

# “Join, or Die” Political Cartoon Activity Instructions for Educators

Educators, use these pages to introduce your children to Benjamin Franklin’s “Join, or Die” political cartoon. This activity is geared to children ages 8-12.

## Materials

Students will need pencils for writing down responses. For the “Draw Your Own Cartoon” activity, students may choose to use pencils, markers, crayons, or stickers to create their own cartoon. Educators may also choose to print out and cut the templates for the cartoons.

## Background Information for Educators

Believed to be one of the first political cartoons ever printed in an American newspaper, the “Join, or Die” political cartoon printed by Benjamin Franklin on May 9, 1754 depicted a snake severed into eight pieces, representing the separate colonies. Under the snake, the caption read “Join, or Die”, referencing the idea of the colonies’ need to stand together. The cartoon’s original intent had nothing to do with American independence, though. Franklin intended the cartoon to encourage American colonists to unite against the further expansion of the French in North America during the period known as the French and Indian War. This call for collaboration was more about protecting the land than the rights of the people, though as the years progressed, the image took on a more personal meaning to those who saw and invoked it.

The “Join, or Die” image reemerged for the repeal of the Stamp Act of 1765. Colonists protesting this tax imposed by the British Parliament on paper products resurrected the severed snake as a symbol of their desire to unify in opposition to unfair taxation - though not yet calling for a separation from Great Britain. The calls for independence became prominent in the 1770s as colonists responded to the removal of personal liberties like judicial rights by the British King and Parliament.

The “Join, or Die” political cartoon, along with persuasive pamphlets like Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, helped to open the hearts and minds of the people towards the idea of an independent American nation.

## For Further Reading

<https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/19227> (Places the “Join, or Die” cartoon in the context of the times; answers questions about what appears in the cartoon and what doesn’t)

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-05-02-0085> (Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Richard Partridge, May 8, 1754)

<https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/french-and-indian-war-unit-6.htm> (National Park Service Lesson Plan on the French and Indian War)

<https://www.americanheritage.com/rattle-snake-symbol-america> (Essay about rattlesnakes attributed to Benjamin Franklin, December 27, 1775)

**Answer Key to Activity Pages**

Images on first page are of a green light traffic signal; the logo of the Philadelphia Eagles football team; and the Liberty Bell.

The parts of the snake are:

- N.E. – New England
- N.Y. – New York
- N.J. – New Jersey
- P. – Pennsylvania
- M. – Maryland
- V. – Virginia
- N.C. – North Carolina
- S.C. – South Carolina