



LESSON 3:

Reading the Work of B. Franklin, Printer

OVERVIEW

Benjamin Franklin was buried in Christ Church Cemetery in Philadelphia, under a tombstone that reads “B. Franklin, Printer.” Although he officially retired from the printing business at the age of forty-two, Franklin continued to consider himself a member of the trade for the duration of his life. Franklin printed newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, broadsides, and of course, almanacs.

As printer and publisher of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin used his paper to disseminate his own views and those of others on the issues of the day. In support of his journalistic principles, Franklin wrote: “Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have advantage of being heard by the public; and that when Truth and Error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.”

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Read and analyze “Apology for Printers,” a primary source document written by Franklin in the course of his printing career.
- Interpret the free press clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and compare it to the principles set forth in the Franklin writing.
- Examine a recent survey of opinions regarding interpretations of the First Amendment and analyze the results of that survey in the context of Franklin’s “Apology for Printers.”

TIME

This lesson and activity require one class period, with additional time to complete the activity at home.

MATERIALS

- Copies of a local newspaper
- Benjamin Franklin. “Apology for Printers,” in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. May 27, 1731. *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay. (New York: The Library of America, 1987). Available at www.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/apologyforprinters.html
- “What Would Franklin Think?” handout

McREL STANDARDS

History/Historical Understanding

Standard 2. Understands the historical perspective

Language Arts

Standard 10. Understands the characteristics and components of the media

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Discussion

Ask students the following questions to generate a discussion:

- Should people be allowed to express unpopular opinions?

- Should newspapers be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories?
- Should musicians be allowed to sing songs containing lyrics that others may find offensive?
- Should high school students be allowed to report controversial issues in their student newspapers without the approval of school authorities?

2. Distribute copies of Franklin’s “Apology for Printers.” Ask students to read the handout, or you may want to have one student read aloud one statement at a time, working with students to gain an understanding of the text.

3. Display the text of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States for the whole class to see:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

4. Ask students to explain the similarities and differences between the First Amendment and Franklin’s “Apology for Printers.”

5. Ask students to consider whether or not there may be good reason to restrict some forms of speech in some places. For example, explain that in the 1990s some universities began restricting what they referred to as “hate speech” in public forums and classrooms. “Hate speech” is a controversial term for speech intended to degrade, intimidate, or incite violence or prejudicial action against someone based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or disability.

6. Homework

Distribute copies of the “What Would Franklin Think?” handout. Using the data and the information from Benjamin Franklin’s “Apology for Printers,” students will assume the role of a 21st-century Benjamin Franklin. Students will then write an editorial to their local newspaper describing their reaction to the survey and their own position on the last point: “Should high school students be allowed to report controversial issues in their student newspapers without approval of school authorities?”

In their editorials, they should note an account for the sharp “apparent change” in opinion of school principals when discussing free speech in relation to students as opposed to people in general. They should also comment on the survey’s implications for American society in the 21st century.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their class participation and the extent to which their editorials demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the notion of free speech in contemporary society. Essays may be evaluated according to an established rubric.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Ask students to write a 21st-century apology for bloggers.

FURTHER RESOURCES

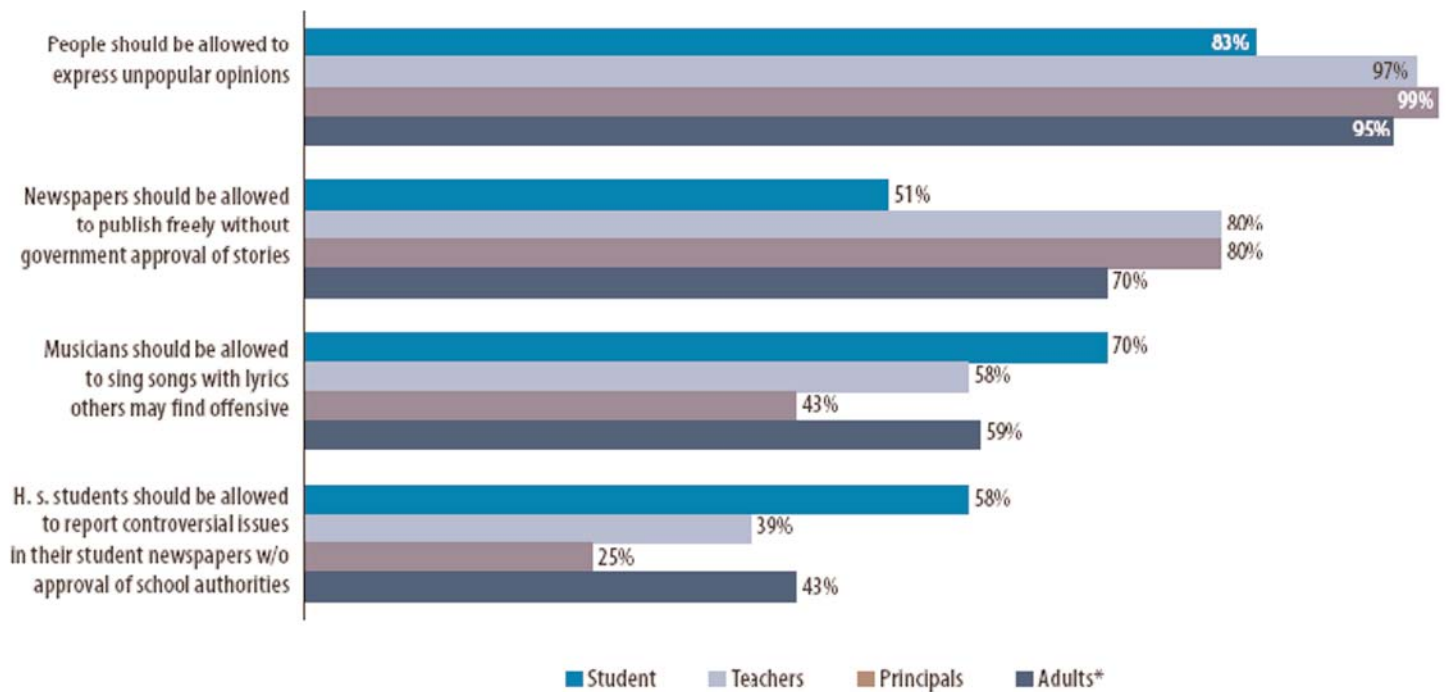
- National Constitution Center’s Interactive Constitution:
www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution
- Justice Learning Guide to the Constitution: www.justicelearning.org

What Would Franklin Think?

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

-First Amendment to the United States Constitution

Percent who agree with each statement is shown



2005 Knight Foundation Report: “The Future of the First Amendment”