



CELEBRATING OUR CONSTITUTION



ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1787

the delegates at the Philadelphia Convention signed the Constitution. The Constitution is the law of the land and the document that created our form of government. Our constitution is the oldest written constitution of any democratic country. Although the Constitution was not ratified by the necessary nine of 13 states until May 29, 1790, we celebrate every September 17 as Constitution Day in the United States.

In 2005, the Congress passed a bill and the President signed it making it a law requiring schools to celebrate Constitution Day. Public schools in this country were founded to teach young people the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Two websites to learn more about the Constitution, the men who wrote it and signed it and other interesting information are www.constitutioncenter.org and www.archives.gov. These websites, as well as www.civiced.org and www.justicelearning.org provide some excellent activities for celebrating Constitution Day.

WE THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNITED STATES,
IN ORDER TO FORM A MORE
PERFECT UNION, ESTABLISH JUSTICE, INSURE
DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY, PROVIDE FOR THE
COMMON DEFENSE, PROMOTE THE GENERAL
WELFARE, AND SECURE THE BLESSINGS
OF LIBERTY TO OURSELVES AND OUR
POSTERITY, DO ORDAIN
AND ESTABLISH THIS CONSTITUTION FOR
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.
—PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

SCHOOLWIDE

- 1 Have each class memorize one portion of the Preamble and then at a schoolwide assembly, each class can present its part. A speaker could follow to explain what it means.
- 2 Have a Constitution Bee. Invite students to learn about the Constitution, the Constitutional Convention and the signers of the Constitution and then hold a schoolwide competition for the constitutional championship. Direct students to www.constitutioncenter.org (Constitutional Timeline and Fast Facts) and to www.archives.gov (Meeting America's Founding Fathers under the section on the Constitution).
- 3 At a school wide assembly, invite community members whose lives have been impacted by the Constitution. For example, invite politicians who rely on the Freedom of Speech to campaign and speak out on issues. Invite local newspaper reporters and editors who rely on the Freedom of Press to be able to criticize the government without fear of being punished. Ask Civil Rights leaders to recount how the Constitution was the main vehicle for desegregating American society.

GRADES 4 – 6

- 1 The Constitution has 27 amendments, which add to the Constitution that was originally passed in 1787. Some of these are:

First Amendment—guarantees the Freedoms of Religion, Press and Speech as well as the right to sign a petition asking the government to do something and the right to meet together in groups in a peaceful way.

Fourth Amendment—protects people from the police searching them or their houses or cars without having some evidence that a crime has been committed.

Fifth Amendment—says that people do not have to testify against themselves at a trial and that the government cannot take somebody's land for a highway or school unless the government pays them for the value of the land.

Sixth Amendment—says a person accused of a crime must have a lawyer, a speedy trial and a trial by jury.

Eighth Amendment—no cruel or unusual punishment can be given to someone who is convicted of a crime.

13th Amendment—outlaws slavery.

15th Amendment—gives all men, including freed slaves, the right to vote.

19th Amendment—gives women the right to vote.

26th Amendment—lowers the voting age to 18.

Which of these do you think is the most important? Choose one and write one or two paragraphs explaining why you feel that way. Share it with your classmates and be prepared to defend your choice.

- 2 Go to www.archives.gov website to the section on the Constitution and then to the section on Meeting America's Founding Fathers. Choose one of the signers of the Constitution and do a report on the signer for your classmates.

GRADES 7 – 9

- 1 Read the Preamble to the Constitution. What do the various phrases mean? What provisions did the framers put in the Constitution to carry out the purposes they talked about in the Preamble? How is our current government striving to still carry out those purposes?
- 2 Read the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. Some call this document more important than the original Constitution. Do you agree or disagree. Why? Which amendment do you think is most important? Be prepared to defend your position to your classmates.
- 3 Send a letter from your class to your local newspaper editor that lists some very important aspects of the Constitution, and invite the community to take time on September 17 to reflect on the importance of the Constitution.

GRADES 10 – 12

- 1 When we think of rights in this country, we usually look beyond the original Constitution and examine the Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments. However, there are some protections in the original Constitution that guarantee some of our rights. Define Writ of Habeas Corpus, Bill of Attainder, and Ex Post Facto Laws. Why did the framers include these provisions? What has been the history of these provisions? How are they applicable today?
- 2 Divide the class into several groups and divide up the parts of the original Constitution. Each group should decide how to re-write its part, incorporating both the amendments that have passed since 1787 as well as key Supreme Court cases. Combine the changes and see what the revised document would look like. Keep in mind that none of the current amendments, including the Bill of Rights, should be necessary after the re-write.

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