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PART 1

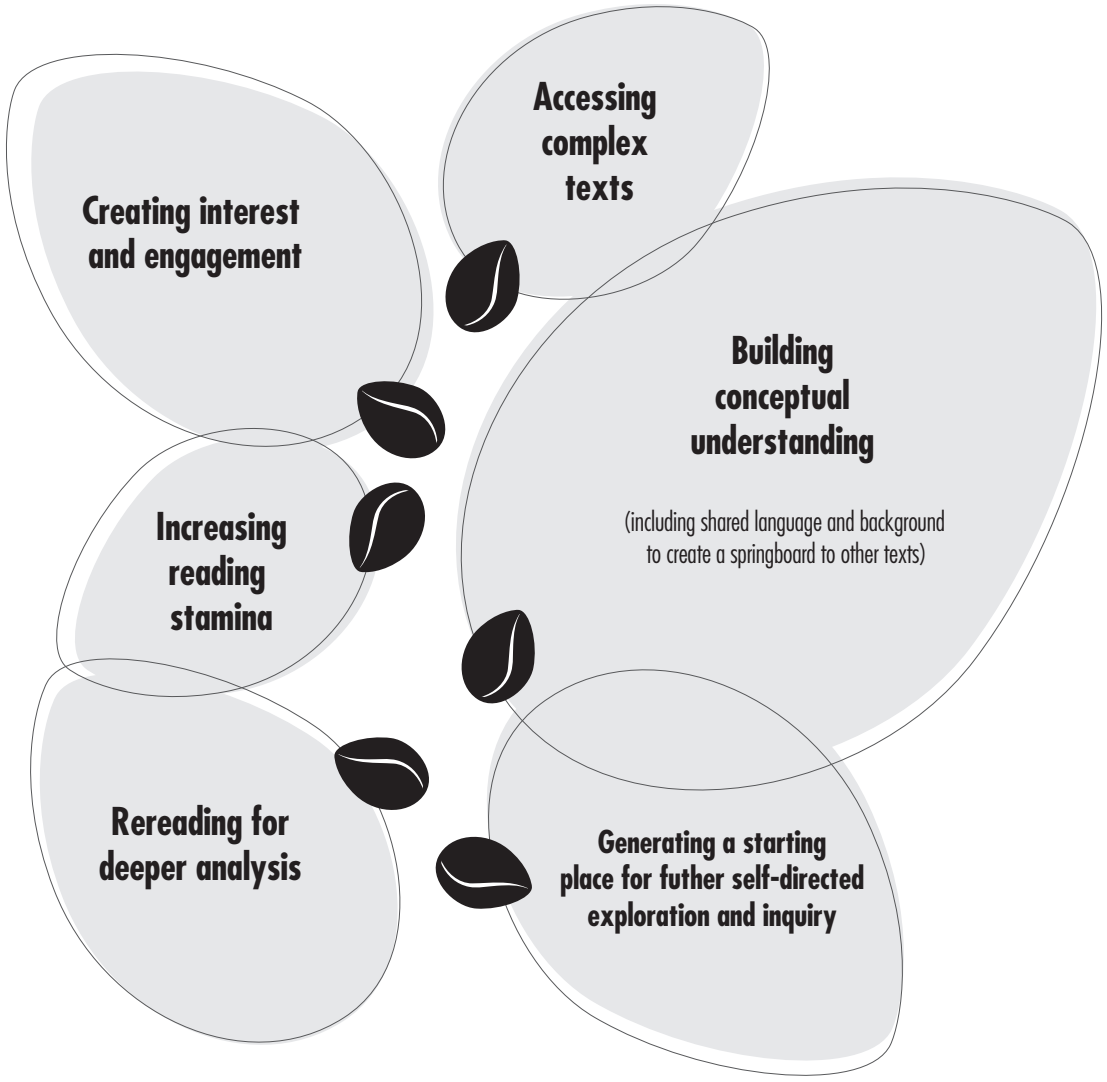
USING SHORT TEXTS TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND COMPREHENSION

Introduction

Every teacher who has assigned reading has watched as students flip or scan through the text to see how many pages they will have to read. The sighs that follow lengthy history readings abound. The results fall short of achieving expectations for independent and knowledgeable readers. However, one of the quickest ways to surprise students is to hand them a short text of three or four paragraphs to read. The typical response from students is, "Is this all? Where's the rest?" At first glance, short texts are inviting and this alone lays the foundation for bringing students into the text. Getting students to choose to read is a powerful motivation for ensuring that students will complete the reading. Of even greater importance is the essentiality of reading to building contextual knowledge and comprehending history. Thus, short texts offer many benefits for teachers and students, including:

- accessing complex texts,
- rereading for deeper analysis,
- increasing reading stamina,
- creating interest and engagement,
- building conceptual understanding (including shared language and background to create a springboard to other texts), and
- generating a starting place for further self-directed exploration and inquiry.

Short texts create pathways to new learning and to helping students understand the past. Short texts inspire curiosity and interest, which are essential to independent learning.



Benefits of Short Texts

Accessing Complex Texts

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010) have re-emphasized the significance of short text as an important tool for developing independent readers. The oversimplification of content has created greater dependence of students on teachers. Students have become conditioned to being told what to think and read; as a result, they lack confidence in their ability to initiate learning or inquiry. The *Publisher's Criteria* noted that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) "require students to read increasingly complex texts with growing independence" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, 3). Yet, for students

to be able to more fully comprehend and appreciate complex texts, multiple exposures and experiences are needed. The limited time in each school day balanced with the amount of content coverage makes it unrealistic to revisit longer works. Short texts offer viable opportunities for accessing complex text, particularly for "students at a wide range of reading levels to participate in the close analysis of more demanding text" (Coleman and Pimentel, 2012, 4). The comprehension tools used with short texts easily transfer and reinforce learning in meaningful ways that promote the sustained interest in content needed for sophisticated texts.

Rereading for Deeper Analysis

In addition to allowing for complete reads during a single period or part of a period, short texts permit students time to reread. While an initial reading allows students to get the gist of the information—what Gallagher (2004) refers to as first draft reading—rereading frees up mental capacity for analysis, the emphasis of many of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Analyzing, as required by the Common Core, "requires a response that demonstrates an ability to see patterns and to classify information into component parts." Such analysis might include focus on identifying text details, text structure, writer's craft, sequences, connections to other texts, author's purpose, perspective, and connections between texts, to name a few. When we skip rereading, we fail to introduce students to the richness of the text and the comprehension that comes from sustained thinking about a text.

Rereading in school has become associated with drudgery for many students. They have been asked to reread the same text they just completed, often to focus on speed and fluency. The emphasis on literacy skills has overshadowed and devalued the content in light of teaching students to become fast readers. What has been lost in this process is the opportunity to introduce content from multiple sources and to explore various perspectives through horizontal, across-text reading. The time necessary to reread large sections of text is prohibitive. However, rereading does not have to be a chore and it can serve content goals. Rereading for the sake of rereading isn't a purpose most students enjoy. However, rereading in order to perform a section, for example, frequently engages students not just for one reread but for multiple rereadings and teaches students to value the process as an inquiry tool.

Increasing Reading Stamina

Reading stamina is developed just like physical stamina. If we want students to be able to focus on long, complex texts, we must build their stamina. By starting with short texts and gradually increasing the amount of text, as well as the complexity of the text, we gradually build students' attention and stamina for longer texts. Stamina also has content benefits. The more students read history, the more they will learn about history. Stamina as a form of exposure to content becomes a process for increasing familiarity with the academic language of the discipline and the concepts associated with essential and enduring ideas like time, continuity, change, context, perspective, causation, and argumentation. Stamina can be understood as sustained interest that promotes the compelling questions leading to historical inquiry.

PART 2

TEN ACTIVITIES TO USE WITH SHORT TEXTS

Introduction

The following ten activities are designed to provide specific ways to engage student with text and increase their comprehension at the same time. These activities are meant to enhance deeper study of the historical eras. Each activity can be used as a standalone activity. At other times, the activities can be modified by changing the format (see *Have or Have Not* for an example modification of *Important Questions*). Activities can also be strengthened by using multiple activities together (see *Flying Tiger Line* short text for an example of combining *Close Reading* and *What Does It Look Like?*).

Ten Activities for Using Short Texts

1. Think Aloud
2. Metacognitive Flowchart
3. Close Reading
4. Divide and Conquer
5. Dramatic Interpretations
6. Directed Reading-Thinking Activity
7. List, Group, Label, Theorize
8. Questioning the Text
9. What Does It Look Like?
10. Important Questions

While short texts are an important part of historical reading, as well as being important components of the CCSS, students will need to move beyond short texts. Three activities for helping students move beyond short texts into longer texts are also provided.

Activities for Moving Beyond Short Texts

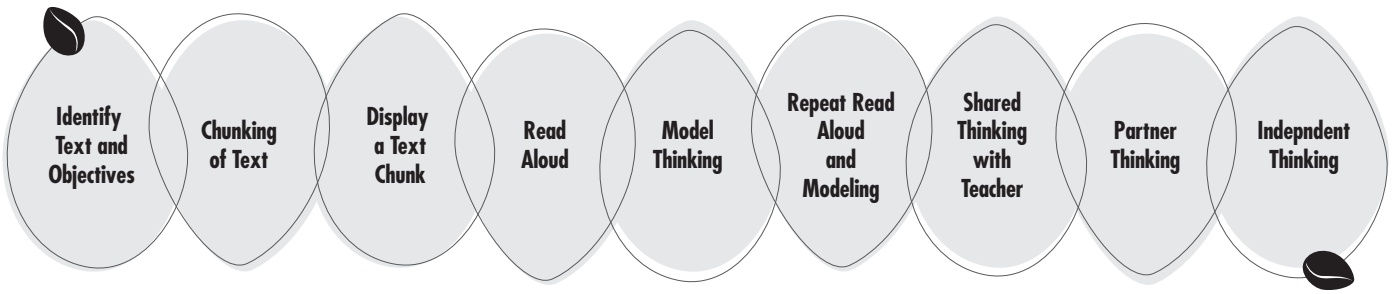
1. Hold that Thought
2. Text Sets
3. Text Series

Each activity contains a general description, an implementation plan listing specific steps, and a teaching example. While the activities are meant to be used with multiple texts, some activities will work more efficiently with some texts than others. For this reason, the lessons in Part 3 offer suggestions of which activities to use to support the reading of specific short texts.

Activity 1: Use Short Text as a Think Aloud Model

A Think Aloud provides an explicit model of the teacher's thinking processes for students. Think Alouds can demonstrate a variety of processes, including how to contextualize the text, how to source the text, or how to use comprehension strategies such as questioning to better understand the text. By asking students to conduct their own Think Aloud about a section of text, the Think Aloud can also become an informal assessment.

Steps for Planning a Think Aloud



1. *Identify Text and Objectives:* Identify the text and one or two learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are instructional objectives that might include historical understanding of an era and using questioning to better understand the text.
2. *Chunking of Text:* Within the text, choose a small number of stopping points to stop and model. It is best to mark these in advance. More detailed modeling can occur if the number of modeling points is kept small.
3. *Display a Text Chunk:* Display only the amount of text to be read for one modeling point.
4. *Read Aloud:* Read the text aloud to students.

5. *Model Thinking:* Model your content and process thinking. The use of cuing phrases can help students focus on the objective. Additionally, an organizer or written model can help support the verbal thinking. (See Appendix A for the chart used in the following model.)
6. *Repeat Read Aloud and Modeling:* Repeat reading aloud and modeling with one or two additional sections of text.
7. *Shared Thinking with Teacher:* Ask students to work with you to continue the thinking. This moves them toward a gradual acceptance of responsibility.
8. *Partner Thinking:* If time permits, ask students to complete an additional section of text in partners so that they have a chance to do the thinking without teacher support.
9. *Independent Thinking:* Student should be given the opportunity to think independently about the text meaning.

The following Think Aloud model focuses on helping students notice what is right there in the text and to begin asking questions. This model provides preparation for a more detailed close reading.

Think Aloud Model Example

Teacher: "When I read, I should be thinking. Thinking in my head is when I ask myself questions as I am reading. If I'm not thinking, I'm probably not paying attention to the text, and I'm probably not going to understand what I read. I want to show you what's going on in my thoughts as I read the following text. I'm going to hand out one paragraph at a time because I want you to focus on what I'm doing with the text as I read. I call these reading segments 'chunks.' Dividing up the reading also helps me think more deeply about the content of the text I am reading."

Paragraph 1 Is Displayed

Apis

Apis was the leader. Together with several young men, they began to plot an act so horrible that it would start a war. Their slogan was, "Death to the tyrant!" They were part of a group made up of people upset about being told what to do by far-off leaders. They called themselves the Black Hand. Others called them terrorists. They wanted their leaders to listen and to respond to their concerns. They also hoped their act would encourage others from their country to resist the leaders' plans.

Teacher: "The title of this story is 'Apis.' I don't recognize that name so I first wonder, "Who's Apis?" Then, I wonder where that name comes from; "What is its origin?" I wonder if it is a made up story since I've never heard the name before. I'm going to keep a *Noticing and Wondering* chart to help me keep track of my thinking. The things that I read—that are right there in the story—those are things I notice. Questions that I have are my wonderings."

Women's Suffrage

Short Text: *The Equality State*

Lexile Level: 1250

Accompanying Primary Documents

- The Adams Letters: http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/index.php.
- Women's Suffrage: http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/womens-suffrage/.
- Temperance Movement: http://library.brown.edu/cds/temperance/.

Recommended Activities

- Close Reading
- Divide and Conquer
- Important Questions

Teaching Notes

This short text references a variety of time periods and movements, as well as including a primary source quote directly in the text. This makes the text ideal for close reading. Close Reading should focus, first, on what is explicitly stated in the text so that students understand the information presented. Repeated readings to support close reading should focus on the movement between time periods and how they are related.

Divide and Conquer is another activity designed to parse the text into smaller segments so that each section can be understood independently. The suggested division of the text into three segments is shown. Each segment focuses on a separate but related foundational concept for women's suffrage.

Students with greater experience using close reading independently or teachers who want to provide a challenge to students may want to use Important Questions as a way of assessing what students can do independently prior to providing more detailed instruction.

References

- Women's History Month Collections (Library of Congress): http://www.womenshistorymonth.gov/collections.html.
- Women's Suffrage LOC: http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/womens-suffrage/.
- Wyoming and Woman Suffrage: http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/news/woman-suffrage/?ar_a=1.

Woman suffrage headquarters in Cleveland. A (far right), Miss Belle Sherwin, President of the National League of Women Voters; B (holding flag), Judge Florence E. Allen; C (left), Mrs. Malcolm McBride.

Photo source: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

THE EQUALITY STATE

Recommended Section 1

Which state was the first to give women the right to vote?

The debate over giving women the right vote started in the colonies. As early as 1776, Abigail Adams urged her husband—a member of the Continental Congress and later the President of the United States—to "*remember the ladies.*" She went on to write:

> *"Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."*

Recommended Section 2

Prior to the Civil War, women began working hard to limit alcohol consumption as a result of seeing the negative effects of excessive drinking on families and children. Women leaders of the Temperance Movement (which worked to limit the consumption of alcohol) realized that in order to affect the laws controlling alcohol, they would need to have the right to vote. Thus, the right for women to vote became linked to the Temperance Movement as a grassroots movement for social and political change.

Recommended Section 3

Others had different reasons for letting women vote. There were not nearly as many women in the new territories of the West as there were men. Territories knew that by giving women the right to vote, they might attract more women to the live in the territory. Also, by allowing women to vote, they were more likely to meet the requirement made in the U.S. Constitution that a territory must have a large enough voting population to support a state government.

That's how a territory with very few people became the first territory or state to give women the right to vote in 1869, fifty years before women were given the right to vote by a Constitutional Amendment. Proud of their status as the first to grant women the right to vote, the same territory went on to be home to the first female justice of the peace, first all-woman jury, first female bailiff, first woman elected to the state Senate, first woman elected to the state House of Representatives, the first all-female city government, and the first female governor. All of these firsts came from the state with the lowest population of all fifty states. Nicknamed the "Equality State," Wyoming led the way to creating equality for women.

American Revolution

Short Text: *Scotchtown*

Lexile Level: 1070

Accompanying Primary Documents

- Collection of primary documents available at Colonial Williamsburg: http://www.history.org/almanack/people/bios/biohen.cfm.

Recommended Activities

- Think Aloud (handout, pg. 155)
- Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (handout, pg. 158)
- Divide and Conquer

Teaching Notes

This longer text offers opportunities for multiple activities. One possible way to use this text is to conduct a Think Aloud with the first section or first two sections and then ask students to complete the third section on their own with the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity or Divide and Conquer. Possible questions for Divide and Conquer are listed below, but these might also be adapted for Directed Reading-Thinking Activity.

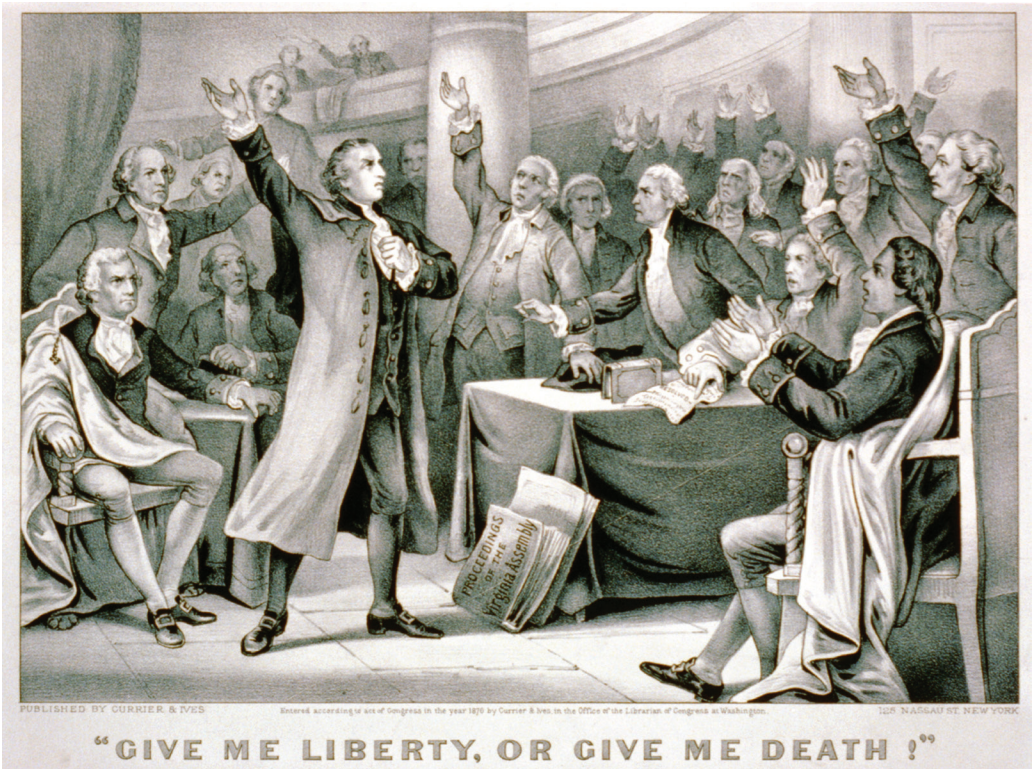
Divide and Conquer

1. Section 1 recommended questions:
    a. What do we know about the location of Scotchtown? What can we infer?
    b. What revolution do you think the author is referring to and why?
2. Section 2 recommended questions:
    a. What Revolution do you think the author is describing and why? Highlight your evidence.
    b. What opposing points of view are present? Note evidence in the text.
3. Section 3 recommended questions:
    a. How did these three men contribute to revolution?
    b. Who was the revolution for and who was excluded?

References

- Crawford, Alan Pell. 2001-2002. "The Upstart, the Speaker, the Scandals, and Scotchtown." *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* (Winter). http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/winter01-02/henry.cfm.
- *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography.* Vol. I–IV, *Burgesses and Other Prominent Persons.* http://arlisherring.com/tng/getperson.php?personID=I043755&tree=Herring.
- Scotchtown: http://preservationvirginia.org/visit/property-detail/the-house-and-plantation.

SCOTCHTOWN



Patrick Henry's renowned speech to the Virginia Assembly, March 23, 1775.

Recommended Section 1

The house had a large undivided attic, eight large rooms on the main floor, and a basement. The rooms were nothing fancy and guests described them as plain. The house was surrounded by hundreds of acres suitable for growing crops and close enough to rivers to use boats as means to ship the crops to other merchants. The property, referred to as Scotchtown, had a darker side, including murder and insanity. Consider three of its owners: a murderer, a shady politician, and a man of contradictions. Yet all three would ultimately contribute to revolution.

Recommended Section 2

A Murderer

Colonel John Chiswell tried growing crops on the surrounding land but wasn't making the kind of money he wanted. He invested much of his money in a nearby mine. Chiswell stopped by a local tavern on his way back to Scotchtown after visiting his mine. He began to argue with his friend, a merchant named Routledge. Spectators reported that both men threw cups of punch at each other and hurled candlesticks. They also traded insults, with Chiswell calling Routledge a "rebel Presbyterian." Finally, Chiswell called for his sword. From there, the accounts varied. Some said Chiswell's arm was restrained by his friends and that a

very drunk Routledge charged Chiswell, resulting in running himself through with the sword. Routledge's friends maintained that Chiswell charged Routledge with the sword and killed him.

Chiswell was arrested and put in jail. Initially, he was held without bail, but as he was being transferred from one jail to another, three judges—all friends of Chiswell—stopped the sheriff escorting Chiswell and "suggested" bail instead of jail. Chiswell was given bail, which he and his friends/judges paid—and returned home. However, Chiswell was found dead before his trial. The doctor swore the cause of death was "nervous fits" due to stress, but most people thought it was suicide. The locals would not allow him to be buried in any of the town's cemeteries, so his body was returned to Scotchtown and buried on the property, but not before an angry mob stopped the wagon carrying the coffin and demanded that the coffin be opened to verify that Chiswell was indeed dead.

Many people were outraged, believing that Chiswell received special treatment because he was part of the upper class. Even though he was actually nearly bankrupt, his rich friends helped him get released on bail. Townspeople suggested the whole incident continued the unfair system of an elite upper class ruling the lower classes and even being able to get away with murder. The rumblings of revolution were beginning.

Recommended Section 3

A Shady Politician

The next owner of Scotchtown was John Robinson. Robinson was a powerful politician, acting as both Speaker of the House and the treasurer of Virginia. His politics always favored the elite upper class. He was very wealthy, owning over 20,000 acres and 400 slaves. John Robinson noticed that many in the upper class were deeply in debt, so he proposed a bill that would require the general public to assume the debt and leave many of the upper class debt free. Robinson called those who opposed the bill traitors guilty of treason. Still, the bill did not pass. Robinson died soon after, and it was discovered that he was also deeply in debt. There were additional questions about how he had used his office of treasurer to offer loans to his friends. The growing unrest over giving too much power to any individual was paving the way for revolution and a new system.

A Man of Contradictions

In an interesting twist of fate, one person who Robinson had labeled guilty of treason was the next owner of Scotchtown. Patrick Henry was a lawyer who had no problems publically criticizing the current ruling powers and calling for a new system. Though he dressed poorly compared to others of his position, he owned almost 1,000 acres and several slaves. He moved his six children and wife to Scotchtown, but soon after, his wife began showing signs of mental illness. Henry considered placing her in a nearby mental hospital. Treatments at the hospital included forced bowel emptying, forced vomiting, blood-letting, and electrical shocks to cure the mentally insane. Ultimately, he restrained his wife in the basement apartment. And so, the irony was that Henry publically argued for freedom while his own wife was restrained and his numerous slaves worked the tobacco fields on his plantation. In March 1775, he rode to the nearby church and offered a stirring speech, calling for the assembly to throw off the unjust rule. He ended by saying, Give me Liberty or give me death!

One house, three owners, and each planted different seeds of revolution. Chiswell and Robinson's elitism and perpetuation of the English system of rule fueled new leaders, such as Patrick Henry, who called for a new system that was not under British control. The Continental Congress would carefully draft a government with a careful system of checks and balances so that no single person had ultimate control.