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# John Locke: A Teacher's Guide

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## **John Locke in the Standards**

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### **Texas §113.33.c.16.B (World History Studies)**

Government. The student understands the process by which democratic-republican government evolved. The student is expected to: *identify the impact of political and legal ideas* contained in significant historic documents, including Hammurabi's Code, Justinian's Code of Laws, Magna Carta, **John Locke's** Two Treatises of Government, and the Declaration of Independence.

### **Texas §113.35.c.2.A (United States Government)**

History. The student understands how constitutional government, as developed in the United States, has been influenced by people, ideas, and historical documents. The student is expected to: *analyze the principles and ideas* that underlie the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, including those of Thomas Hobbes, **John Locke**, and Charles de Montesquieu.

## **Biographical Summary**

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### *Early Life*

John Locke was born August 29, 1632, in Somerset, England and died October 28, 1704, in Essex, England. His father, also named John Locke, was a Parliamentarian lawyer, and his mother Agnes Keen was the daughter of a tanner. Both of his parents were Puritan. Because his father was a lawyer and at times a judge, Locke was always around politics. In 1647, Locke was sent to Westminster School to obtain his formal education. In 1652, he continued his higher education at Christ Church, Oxford. While at Oxford he studied logic, grammar, rhetoric, all sorts of philosophy and eventually medicine. At Oxford he earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree and finally a Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1674.

### *A Move Toward Politics*

In 1666 John Locke met Lord Ashley, first Earl of Shaftesbury, when the latter was seeking medical attention. Locke made such a powerful impact on Shaftesbury that he decided to hire Locke as his personal physician, even though Locke had not finished his studies. This relationship would prove to be a defining relationship in Locke's life. It launched Locke into a world of nobility and politics. Their relationship would last for the rest of Shaftesbury's life and by the time Shaftesbury died in 1683, Locke had used his acquaintance with Shaftesbury to make a name for himself.

It was his friendship with Shaftesbury that unlocked opportunities for Locke. For one thing, it was Locke's fervent conversations with Shaftesbury and with his teacher Thomas Sydenham that provided much of the material for his major work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In 1683 at the age of 50 John Locke went into exile. This was because of his connection to Shaftesbury and fierce criticisms Locke had against King James II. Locke would remain in exile in Holland for five years, and during this time he was able to compose most of his two great works.

### *Life After Exile*

Upon returning from exile, and in the company of the new Queen Mary, Locke was finally able to fulfill his lifelong work. With the good favor of the monarchy Locke was able to devote much of the next two years to his writing and in 1690, Locke published his two works *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises on Civil Government*. Following the publication of these two works Locke continued to devote time to politics, writing and medicine. Over the next decade, Locke would toil away and would continue to worry about the legacy of his two great works. John Locke died October 28, 1704, in Essex, England.

### *Writings*

In 1690, at the age of 57, Locke published the two works that would ultimately earn his reputation as a philosopher and as a political theorist. The first of these works, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* helped shape the ensuing school of British Empiricism by expounding a variant form of how humans learn ideas. According to Locke, all humans are born with a blank slate as a mind and it is through experience that we get the knowledge of ideas.

John Locke is best known in history classrooms for his contribution to political theory. It is in this area that he wrote the second of his two influential works, *Two Treatises on Civil Government*. This work plays a formative role in the foundation of the United States' democratic ideals. As previously noted, this work is a product of its times. *Two Treatises* is a work written in the context of the revolution of 1688. It is written to justify the overthrowing of King James II. Because he lived in a time of political instability and upheaval, Locke is able to draw on much of his life's experience in politics to write a book that would resonate well into 1776 and 1787. The main argument of the work is that government is the derivative of a natural state of mankind, but people are still born with and should maintain certain natural rights. This is all stated in the second book of the *Two Treatises*. The work begins with a hypothetical depiction of the state of nature. This state is an anarchic state, as it exists in a time before government. While there is no one person or group of people to govern the actions of others, men are still not free to do as they wish. According to Locke, there exists amongst this group a natural law. However, not all men adhere to this natural law, or understand it correctly. It takes the formation of a group to protect the rights ownership of property and liberty. Locke believes that governments are formed for this purpose.

## Interpretations over Time

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John Locke can be studied within two major disciplines. In the field of philosophy, the focus on John Locke is how his ideas evolve over time. In other words, the historiography of John Locke in the field of philosophy would involve a look into Locke's theory of epistemology. It would then trace his philosophical ideas over the last couple centuries and how they are applied to different systems and have been interpreted by different philosophers. For example, a historiographical paper in philosophy might show that Locke is used by Immanuel Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to explain how the human mind categorizes objects, or how Alfred Ayer in the twentieth century continued the British empiricist tradition pioneered by Locke.

A view of the history of Lockean literature can also be obtained from the field of history. Such a view would look at John Locke's philosophy and how it has been interpreted over time, but the focus of such a task would be to look at how John Locke as a person and as a political theorist is seen over time. The task of this study is to examine the historical works on John Locke and in the process discover how interpretations of Locke have changed over time.

Historian Maurice Granston begins his introduction by informing the reader that in 1948 all of John Locke's personal papers were sold to Oxford and finally made public. Until this point only one other Locke historian had been given access to these papers, but he wrote an inconsequential book. Though few others have seen these letters, none have written anything that comes close to a revolutionary biography of Locke. This seems to be Granston's goal. He tells the reader that his endeavor began in 1948 as soon as these letters were released and that they were the primary source for his book. He goes on to explain the wealth of information that a historian can get from the thousands of letters in the Oxford collection.

What comes out of this project is a highly detailed look into the life of John Locke. Granston leaves nothing out of this nearly 500 page narrative of John Locke. Granston includes a direct quote from a letter or an excerpt of a financial record in every other page that lets the reader know that his book has been thoroughly researched and can be considered a reliable account of the life of John Locke. However, this work seems to sacrifice fluidity and prose for the sake of accuracy and detail.

In her 1996 work *John Locke and America*, historian Barbara Arneil gives the reader a more historical account of John Locke and his exploits into the Americas. For example, it is Arneil that tells us that Locke had multiple books from explorers coming to America and that Locke probably modeled his view of the state of nature from those works. Arneil also tells us that John Locke had personal interest vested in the success of the colonies. Locke was issued 4000 estates of land in the Carolinas in a charter from the king. In her work Arneil is giving us a holistic view of John Locke. He was not just some great thinker, but he was a man of his times and a man who was very much involved with the issues of his time. Locke was not just some intellectual who worried about how knowledge came to be in our brains, he was also a shrewd businessman who knew that his writings would be read by people in power, the kinds of people he wished to impress.

This view of John Locke is very different from the popular view of Locke. While John Locke has always been known for his involvement in British politics and his influence, post mortem, over American politics, the notion that Locke was personally involved in colonial

affairs is rarely discussed. Arneil attempts to give Locke a more human appeal. He was not only a scholar, but he was also a businessman who might have been writing in order to please the people who already gave him land.

Oxford University Press began publishing a series of short books entitled *A Very Short Introduction*. For their representation of Locke, they chose a previously written book by Locke expert John Dunn. Dunn had been writing about John Locke since his 1969 work *The Political Thought of John Locke* and has made a career of writing about Locke. His 2003 work *John Locke: A Very Short Introduction* of the previously mentioned series is a rewritten edition of a previous Locke work of his that he published in 1984. It is interesting to note that in the introduction Dunn tells his reader that he will not change anything about his old book. Although he has worked on research of John Locke since then he stands by the image he created of John Locke. This is a very interesting point about Locke scholarship. It has come to a standstill as far as the historical perspective is concerned. While philosophy is still fascinated with Locke, historians seem more interested with the product of Locke's works than with the man himself.

## **Recommendations for Teachers**

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### *Lesson Plans*

#### [Power to Learn Locke Lesson](#) (Power to Learn), grades 7-12

A brief outline for a lesson on intellectual influences of the Declaration of Independence. This lesson is designed for high school students.

#### [YMCA leadership Lesson](#) (University of Virginia), grades 7-12

A complete lesson for high school students designed to teach the various aspects of Locke's philosophy and his influence on American politics. This lesson has is full of useful information and examples of how Locke still influences government and has primary sources included. A must see for a comprehensive Locke lesson.

### *Websites*

#### Anonymous, [The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy- John Locke](#), 2006.

A general look at Locke's life and writings.

#### [Discovery Streaming-](#)

A website with a number of Locke videos. Just type in Locke in the search space and numerous short video clips on John Locke will pop up.

\*You will need to login with a paid subscription.\*

#### William Uzgalis, [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy- John Locke](#), 2009.

An overview of Locke's philosophy by one of the most complete philosophy websites on the web.

### *Additional Resources*

#### [John Locke's Manuscripts](#)

A website with letters to and from Locke, a chronology of his life, a bibliography of Locke sources and a link to additional resources.

#### [John Locke's Works](#) –

A website with Locke's writings online. It includes references and links to other Locke sources. However, most of the links are unreliable and do not work.

#### [John Locke Index-](#)

Another website with Locke's writings online.

#### [Philosophypages Locke Site-](#)

A brief overview of John Locke. A bit too brief.

## Select Annotated Bibliography

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### Primary Source Materials

Locke, John. [\*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding\*](#). New York: Oxford, 2008.

Locke, John. [\*Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration\*](#). New York: Yale University Press, 2003.

John Locke's major works in which he proposes and expands on his ideas concerning epistemology, politics, government, and morality. They are the basis for understanding Locke's thought and his influence in American politics.

### Full-length Biographies

Arneil, Barbara. *John Locke and America*. New York: Oxford, 1996.

Arneil writes about the brief, but powerful interactions that John Locke has with the American colonies. The focus of this work is less in the revolutionary ideas of Locke's work, but the small, but influential connections that Locke had with the colonies, including his political and economic interest in the colonies.

Dunn, John. *Locke: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford, 2003.

This work by Dunn, originally published as part of a series of biographies, is, as its title claims, a short and concise introduction into the life and work of John Locke. The work is broken up into three easily readable sections, and at just over 100 pages this introduction is both a serious addition to Locke scholarship and a book that a teacher can use for a high school or college lesson of Locke.

Huyler, Jerome. *Locke in America*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1995.

In this work, Huyler looks first at John Locke's philosophy before putting it into the context of the American experience. Huyler does this by looking at the historiography of Lockean literature and trying to either validate or negate what previous historians have said about John Locke and his influence in American politics.

Granston, Maurice. *John Locke: A Biography*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1957.

The most detailed of John Locke's biographies. Because of its release shortly after Locke's papers were made public, this biography offered the newest Locke insight at the time. It goes into all sorts of detail about his personal life and includes many primary sources.

Woolhouse, Roger S. *Locke: A Biography*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007.

This book offers some of the most recent Locke scholarship done by an author who has already produced Locke literature. This book is a comprehensive and detailed look into the life, with some mention of his works. The goal of the book is to give the most

detailed look into the life of a man who is not known so much for what he did, but for what he wrote.

#### *Article- or Chapter-length Biographical Sketches*

Stumpf, Samuel E. and James Fisher. "Empiricism in Britain" in *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond*, New York: McGraw Hill. 2003. 250-273.

*Socrates to Sartre* devotes ten pages to an in depth look into John Locke's philosophy. The focus of the book is the content of Locke's work, especially *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in order to enlighten any beginner in philosophy. The book puts Locke in the context of British Empiricism and considers Locke the founder of such philosophical tradition.

Stangroom, Jeremy and James Garvey. "John Locke" in *The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Foucault*, New York: Metro Books. 2007. 48-51.

This book offers a swift overview of John Locke's life and ideas. Because the section is only four pages long, this book lacks detail, but does a good job in establishing the foundation of Locke's belief and briefly explains his political and social life within the context of political upheaval of his day.

#### *Juvenile Biographies*

Faiella, Graham. *John Locke: Champion of Modern Democracy*. New York: Rosen Central, 2005.

An easy to read, yet highly detailed and informative summation of John Locke's life and work. This book is written at a moderate level and can be used by students in middle school, high school, and even college students who have never been introduced to Locke.

## **About the Author**

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Felipe Cortez is currently a teacher at Americas High School and an MA student at the University of Texas at El Paso. He received a BA degree in history and philosophy from Baylor University in 2007. Some of his interests include philosophical influences of the American Revolution, history of American thought, and existentialism. He lives in El Paso with his wife Lauren and daughter Jocelyn.

