



LESSON 10:

Classroom Constitutional Convention

OVERVIEW

Franklin returned to America in 1785 and within two years was once again at the center of the effort to define and shape the new nation. In 1787, despite being in poor health and the oldest member of the Constitutional Convention, Franklin's keen observation of human nature made him an ideal delegate. Franklin brought to the Constitutional Convention a spirit of compromise and unity.

Students will study and illustrate, in words and pictures, the eight phrases that comprise the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as a way to understanding the U.S. Constitution's central principles and purpose. Students will then convene their own constitutional convention with the aim of crafting a preamble for their school's governance.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand the general purpose and goals of the U.S. Constitution through the study and analysis of its Preamble.
- Understand the general principles and values that underlie a constitutional democracy.
- Appreciate the process of identifying priorities and principles in crafting a governing document.

TIME

This lesson and activity require at least three class periods.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the U.S. Constitution, available at www.constitutioncenter.org/explore
- A copy of your school's constitution (if available)
- Computers with Internet access
- Printed resources (books, magazines, encyclopedias)
- Poster board

McREL STANDARDS

History/United States History

Standard 1. Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government

Standard 3. Understands how democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols

Standard 8. Understands the central ideas of American constitutional government, and how this form of government has shaped the character of American society

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Background

Introduce discussion by asking students about the U.S. Constitution. Guide students to understanding that a constitution is a set of laws that govern people living in the same country.

Provide some background information. After declaring independence from Great Britain, the 13 new states drafted the Articles of Confederation. This document loosely united the

states under a central government, thus allowing them to fight the British as one united nation. After the Revolutionary War was won, however, many felt that the national government established under the Articles of Confederation was not strong enough to govern either the domestic or foreign affairs of the new nation.

Consequently, in the spring of 1787, twelve of the thirteen states (Rhode Island chose not to participate) sent representatives to Philadelphia to discuss amending the Articles of Confederation. Franklin was one of the delegates appointed by the Pennsylvania government. This meeting became known as the Constitutional Convention, and instead of amending the Articles of Confederation, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention created a whole new document, the U.S. Constitution, which established the framework for the government we still have today.

2. Distribute copies of the Constitution to the class. If possible, use an overhead or digital projector to show an image of the U.S. Constitution. Otherwise, write the Preamble on the blackboard. Point out the Preamble in relation to the rest of the text. Ask students what purpose they think the Preamble serves.

3. Read the Preamble aloud to the students and then ask students to take turns reading different sections of the Preamble.

4. Tell students that one way to understand the principles behind the Constitution is to understand the words behind its preamble.

5. Group Work

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group one of the eight phrases of the Preamble below and ask each group to research the meaning and import of its phrase. Tell students that they may use a dictionary to first identify any unknown terms and then explain what their phrase means in relation to the main text of the U.S. Constitution. Groups will prepare their response in the form of a short paragraph essay.

- We the People of the United States
- in Order to form a more perfect Union
- establish Justice
- Insure domestic Tranquility
- provide for the common defence
- promote the general Welfare
- Secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity
- do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America

6. Ask the groups to post their short essays on their poster board. Inform students that the remainder of the space on the poster board should be used to illustrate, in any manner they see fit, a scene that best describes the principle underlying the phrase. (For example, students may describe “We the People of the United States” as an expression of power resting with the people and illustrate that principle with people going to the polling booth.)

7. Ask the groups to present the work on their posters. Once each group has presented a poster, the class will assemble the Preamble, in correct order, and affix it to a classroom wall.

8. At the following class, ask groups to reconvene to draft a preamble for their school's constitution. If the school does not have a constitution, students can still draft a preamble to its hypothetical constitution. Students now know that the purpose of the preamble is to set forth the aspirations and goals of the ensuing rules or set of laws. The preamble to the school's constitution should reflect the school's goals and guiding spirit behind its governance structure and administration.

9. Debate and Negotiation

At the next class, groups will meet in one central space, preferably in a large circle, and exchange their ideas for a preamble to the school's constitution. The class is charged with negotiating and crafting a final version of the preamble, one that they believe best serves their school community, by the end of class. (Teacher may select an incentive to encourage collaboration with an aim toward resolution within a certain time frame.)

10. At the conclusion of the debate, remind students that one of the strengths that Franklin brought to the Constitutional Convention was his spirit of compromise. Ask students to reflect on Franklin's simple reasoning when urging his fellow delegates to compromise on one of the thornier issues at the Convention—state representation in the new federal government: "When a broad table is to be made, and the edges of the planks do not fit, the artist takes a little from both, and makes a good joint. In like manner here, both sides must part with some of their demands."

11. Type and post the school preamble alongside the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

12. Writing

Ask students to write a paragraph which describes the class' process of debate and compromise when crafting their school preamble.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on their writing activity and on their active participation in group work, class discussion, and debate.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Ask students to write a paragraph or short essay describing which ideal expressed in the Preamble to either the U.S. Constitution or school constitution represents the most important principle to them and why.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- National Archives Charters of Freedom
www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters.html
- Library of Congress American Memory Project
www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/
- Teaching American History.org
www.teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/
- National Constitution Center
www.constitutioncenter.org/explore/Welcome/index.shtml