

# Essentials of the US Constitution Unit

## Summary

### **Enduring Understanding:**

Students will understand how the content of the U.S. Government enables the U.S. Government to function.

### **Essential Questions:**

- What is the basic structure of the Constitution?
- What are the roles and functions of the three branches of government?
- How do separation of powers and checks and balances affect the U.S. Government?
- What are the rights, liberties, and responsibilities of U.S. citizens?
- How is the Constitution a living document?

## Time Frame

3 class periods of 90 minutes each

## Group Size

Small Groups

## Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication, Social & Civic Responsibility

## Materials

Depending upon which activities you decide to do, you will need some of the items from the list below:

- School House Rock Video or CD
- US History Textbook or copy of the Constitution
- Index Cards
- Drawing paper and colored pencils or markers
- Copy of a Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances graphic
- Copies of Civil Liberties Pre-Quiz
- Newspapers and Magazines
- Cards for the Rights and Responsibilities group activity

## Background for Teachers

You will need to understand the following vocabulary terms for the Civil Liberties Quiz.

- **Writ:**  
a written order, from a court, that requires the performance of a certain act
- **Civil Rights:**  
Personal liberties guaranteed to U.S. citizens by the 13th and 14th Amendments
- **Writ of Habeas Corpus:**  
Requires officials to bring a person whom they have arrested and held in custody before a judge in a court of law
- **Civil Liberties:**  
Freedoms spelled out in a constitution
- **Bill of Attainder:**  
Law that punishes a person without permitting him a trial or fair hearing in a court of law

**- Ex Post Facto Law:**

Makes an act a crime that was not a crime when committed, or increases the penalty for a crime after it was committed, or changes the rules of evidence to make it easier to convict someone.

Student Prior Knowledge

How and why the Constitution was created and written.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will understand the basic structure of the Constitution.

Students will understand the roles and functions of the three branches of government.

Students will understand how the separation of powers and checks and balances affect the U.S. Government.

Students will understand the rights, liberties, and responsibilities of U.S. citizens.

Students will understand how the U.S. Constitution is a living document.

Instructional Procedures

Begin this lesson with a "hook". You may use things such as a 'How much do you know about the Constitution?' or a modified version of the INS citizenship test. Or, you could have students create their own classroom constitution.

**Essential Question#1: What is the basic structure of the Constitution?**

Have students look through a copy of the Constitution in order to familiarize themselves with the format.

Students will be able to identify parts of the Constitution (i.e. Preamble, Articles, Signatures, Amendments)

Students will identify key features of each of the parts (i.e. each Article of the Constitution deals with a different topic or each Article is comprised of sections)

**Essential Question #2: What are the roles and functions of the three branches of government?**

Students will brainstorm a list of qualifications for each of these jobs. This could be done as a whole group activity by writing their ideas on the board in three separate columns or, they could work in groups or with a partner to do this.

Students will utilize Articles 1-3 of the Constitution. They will correctly identify the three branches of government and their primary focus/duty.

**Article I ideas:**

Students can design a help wanted ad describing the job of and requirements for a senator or representative. (This can be followed with a discussion of whether or not these qualifications were different from what they expected.)

Play the School House Rock Video or CD "I'm Just a Bill" for the students. They can then use the information from that video and/or their books to make a ladder or flow chart showing the steps needed for a bill to become a law. Your more verbal or linguistic students could make up a song or poem that explains these steps.

Put all the steps used in the process of making a bill into a law on cards. Each student will be given one of the cards and they will then need to put themselves in order (correctly!)

This is a good follow up assessment for the day after you discussed and learned about Article #1.

**Article II ideas:**

Write questions for a job interview with a candidate for president (students will use information from this Article to help frame their questions).

Identify which parts of Article II deal with issues such as impeachment and conviction, resignation, or the death of the president.

### **Article III ideas:**

Make a "Wanted Poster" that identifies the qualities an ideal Supreme Court Justice should possess.

Write an essay that demonstrates an understanding of how one's rights are protected. (Students will use information from this Article to help frame the content of their essay).

Debate an issue such as:

Should Supreme Court Justices be appointed for life?

Why did the writers of the Constitution clearly define treason? Should they have done so?

### **Essential Question #3: How do separation of powers and checks and balances affect the U.S. Government?**

The teacher will need to give a brief introduction lecture or discussion about the origin of and meaning of separation of powers and checks and balances. (Students could also be assigned an outside reading that covers the same information.)

Distribute a copy of the Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances graphic. Have students study it and answer the questions. Review the answers and questions with the class.

Discuss the graphic and create a list of pros and cons to this system.

A follow-up quiz on this material at a later date is advisable.

### **Essential Question #4: What are rights, liberties, and responsibilities of U.S. citizens?**

Vocabulary matching activity is a good lead in for the Essential Question.

Have students take the Civil-Liberties pre-quiz below. Rationale for the answers is listed below.

Review the answers with the students. Do follow-up explaining and questioning as necessary.

Students will then participate in the Rights and Responsibilities group activity. Directions are provided below.

### **Essential Question #5: How is the Constitution a living document?**

Students will use newspapers and magazines to research how a certain amendment, article, or the Constitution in general is used today. With the information the students compile, they will make a current event poster.

If desired, these posters could be presented to the whole class.

Students could work individually on this, or with a partner, depending upon your preference.

### Assessment Plan

#### **Possible Assessment Options:**

Make a booklet for a new immigrant that summarizes the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Use your own words and cartoons or illustrations. (If necessary or desired, the class could brainstorm a list of appropriate or required terms before beginning project.)

Test

### Authors

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