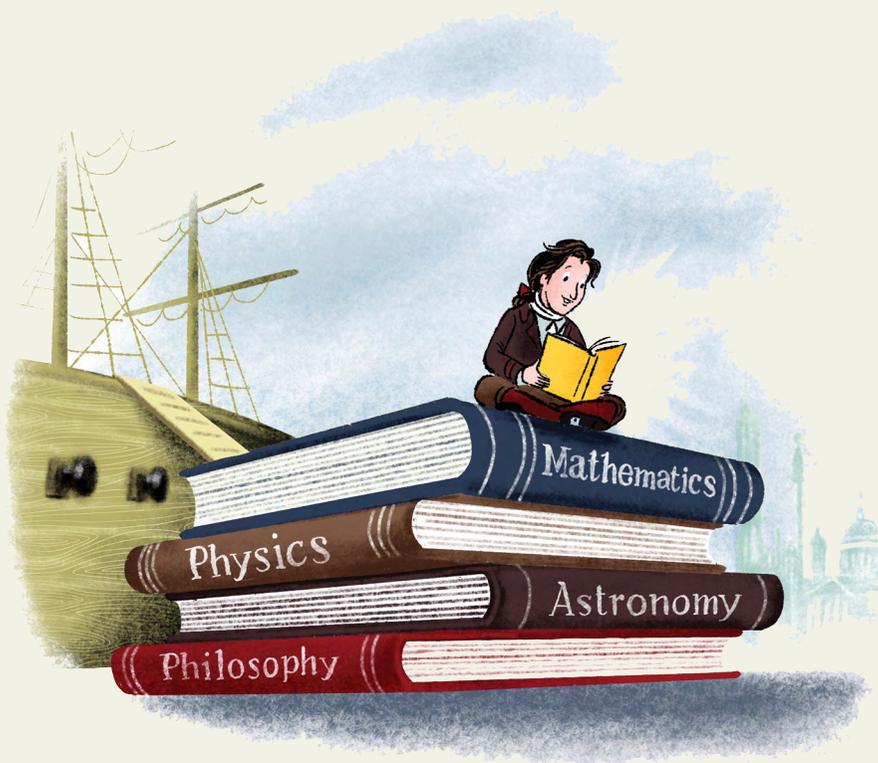
This fascinating and extensively researched biography, based on numerous primary sources, will immerse readers in Thomas Paine's inspiring journey of courage, failure, and resilience that led a penniless immigrant to change the world with his words.

About This Guide

This guide presents discussion questions and writing activities that align with Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for grades 4 and 5. Use the materials as part of whole-class or small-group study. The book and these materials also offer opportunities for exploration and research as part of a geography or history classroom.

Before Reading

Activate and build student background knowledge and generate interest in the book and the American Revolution with an overview of this era. Given the many figures and events of this fascinating time in history, a timeline is a great place to start. Adapt the helpful timeline included at the end of *Thomas Paine and the Dangerous Word* for your classroom wall, leaving space for students to add their own prior knowledge or additional details they uncover as they learn how people and events of his era relate to each other. Review the timeline with your students. As they gain knowledge about the wide range of historical events surrounding Paine and his times, encourage them to enlarge perspectives with images and information they add to the timeline.



Discussion Questions

The questions below can be used for class discussion and reflection or be offered to students as reflective writing prompts.

- 1 How can a word be dangerous? Why was “independence” a dangerous word for Thomas Paine to use? What words seem dangerous to you? Why?
- 2 Thomas became a corset-maker because his father was a corset-maker. Would you like to have the same job your father has? Why or why not?
- 3 What dreams did Thomas have for his life? How did his dreams change?
- 4 According to the author, for Thomas: “It was one thing to imagine adventure, but another to face it.” What does this idea mean? Share how you have experienced this in your life.
- 5 A person’s perspective influences her or his opinion. What experiences and ideas did Thomas Paine bring with him to America that made him question why things were as they were?
- 6 Thomas Paine used writing to try to make a difference in the lives of others, such as speaking out against slavery. If he were writing today, what do you think he might write about?
- 7 How and why was Paine’s *Common Sense* important in moving the colonists to stand up to Britain? What moves people to stand up against injustice today?
- 8 What was Thomas Paine’s life like after the Revolutionary War? When he died in 1809, he had few friends and little money. But his words were never forgotten. Why do you think his words are still read today?

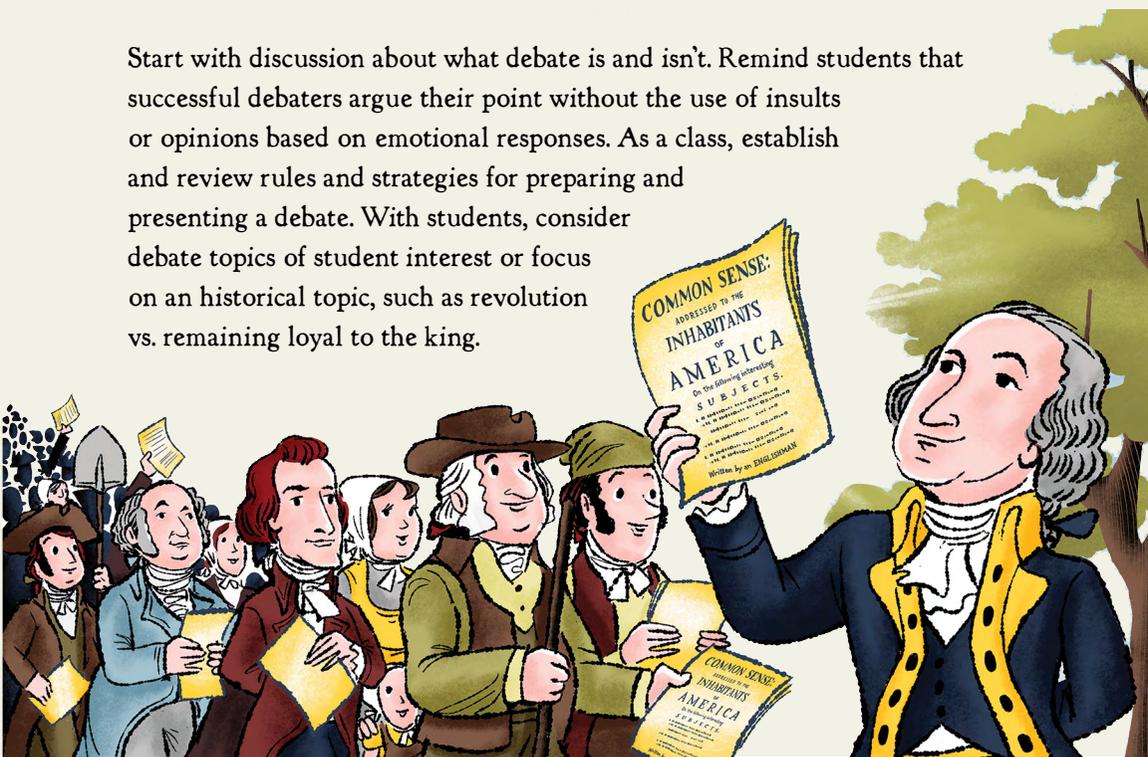
Curriculum Connections

These activities align with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for grades 4 and 5 and offer connections to the social studies curriculum. Many of these activities provide opportunities for students to identify with events and people in history by using and analyzing primary and secondary sources. For students who find this work challenging, *think, pair, share*, or working in small groups may be a helpful strategy. Other students may need more support to guide them through the experiences, with helpful paraphrasing or vocabulary instruction.

The Headstrong Club

Thomas Paine loved debating the issues of the day with his friends. Help students gain critical thinking and presentation skills by having them prepare for and participate in their own debates.

Start with discussion about what debate is and isn't. Remind students that successful debaters argue their point without the use of insults or opinions based on emotional responses. As a class, establish and review rules and strategies for preparing and presenting a debate. With students, consider debate topics of student interest or focus on an historical topic, such as revolution vs. remaining loyal to the king.



To begin research on debate topics, organize students into teams of four. Teams should thoroughly research both sides of the issue, as they will not know which side they have to argue until research is complete. Once sides are determined (by random drawing), teams should prepare for debate and choose a team member to represent their team at the podium. After a student from each team has presented their position, you may wish to have guest judges determine debate winners or provide ballots for students to vote for the most persuasive speaker.

Resources

- Debate
www.brainpop.com/english/writing/debate/
- How to Structure a Simple Classroom Debate
<http://blog.simplynovel.com/how-to-structure-a-simple-classroom-debate/>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1.C, SL.4.4, SL.5.1.C, SL.5.4;

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.9, RI.5.9



Voices of the Past

A biography can help readers understand the influence of an individual on history, as well as the effect of history and culture on that individual. Bring biography and poetry together when students compare and contrast the life of Thomas Paine with another historical figure of the American Revolution.

Have student pairs select and further research one of the historical figures mentioned in *Thomas Paine and the Dangerous Word*. As they analyze the life of their figure, have them identify the person's significant contributions to society, three to five outstanding characteristics of the person, and five to ten major events in the person's life. Have them do the same for Thomas Paine.

After students compare and contrast the information they've gathered, have them compose a poem for two voices—with one voice as Thomas Paine and the other voice as their researched historical figure. A poem for two voices is meant to be read aloud, with each of the two voices speaking in turn. Though, where there are commonalities, some lines may be for both voices read together at once. Have paired poets read their poems aloud to the class.

Extension: Encourage students to find additional figures—historical or contemporary—to compare and contrast with Thomas Paine's life and write additional poetry for two voices.

Resources

- A Poem for Two Voices
http://writingfix.com/PDFs/Comparison_Contract/Poem_Two_Voices.pdf
- A Poem for Two Voices Project
www.rrojas.com/5/projects/ela/poetryprojects/poemfortwovoices

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2, RI.4.9, RI.5.2, RI.5.9;
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4, W.4.7, W.5.4, W.5.7

Common Sense Today

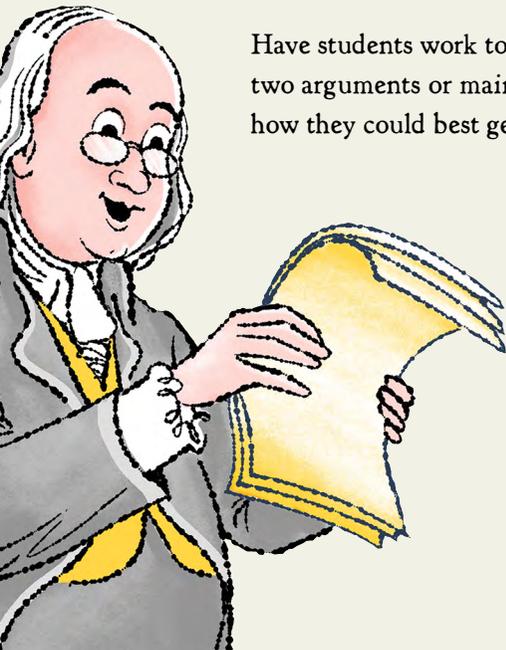
Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* was the first published work to call for independence from Great Britain. The printed word was the only means at the time to reach and appeal to large numbers of people. Get students thinking about all the ways we can now communicate. Have them interpret Paine's writing and create presentations that use modern mediums to deliver his message.

Start by reading aloud from or have students listen to parts of Paine's pamphlet. Ask students to listen for:

- Main arguments for why the American colonies should separate from Great Britain
- Plain, understandable language
- Why Paine's words might change the minds of people loyal to King George
- Words and arguments that would have persuaded them to fight for independence had they been American colonists

Have students work together in small groups to choose one or two arguments or main themes from Paine's writing and consider how they could best get that information to a modern audience.

Let student groups script or create a news interview, TV or radio commercial, TED-style talk, web page, meme, etc., that delivers Paine's positive ideas about freedom and living in a nation governed by the people. Have students present their work to the class and encourage discussion about how both the medium and the delivery affect the message.



Resources

- Audio version of *Common Sense*
<https://librivox.org/common-sense-by-thomas-paine-2/>
- Printable version of *Common Sense*
www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/revolution/docs/Common_Sense.pdf
- *Common Sense* Quotes
www.shmoop.com/common-sense/quotes.html

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1, W.4.6, W.4.9, W.5.1, W.5.6, W.5.9

Additional Activity Ideas to Explore the Life of Thomas Paine

Build on Back Matter

Authors who write biographies must determine what to include and exclude when writing about an individual's life and achievements. With the shorter format of a picture book biography, much of Thomas Paine's later life ends up in the author's notes for *Thomas Paine and the Dangerous Word*. Have students take advantage of Sarah Jane Marsh's careful research presented in the back matter to develop a picture book biography that focuses on other aspects of Paine's life. Students can work together in groups of three, each taking the lead in an author, illustrator, or editor role. Celebrate and share their works at a publishing party!



Resources

- Biography: Writer’s Workshop with Patricia and Fredrick McKissack
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/biograph/index.htm>
- The Science of Writing and Illustrating a Biography for Children
www.charlesbridge.com/blogs/news/the-science-of-writing-and-illustrating-a-biography-for-children

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2, W.4.4, W.5.2, W.5.4

Travel with Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine was born in England and died in the United States. But throughout his life, he followed his interests to many different places. Have students research primary documents and use them to create a story map—a presentation that maps and annotates all of Paine’s adventures. In creating their story map, students use geography to organize and retell Paine’s history combining maps with narrative text, images, and multimedia content. If access to technology is limited, students can also create a story map with their own drawings and handwritten narratives.

Resources

- Library of Congress Collections with Maps
www.loc.gov/maps/collections/
- Digital Public Library of America
<https://dp.la/>
- StoryMapJS
<https://storymap.knightlab.com>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.9; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.4, SL.4.5, SL.5.4, SL.5.5; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.9

Additional Educator Resources

- Explore the major hardships of life under British rule, how the colonists decided to break away, and how they set a path for a new and independent government with “Road to the Constitution” from iCivics.
www.icivics.org/curriculum/road-constitution
 - “American Icons” from PBS includes lesson plans and videos to encourage students to explore the contributions to society made by prominent Americans from all walks of life.
www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/american-icons
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About the Author

Sarah Jane Marsh has taught American Revolution history in elementary and middle school. Like Thomas Paine, Sarah attempted several adventurous careers (zookeeping, dolphin training, and firefighting) before settling into writing. She has an MBA from the University of Vermont and lives with her family outside of Seattle. This is her first book. Learn more about Thomas Paine at www.sarahjanemarsh.com.



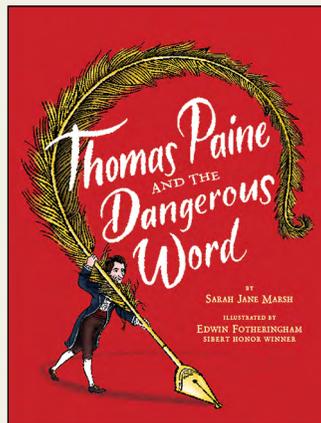
About the Illustrator

Edwin Fotheringham grew up in Sydney, Australia, and attended the University of Washington School of Art, in Seattle, where he currently lives. He began his career as an illustrator working on a variety of projects, from CD covers to Neiman Marcus print ads. Other clients include the *New Yorker* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Edwin has also illustrated a number of children’s books.



Rachael Walker (belleofthebook.com) created this guide. She works in a middle school library in Arlington, Virginia, consults on a wide variety of educational programs and multimedia projects, and develops educational materials and reading resources for children, parents, and teachers.

Many more discussion guides can be found on the Disney•Hyperion website at www.disneybooks.com.



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Dangerous Word

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