

Celebrate Constitution Day

A high school lesson plan prepared by:

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The Constitution of the United States

What is the nature, purpose, and philosophy of the United States Constitution?

“The Constitution is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people, it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government – lest it come to dominate our lives and interests.”

–Patrick Henry

Overview

In this lesson, students will study the Constitution from three perspectives, examining its structure, content, and underlying philosophy. After skimming and making inferences about the Constitution, students will focus on the separate articles: their purpose, content, and underlying ideas. Next, they will jigsaw into new groups and brief each other on their articles. Finally, they will work individually to analyze constitutional principles and locate relevant sections within the Constitution.

Objectives

In the core lesson, students will:

- list the purposes of the seven articles of the Constitution.
- identify the powers of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.
- understand the ways the Constitution ensures
 - republican government
 - limited government
 - separation of powers and checks and balances
 - individual rights
 - federalism
 - popular sovereignty
- appreciate the protections of the United States Constitution.

STANDARDS

CCE: IB1, IC1, IIA1, IID2, IIIA1, IIIA2, and IIIB1
NCHS: (5-12) Era 3, Standard 3A
NCSS: Strands 5, 6, and 10

MATERIALS

Student Handouts

- The Constitution of the United States
- **Handout A: Constitution Cube** (*run off on heavy or construction paper*)
- **Handout B: First Impressions**
- **Handout D: A Second Study**
- **Handout E: Looking Deeper at Philosophy**
- **Handout F: Government Around the World** (*optional*)

Additional Teacher Resources

- **Handout C: Constitutional Connection Cards**

RECOMMENDED TIME

One 45-minute period

LESSON PLAN



I. Background/Homework [10 minutes the day before]

- A. Distribute **Handout B: Constitution Cube**. Ask students to assemble it at home and bring it to class next time.
- B. Distribute individual copies of the Constitution and **Handout A: First Impressions**. Tell students not to read the document, but to answer the questions based only on what they can infer from the way the Constitution *looks*.



II. Warm-Up [15 minutes]

- A. Before class, copy and cut out the tickets on **Handout C: Constitutional Connection Cards**. Make sure there are enough tickets for all students. As students enter, give each one a card from **Handout B**.
- B. Have students read their quotation and assemble into groups with other students who have the same quotation. Each group will have approximately five members.
- C. Have students discuss their homework responses on **Handout B**.



III. Activity [30 minutes]

- A. Distribute **Handout D: A Second Study**. Have students locate their quotation in the Constitution and then work in their groups indicated on **Handout D** to carefully read and explain their sections of the Constitution.
- B. Distribute **Handout E: Looking Deeper at Philosophy**. Have students read and discuss the quotations that are taken from their article(s) of the Constitution and decide which constitutional principles they reflect. Allow about five minutes for discussion.
- C. Next, have students jigsaw into new groups with one “expert” representing each section of the Constitution. Have students brief each other on the purposes and content of their articles and complete all columns of **Handout D**.
- D. When **Handout D** is completed, have each group member in turn roll the Constitution Cube like a die. Each student should then locate a quotation from any section of the Constitution that reflects the constitutional principle that s/he “rolled.” Have students share their quotations with their group members.
- E. Reconvene the class and ask individual students to share their quotations, making sure to discuss at least one reflecting each constitutional principle: limited government, republican government, popular sovereignty, individual rights, separation of powers/checks and balances, and federalism.
- F. Conduct a large group discussion about the significance of Constitution Day and why it is cause for celebration.





IV. Homework

- A. Have students choose one statement from **Handout E** and write a paragraph explaining how it reveals one or more of the principles of the Constitution.
- B. Have students find a news story reflecting a constitutional principle and write one paragraph analyzing how it relates to that principle and, specifically, articles I-VII of the Constitution. Have students find their article from news headline links, updated every school day, at The Bill of Rights Institute website: <http://www.BillofRightsInstitute.org>
- C. Have students find a newspaper editorial or letter to the editor in which the writer claims a branch of government has exceeded its power under the Constitution. Have students consult the Constitution and write one paragraph explaining whether they believe the author of the editorial/letter is correct.

Extensions

- Have students choose one of the signers of the Constitution, and write a one to two page biographical essay. Have students go to The Bill of Rights Institute website to begin their research: <http://www.BillofRightsInstitute.org>. Students may also visit http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/constitution_founding_fathers.html or <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/delegates/bigpicture.html>.
- Have students research the Federalist and Anti-Federalist debate about adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution. They should create a PowerPoint presentation explaining the arguments of at least two prominent figures from both sides.
- Have students conduct research on at least four other countries and compare their government's structure to that of the United States. See **Handout F: Government Around the World** for a sample matrix. Constitutions from around the world can be found at <http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/index.html>

ANSWER KEY

Handout B: First Impressions

1. Seven
2. Answers will vary according to margins and type size. Students may believe it is shorter than their student handbook.
3. Students may suggest that because the section about the legislative branch is so much longer, the Founders saw it as the most powerful and significant branch of government.
4. Students may suggest that the Constitution is organized in a linear and orderly way, divided into clear sections and subsections.
5. Thirty-nine people. The signers are all men, and their names are associated with twelve states. Rhode Island is not represented.

Handout D: A Second Study

Article I

Purpose: explains the powers and responsibilities of the legislative branch.

Content:

1. bicameral (two-house) system
2. eligibility, election, and basis of representation for the House of Representatives
3. eligibility, election, and basis of representation for the Senate
4. elections and meetings of Congress
5. rules for Congressional proceedings
6. compensation, privileges, and rules for members of Congress
7. procedures for passing legislation
8. powers granted to Congress
9. powers denied to Congress
10. powers denied to the States

Article II

Purpose: explains the powers and responsibilities of the executive branch

Content:

1. eligibility and election of president and vice president
2. powers of the president
3. other duties of the president
4. reasons for impeachment

Article III

Purpose: explains the powers and responsibilities of the judicial branch

Content:

1. establishes Supreme Court, other courts to be established by Congress
2. powers of the judiciary
3. definition of treason

Article IV

Purpose: explains the relationship among states, and between the federal government and states

Content:

1. states recognize the laws and contracts of other states
2. duties of states to states
3. procedures for adding new states and territories
4. federal government responsibility to states

Article V

Purpose: explains how to amend the Constitution

Content: procedures for amending the Constitution

Article VI

Purpose: establishes the Constitution's supremacy

Content:

1. New government will honor all contracts of old government.
2. Constitution is the supreme law of the land.
3. no religious test for office

Article VII

Purpose: explains criteria for ratification

Content: The Constitution will be established when nine states have approved it. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention from the various states sign their names to it.

Handout E: Looking Deeper at Philosophy

Article I, A

- a. limited government, separation of powers
- b. popular sovereignty, republican government, federalism
- c. republican government, federalism

Article I, B

- a. limited government, individual rights
- b. separation of powers/checks and balances, limited government
- c. separation of powers/checks and balances

Article I, C

- a. federalism
- b. limited government, individual rights
- c. republican government, popular sovereignty

Article II

- a. limited government, republican government
- b. republican government, popular sovereignty, federalism
- c. limited government, separation of powers/checks and balances

Article III

- a. limited government, republican government, separation of powers/checks and balances
- b. federalism
- c. separation of powers/checks and balances, individual rights

Article IV and V

- a. limited government, individual rights, federalism
- b. republican government, federalism
- c. separation of powers/checks and balances, popular sovereignty, federalism

Article VI and VII

- a. limited government, federalism
- b. limited government, individual rights
- c. popular sovereignty, federalism