

## Teacher Tips

**Teacher Tips** This back-to-school season, you and your students have a chance to make history by participating in the nationwide Constitutional celebration on September 16 and 17. In addition to joining the exciting nationwide recitation of the Preamble, take this opportunity to explore the amazing document that created our system of government.

Though created well over 200 years ago, the Constitution is a living document that continues to evolve and speak to us today about issues the original Framers could not have imagined. The activities that follow will help you teach about the creation, content, and ongoing interpretation of the Constitution—and help you find connections to your students' everyday lives.

### Lesson 1: A Classroom Constitution

**Materials:** [A Classroom Constitution \(PDF\)](#)

**Curriculum Connections:** back to school (classroom management), citizenship

**Objective:** Students will use the U.S. Constitution as a model to create their own classroom constitutions.

**Getting Ready:** Have students read the text of the Constitution in this online Special Report. Point out that the U.S. Constitution is the highest law of the land, but that each state also has its own constitution. Explain that the class is going to adopt a constitution of its own for the coming school year, and that, like the national document, it will be created by the people.

#### What to Do:

1. Divide your class into small groups and explain that each group will be working to frame a proposal for a classroom constitution.
2. Distribute copies of the PDF and invite the student teams to go through the worksheet step by step.

In step 1, have students consider their goals for their learning environment. What conditions do they want to create in the classroom? Possible answers include: peace, equality, fairness, safety, happiness, etc.

3. In step 2, instruct students to describe the roles of teacher, students, principal, and other important parties in governing the classroom. How will decisions be reached regarding discipline? What opportunities will students have to voice their concerns?

4. In the final step, students should list the freedoms they believe that the citizens of the class deserve. Point out that there are two types of freedom: freedom to do certain things, and freedom from other things. In some cases, those rights may conflict with one another. For example, if students have the right to talk among themselves whenever they wish, the noise level may deny other students the right to learn. Students must consider these issues in crafting their "Bill of Rights."

5. Finally, have a class meeting to discuss the submitted proposals. Adopt a constitution that incorporates the strongest points of each group's work.

#### Extending the Lesson:

Put your classroom constitution in a Constitution Day 2005 time capsule for future generations of students to explore. You might also include a list of issues in the news today (or a copy of a local newspaper), a photo of your students as they participate in the Preamble recitation, and a description of the technology you used to participate in this year's event.

## Lesson 2: A Living Document

**Materials:** [A Living Document \(PDF\)](#)

**Curriculum Connections:** social studies, math, critical thinking

**Objective:** Students will read and use a time line of important constitutional amendments and discuss the merits of some recently proposed amendments.

**Getting Ready:** Discuss the title of the PDF "A Living Document." Explain that historians and social scientists often describe our Constitution as "living" because it continues to evolve and change to meet the demands and challenges of each new era. One way the Constitution "changes" is through interpretation by the Supreme Court. For example, the First Amendment right to free speech may be viewed differently today than it was a century ago. But the Constitution also changes in a very real, concrete way: It has had 27 different amendments added to it over time. Point out to students that the Framers of the Constitution were prepared for this; they even included rules for making changes within the text of the original document. In this activity, students will look at some of the changes that have been made as well as some that have been proposed but not adopted.

### What to Do:

1. Distribute the PDF and invite students to read the time line. Discuss the entries. Are students surprised that the original Constitution did not specify the right to vote for women or African Americans?
2. Have students answer the questions, then check their work using the answer key below.
3. Use this online report to explore the steps that must be taken for the Constitution to be amended. Ask: Do you think it is easy to change the Constitution?

### Extending the Lesson:

Students may be surprised to learn that more than 9,000 constitutional amendments have been proposed, but only 17 have passed since the original 10 amendments that make up the Bill of Rights. Debate the pros and cons of these rejected proposals:

- This session of Congress has considered an amendment to allow citizens who were not born in the U.S. to become President if they have been citizens for at least 20 years.
- In 2003-04, Congress considered an amendment to lower the age requirement for serving in the U.S. Congress to 21 (it is currently 30 for the House of Representatives and 25 for the Senate).
- In 2001-02, Congress considered an amendment that would guarantee the right to "equal high-quality health care" for all citizens.
- In 1991-92, Congress considered an amendment that would prohibit the death penalty.

*[Answers to PDF: 1. C; 2. B; 3. D; 4. C; 5. D. 6. Answers will vary.]*

### **Lesson 3: Is It Constitutional?**

**Materials:** [Is It Constitutional? \(PDF\)](#)

**Curriculum Connections:** debate, critical thinking, current events

**Objective:** Students will assume the role of Supreme Court justices and use what they have learned in the online Special Report to decide whether several actions/laws are constitutional.

**Getting Ready:** Explain to the class that it is the job of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution and decide whether particular laws are constitutional. The Justices must ask themselves difficult questions, such as, "Can there be limits to freedom of speech?" (First Amendment); "How does the right to bear arms apply to today's society?" (Second Amendment); or, "Is this punishment cruel and unusual?" (Eighth Amendment).

**What to Do:**

1. Divide students into groups (nine students per group is ideal, mirroring the size of the Supreme Court). Distribute the reproducible PDF and have students read the three case studies. If you wish, assign each group a different case to work on.
2. Have students debate the issues presented in the cases. Students can search online for additional information about free speech, video-game violence, separation of church and state, free press, and confidentiality agreements.
3. Have students vote on each issue and present the majority opinion to the class. In the tradition of the Supreme Court, students can write a brief essay explaining their decision. Dissenting students can write a minority opinion piece.