



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #12: Neutrals and the American Revolution—Choosing Not to Choose

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds upon Lessons 10 and 11, where students explored why some colonists became Patriots and why others remained loyal to Britain. In Lesson 12, students examine a third perspective during the American Revolution: colonists who chose to remain neutral.

This lesson focuses on the motivations that led some colonists to avoid supporting either the Patriot or the Loyalist cause.

Students learn that:

- Not all colonists chose sides during the American Revolution.
- Some colonists feared violence and disruption.
- Some remained neutral because of religious or moral beliefs.
- Some were focused on protecting their families, businesses, and daily lives.
- Many neutral colonists were uncertain about how the conflict would end.
- Choosing neutrality was often difficult and sometimes brought criticism from both Patriots and Loyalists.

This lesson is organized into two phases. Phase 1 builds meaning through vocabulary, reading, and text coding. Phase 2 builds argument through gathering evidence and using it to engage in writing. The lesson culminates in a structured Revolutionary Writers essay connected to Elizabeth Drinker and Joseph Hewes.

Competition Note: For teachers participating in the FIREWORKS250 year 2 cohort, this essay is one of nine potential essays students may select for the Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition. Each lesson introduces a key Founding Father or revolutionary while integrating civics standards. Teachers will introduce these individuals to students with a biography and video before students write their essay.

Materials

- Highlighters or pencils for text coding
- Handout #1: Neutrals—Why Some Colonists Chose Not to Pick a Side
- Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer
- Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer
- Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Note: Students may use any notes from any handout (text coding, video notes, or graphic organizer) when writing their essay. These are not separate tasks but support tools for the final essay.

Preparation

- Number paragraphs in the reading text.
- Review vocabulary: Neutral, Patriot, Loyalist, Quaker, Pacifist, Persecution
- Before class, locate and read the biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum for Joseph Hewes: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles>.
- Load the video Joseph Hewes. <https://youtu.be/YdP9zWo1s4I?si=YDCKsjnblgjq0DYe>.
- Prepare essay writing model. See sample paragraph in Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to: Lesson 10 (Patriots) and Lesson 11 (Loyalists).

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.2.1**: Discuss the political ideas of Patriots, Loyalists and other colonists about the American Revolution. *Clarification*: Students will examine motivations for the decision not to take a side during the American Revolution.

Essential Question

Why did some colonists choose to remain neutral during the American Revolution?

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students understand why some colonists chose neutrality and how personal beliefs, safety concerns, and uncertainty influenced their decisions.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* "If two groups around you strongly disagreed and were beginning to fight, would you always feel like you had to choose a side? Why or why not?" Accept all reasonable responses.
- *Quick pair share:* Students briefly discuss. Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions later during the lesson.
 - Is it always necessary to choose a side?
 - What might make someone stay out of a conflict?
 - Could remaining neutral be difficult?

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- *Introduce and clarify the following terms:*
 - **Neutral:** A colonist who tried not to take sides in the Revolution.
 - **Patriot:** A colonist who supported independence from Britain.
 - **Loyalist:** A colonist who remained loyal to Britain.
 - **Quaker:** A member of a religious group that emphasized peace and equality.
 - **Pacifist:** A person who opposes violence and war.
 - **Persecution:** Unfair treatment because of a person's beliefs.
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Why might someone choose not to take sides?”
 - “Can people disagree without fighting?”
 - “Why might peace be more important than politics for some people?”

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you read today, pay attention to the different reasons colonists chose to remain neutral during the American Revolution.”
- *Students read:* Neutrals—Why Some Colonists Chose Not to Pick a Side (Handout #1)
- *Students use three codes to mark sections:*
 - N (Neutral Motivation) Describes reasons colonists remained neutral.
 - P (Patriot Perspective): Describes reasons colonists supported independence.
 - L (Loyalist Perspective): Describes reasons colonists remained loyal to Britain.
 - I (Important Information): Important background or context that does not clearly fit N, P, or L.

Note: The “I” code is intentionally open. Students who disagree about coding are engaging in strong historical thinking. Use discussion prompts such as: “Why did you choose I instead of N?” “Could this paragraph fit more than one code?” “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- *Think aloud:*
 - “This paragraph explains how Quaker beliefs encouraged peace and nonviolence. That sounds like a reason for neutrality, so I would code it N.”
 - “This section explains why Patriots criticized people who remained neutral. That's describing another perspective, so I might code it P.”
 - “This paragraph provides historical context without clearly supporting any side. It's important background information, so I might code it I.”
 - Model uncertainty and evidence-based reasoning. Not every paragraph fits neatly into one category. Encourage students to explain and defend their thinking.

Guided Practice—We Do (5 minutes)

- *Read the next paragraph together.* Celebrate productive disagreement. There is no single correct answer for every paragraph.
 - “What is this section mostly explaining?”
 - “Is this describing neutrality, a Patriot or Loyalist perspective, or important background information?”
 - “Could more than one answer make sense?”
 - “What evidence supports your thinking?”
 - Celebrate productive disagreement.

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What reason for neutrality appears here?”
 - “Why might someone avoid choosing a side?”
 - “What evidence supports your code?”

Phase 2: Build Argument (Synthesis → Evidence → Writing)

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain why some colonists remained neutral during the American Revolution.

- *Teacher prompt:* “Now that we’ve learned about neutral colonists, gather evidence that explains why some colonists chose not to support either side during the American Revolution.”

Directed Note-Taking (15–20 minutes, Handout #3)

Guiding Question:

Why did some colonists choose to remain neutral during the American Revolution?

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you are gathering evidence to explain why some colonists decided not to support either side during the American Revolution. Think carefully about both the ideas and concerns that influenced them.” Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Concern	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about neutrality
Fear of violence and danger		
Religious or moral beliefs		
Practical and everyday concerns		
Uncertainty about the outcome		

- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Which concern appears most often?”
 - “Could a person have more than one reason for remaining neutral?”
 - “Which concern seems most understandable to you?”

Meet a Founding Father: Joseph Hewes (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “In the text from this lesson, we read about Elizabeth Drinker, a Quaker who tried to remain neutral during the American Revolution. Now we are going to meet Joseph Hewes, who also came from a Quaker background but chose to support independence and became a signer of the Declaration of Independence. As you listen and watch, think about why two people with similar religious influences might make different choices during the Revolution. You are going to have to make some inferences based on what you’ve read about Elizabeth Drinker, the Joseph Hewes biography I will read to you, and the video we will watch together. ”
- **Read** the Joseph Hewes biography aloud to the class from:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles>
- **Show** the Joseph Hewes video to the class from:
<https://youtu.be/YdP9zWo1s4I?si=YDCKsjnblgjq0DYe>

Note: The video helps students connect personally to the historical choices people faced during the Revolution. The text remains the primary source for understanding neutrality.

- *Students complete Handout #4 while watching.*
- *Teacher prompts (after video):*
 - “Why did Elizabeth Drinker remain neutral?”
 - “Why did Joseph Hewes support independence?”
 - “How did Quaker beliefs influence each person?”
 - “Why might people with similar backgrounds make different decisions?”

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Why did some colonists choose neutrality?”
- *Students discuss:*
 - Was neutrality easy or difficult?
 - What risks came with remaining neutral?
 - Why might someone avoid taking sides?
 - Can a person care deeply about their country and still remain neutral?
- *Teacher prompt (after students talk):* “Many neutral colonists were not indifferent. They cared deeply about their families, communities, and beliefs. Some simply believed that avoiding conflict was the most responsible choice.” Let this synthesis emerge from student responses rather than leading with it.

Debate: Why did colonists remain neutral? (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display the debate question and the four concerns:

The Debate Question

Which concern best explains why many colonists remained neutral during the American Revolution?

Neutral concerns:

- Fear of violence and danger
- Religious or moral beliefs
- Practical and everyday concerns
- Uncertainty about the outcome

Note: These are different ways the text helps explain neutral decisions.

Debate Directions

Choose one concern and explain why it best explains colonists choosing neutrality. Students must support their thinking using evidence from the text or video.

Structured Discussion

- Call on students who chose different ideas. *Prompts include:*
 - “What evidence supports your position?”
 - “Does another group disagree?”
 - “Could more than one reason be correct?”
 - “Was neutrality a reasonable choice?”
 - “If you lived in 1776, what might have influenced your choice? What would you have done?”
 - There is no single correct answer. The goal is for students to use evidence to defend a position—exactly the thinking the essay requires. Teachers may shorten discussion or combine steps depending on class time.

Bridge to Essay

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you explored why some colonists chose not to support either side during the Revolution. Your essay will ask you to compare two individuals who reached very different conclusions.”

Primary Assessment Task (20–25 minutes, Handout #2)

Revolutionary Writers Essay: Elizabeth Drinker and Joseph Hewes

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 12 and also serves as one of nine potential student essays for the FIREWORKS250 Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition for students with teachers participating in cohort 2. Participating teachers should save all student essays. Students will select their best essay at the end of the year to submit for the competition.

- *Teacher prompt:* “You have read about Elizabeth Drinker, a Quaker who tried very hard to stay neutral during the American Revolution. You have also learned about Joseph Hewes, a man from a Quaker family who signed the Declaration of Independence as a Patriot. Remember from our text that Quakers were one of the largest groups that stayed neutral because of their religious beliefs. Many Quakers refused to take oaths of loyalty, bear arms, or support either army because they believed it was against their religious beliefs to commit or support acts of violence. Imagine you are a Quaker living in 1776. Would you remain neutral like Elizabeth Drinker or become a Patriot like Joseph Hewes? Explain your choice using at least two reasons and support your answer with evidence from the text and video. Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

Imagine you are a Quaker living in 1776.

Would you remain neutral like Elizabeth Drinker or become a Patriot like Joseph Hewes?

Explain your choice using at least two reasons and support your answer with evidence from the text and video.

Students should write a paragraph that:

- explains which choice they would make.
- describes Joseph Hewes's perspective.
- describes Elizabeth Drinker's perspective.
- Explains how Quaker beliefs influenced each person.
- uses evidence from the text and video.

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

If I lived in 1776, I would have...

Elizabeth Drinker believed...

Joseph Hewes believed...

One reason neutrals remained neutral was...

One reason Patriots supported independence was...

Their different experiences influenced them because...

I would have made this choice because...

Sample paragraphs:

If I had lived during the American Revolution, I would have remained neutral like Elizabeth Drinker. One reason is that I would have wanted to keep my family safe during a dangerous time. The text explains that many neutral colonists feared violence and did not want to become involved in the fighting. Another reason is that I would have respected the Quaker belief in peace and nonviolence. Elizabeth Drinker believed people should solve problems without fighting, even when others pressured them to choose a side. Joseph Hewes came from a similar Quaker background, but he chose to support independence and became a Patriot. Although I understand why Hewes believed independence was important, I would have chosen neutrality because protecting my family and avoiding violence would have been most important to me.

If I were a Quaker living in 1776, I would have become a Patriot like Joseph Hewes. One reason is that the British were treating the colonists very unfairly by taking away their rights. Joseph Hewes saw this and decided to sign the Declaration of Independence to help fight for freedom. Another reason is that even though Quakers believed in peace, sometimes you have to stand up for what is right. Elizabeth Drinker stayed neutral to follow her religion, but I think I would want to help my country like Joseph Hewes did. It would be a hard choice, but I would choose to be a Patriot.

Closure (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* "Today we learned that not all colonists chose to become Patriots or Loyalists. Many people remained neutral because of their beliefs, fears, responsibilities, or uncertainty about the future."
- *Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:* "Which reason for neutrality do you think is most understandable to you—and why?"
- *Exit Ticket prompt:* "What was the strongest reason some colonists chose not to take a side during the American Revolution?"

Handout #1

Neutrals—Why Some Colonists Chose Not to Pick a Side

In the 1770s, the 13 American colonies were part of the British Empire. When trouble grew between the colonies and Britain, people had to decide what to do. Historians say the colonists split into three main groups—Patriots, Loyalists, and Neutrals. This story is about the **neutrals** and why many colonists chose not to join either the Patriots or the Loyalists.

What Did Neutrals Believe? Their Reasons for Staying Out

Neutrals were not always against independence or loyal to the king—they just wanted to avoid the war. They believed the fighting would bring more harm than good. Many thought the conflict was between extreme groups (radical Patriots and stubborn Loyalists), and ordinary people should stay safe and wait for a peaceful solution.

Their main motivations included:

- **Fear of Violence and Danger.** Both sides used pressure, threats, and violence. Patriots forced people to sign loyalty oaths, boycotted businesses, or tarring-and-feathering those who disagreed. Loyalists sometimes reported neighbors to British officials. Neutrals feared being attacked, having their homes burned, or losing everything no matter who won. Staying quiet felt safer than choosing a side.
- **Religious or Moral Beliefs.** Some groups, like Quakers (Society of Friends), believed war was wrong. Their religion taught peace and nonviolence, so they refused to fight, join militias, or pay taxes that supported the war. Quakers were committed pacifists who saw violence as against God's will. Other pacifists or people with strong moral views felt the same—war hurt innocent people and went against their faith.
- **Practical and Everyday Reasons.** Many colonists were busy farmers, shopkeepers, or families who just wanted to live their lives. They had no strong political opinions or felt the distant king didn't affect them much day-to-day. They worried a war would destroy crops, close trade, raise prices, or bring soldiers to their homes. Neutrality let them focus on survival instead of politics.
- **Uncertainty About the Outcome.** At the start, no one knew who would win. Many neutrals thought Britain was too powerful to defeat, or that the Patriots' rebellion might fail quickly. They didn't want to risk their property, family, or future on an uncertain cause.

Examples of Neutrals

Many ordinary colonists—farmers in rural areas, small merchants, recent immigrants, or people in mixed communities—tried to stay neutral. In frontier regions, people often stayed neutral because they were more worried about Native American attacks or daily hardships than distant politics.

A Quaker Example

Quakers were one of the largest groups that stayed neutral because of their religious beliefs. They refused to take oaths of loyalty, bear arms, or support either army. This made life hard—Patriots sometimes fined them or took their property for not helping the war effort, while British forces might punish them for not supporting the king.

One famous Quaker who tried to stay neutral was Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, a Philadelphia woman who kept a detailed diary during the war. She and her husband Henry were pacifists who wanted no part in the fighting. Elizabeth wrote about the fear and hardship neutrals faced: soldiers from both sides took food from their home, and the family worried about being accused of helping the “wrong” side. Despite the pressure, Elizabeth stayed true to her Quaker principles of peace and nonviolence. Her diary shows how neutrals often suffered from both armies while trying to protect their families and live quietly.

Neutrality was hard to maintain. Patriots sometimes called neutrals “cowards” or treated them like Loyalists. British forces might punish them for not helping. Many neutrals ended up helping whichever army was nearby just to survive.

The neutrals’ choice shows that not everyone saw the Revolution as a clear fight between good and evil. For many, the war meant danger, loss, and uncertainty. They hoped to protect their families, homes, and way of life by staying out of the war. The Revolution was hard and divided Americans deeply. The Patriots won, but the stories of Loyalists and neutrals remind us that history is complicated—people had different fears, beliefs, and reasons for their choices. Through their stories, we can see how big events like the Revolution forced people to make tough choices. Neutrality was one way some colonists tried to stay safe in a divided time.

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

Imagine you are a Quaker living in 1776.
Would you remain neutral like Elizabeth Drinker or become a Patriot like Joseph Hewes?
Explain your choice using at least two reasons and
support your answer with evidence from the text and video.

Remember: Use what you learned about Elizabeth Drinker from the text and Joseph Hewes from his biography and video.

Step 1: Choose Your Position

Which choice would you make?

- ☐ Remain neutral like Elizabeth Drinker
- ☐ Become a Patriot like Joseph Hewes

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

Which of these two people (Drinker or Hewes) would you have supported?

I would have supported _____

What is one reason for your choice?

What is a second reason for your choice?

How do Elizabeth Drinker's personal experiences and choices influence your decision?

My decision was influenced by _____

How do Joseph Hewes' personal experiences and choices influence your decision?

My decision was influenced by _____

Why do you think your choice would have been the best one?

I think that my choice would have been best because _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph.

[illegible]

If I lived in 1776, I would have...

Elizabeth Drinker believed...

Joseph Hewes believed...

One reason neutrals remained neutral was...

One reason Patriots supported independence was...

Their different experiences influenced them because...

I would have made this choice because...

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Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Guiding Question:

Why did some colonists choose to remain neutral during the American Revolution?

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. Find evidence for each concern that influenced some colonists to remain neutral. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Concern	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about neutrality
Fear of violence and danger		
Religious or moral beliefs		
Practical and everyday concerns		
Uncertainty about the outcome		

Think About It:

What was the strongest reason some colonists remained neutral during the Revolution?

Which concern do you think would have influenced you most? Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Video: Joseph Hewes—<https://youtu.be/YdP9zWo1s4I?si=YDCKsjnblgjq0DYe>

Directions: Listen as your teacher reads the biography of Joseph Hewes and then watch the video. Think about why Joseph Hewes and Elizabeth Drinker made very different choices during the American Revolution, even though they were both influenced by Quaker beliefs. Answer the questions below.

1. What choice did Joseph Hewes make during the American Revolution?

2. Why do you think Joseph Hewes decided to support independence?

3. How were Joseph Hewes and Elizabeth Drinker similar and different?

4. Why might two people with similar backgrounds make different decisions?

5. If you had lived during the American Revolution, would you have agreed more with Elizabeth Drinker or Joseph Hewes? Explain your thinking.
