

**Reading**

# “On the Equality of the Sexes” by Judith Sargent Murray, 1790<sup>1</sup>



## Directions

**Read the text by yourself.** As you read, make annotations in the left margin to record your ideas and reactions to the text. Use these annotation symbols:

- ♥ = **Thought** (when that line or sentence contains something that you like or that gives you an idea)
- ? = **Question** (when you don’t understand the line or sentence or you have a specific question about it)
- ! = **Epiphany** (when you just learned something important from this line or sentence about yourself, people in general, or the world)

**Do NOT answer the reflection questions in the dashed boxes. Do NOT complete the TQE Time! section or the connection questions.**

Annotations	The Status of Women During the Revolutionary Era	DEFINITIONS
♥ = Thought ? = Question ! = Epiphany	<p>At the dawn of the American Revolution, as ideas about <b>natural rights</b> and equality <b>circulated</b> widely, the notion that women were as <b>entitled</b> to these rights as men was still a radical proposition.</p> <p>After American independence, women were denied the right to vote everywhere except New Jersey. The state temporarily <b>permitted widowed</b> white women to vote before taking that right away in 1807.</p> <p>Overall, women, no matter their class or racial background, had few <b>legal</b> or <b>economic</b> rights in the early republic, and very little access to formal education.</p>	<p><b>natural rights:</b> rights that should be guaranteed to everyone</p> <p><b>circulated:</b> passed from person to person</p> <p><b>entitled:</b> deserving</p> <p><b>permitted:</b> allowed</p> <p><b>widowed:</b> to lose one’s husband or wife through death</p> <p><b>legal:</b> related to the law</p> <p><b>economic:</b> related to wealth</p>

<sup>1</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” The Massachusetts Magazine, March 1790, TeachingAmericanHistory.org (accessed March 24, 2022).

<p><b>Annotations</b></p> <p>♥ = Thought        ? = Question        != Epiphany</p>	<p><b>Judith Sargent Murray</b></p> <p>Judith Sargent Murray was born in 1751 to a wealthy family in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Although she was not allowed to go to school because she was a girl, Murray was a self-taught <b>intellectual</b> who was very familiar with the <b>philosophical</b> arguments of the day. A student of the Enlightenment, Murray believed in the idea that both women and men are entitled to a set of “natural rights” that cannot be taken away by governments.</p>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <p><b>Intellectual:</b> a highly developed thinker</p> <p><b>philosophical:</b> related to the study of knowledge and existence</p>
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<p><b>Annotations</b></p> <p>♥ = Thought        ? = Question        != Epiphany</p>	<p><b>“On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790)</b></p> <p>Murray first wrote her essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” in 1770, when she was just 19 years old. But it was not published until 1790, when she had already made a name for herself as a writer. In the essay, originally published in <i>The Massachusetts Magazine</i>, Murray asserted women’s natural equality with men, arguing against the widely held view that women were intellectually, morally, and spiritually <b>inferior</b>. Murray was part of a broader movement in America and Europe that used <b>Enlightenment</b> thought to argue for expanded rights and opportunities for women.</p> <p>In her essay, Murray wrote:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Is it upon mature <b>consideration</b> we adopt the idea, that nature is thus <b>partial</b> in her <b>distributions</b>? Is it indeed a fact, that she [nature] <b>hath yielded</b> to one half of the human species so unquestionable a mental <b>superiority</b>? I know that to both <b>sexes</b> elevated understandings, and the reverse, are common. But, <b>suffer me to ask</b>, in what the minds of females are so <b>notoriously deficient</b>, or unequal . . .</p>	<p><b>DEFINITIONS</b></p> <p><b>inferior:</b> less than</p> <p><b>Enlightenment:</b> a movement in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries.</p> <p><b>consideration:</b> thought</p> <p><b>partial:</b> biased</p> <p><b>distributions:</b> shares</p> <p><b>hath:</b> has</p> <p><b>yielded:</b> given</p> <p><b>superiority:</b> being better than</p> <p><b>sexes:</b> men and women</p> <p><b>suffer me to ask:</b> allow me to ask</p> <p><b>notoriously:</b> well known</p> <p><b>deficient:</b> lacking</p>
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**REFLECTION QUESTION:**

What question is Judith Sargent Murray asking in this paragraph?

<p><b>Annotations</b></p> <p>♥ = Thought ? = Question ! = Epiphany</p>	<p><b>“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)</b></p> <p>Are we deficient in <b>reason</b>? We can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of <b>acquiring</b> knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be <b>deduced</b> . . .</p>	<p><b>DEFINITIONS</b></p> <p><b>reason:</b> the power of the mind to make judgments based on logic</p> <p><b>acquiring:</b> getting</p> <p><b>deduced:</b> arrived at a conclusion</p>
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**REFLECTION QUESTION:**

Why does Murray argue that it is impossible to determine whether women are “deficient in reason” compared to men?

<b>Annotations</b> ♥ = Thought ? = Question ! = Epiphany	<b>“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)</b> <p>May we not <b>trace</b> its source in the difference of education, and continued advantages? How is the one [boys] <b>exalted</b>, and the other [girls] depressed, by the <b>contrary</b> modes of education which are <b>adopted</b>! The one is taught to <b>aspire</b>, and the other is early <b>confined</b> and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly <b>domesticated</b>, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science . . .</p>	<b>DEFINITIONS</b> <b>trace:</b> find <b>exalted:</b> praised <b>contrary:</b> opposite <b>adopted:</b> choose to take up <b>aspire:</b> to try to reach a goal <b>confined:</b> limited <b>domesticated:</b> stay in the home and cook and clean
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**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

What is the true source of the perceived differences between men and women, according to Murray?

<b>Annotations</b> ♥ = Thought ? = Question ! = Epiphany	<b>“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)</b> <p>Yes, ye lordly, <b>ye haughty</b> sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God <b>animates</b>, enlivens, and invigorates us . . . For equality only, we wish to <b>contend</b></p>	<b>DEFINITIONS</b> <b>ye:</b> you <b>haughty:</b> full of pride <b>animates:</b> to give life or energy to <b>contend:</b> to argue for
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### REFLECTION QUESTION:

What evidence does Murray use to support her central argument in this essay? Why might her evidence have been particularly persuasive to her audience at the time the essay was published?

### Directions for Reading a Second Time with a Partner



1. Read the text again with a partner. Take turns reading out loud to one another.
2. If you have new thoughts, questions, or epiphanies, add these annotations to the ones you made during the first read.
3. Answer the questions in the gray boxes at the end of each section together.
4. Do not discuss your annotations; wait until you get to **TQE Time!** at the end of the text. Read the directions there for sharing your annotations with each other.
5. Answer the connection questions together after **TQE Time!**



## Connection Questions



### Directions:

Read the connection questions below and try to answer them together.

Be prepared to share your answers with the whole class.

1. What connections can you make between this source and the ideas of the Declaration of Independence?

- Connection 1:
- Connection 2:
- Connection 3:

2. In what way can this source be seen as its own declaration? What is the source *declaring*?

3. You and your partner will write a tweet with no more than 280 characters (including hashtags and emojis). You have a choice of tweets to write:

- Choose a quote from the text that affected you in some way. Maybe you found it surprising, interesting, or troubling. Explain why the quote was meaningful for you.
- Tweet about your biggest “takeaway idea” (the most important idea that you will remember) from this text. What is the idea, and why is it important to remember?