

# The U.S. Constitution



Hear Ye! Hear Ye! Hear Ye!

Read about the Constitution—  
learn its history  
and why it's important!

America was an exciting but somewhat scary place to be on July 4, 1776. This was the day that the men attending a meeting in Philadelphia, called the Second Continental Congress, adopted the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence said that the 13 British colonies in America no longer wanted Great Britain to be their government. They didn't think the British government treated them fairly. That is why July 4th is considered the birthday of our nation.

The men who wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence were called Founders because they founded our country.

Although we weren't yet a nation on July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence had some hints of what was to come. In the Declaration, the colonies were referred to as the "thirteen united States of America," which

was close to calling us the United States of America.

But in 1776, each colony wanted to be its own state with no one else governing it. So how did the "united States" become the United States of America?

When the Revolutionary War ended in our favor in 1781, our nation had a government but no president or judges. There was no national money. There was no military because the Revolutionary soldiers all returned to their homes.

Many of the Founders and other state leaders gathered again in the summer of 1787 to work on the government. The meeting was called the Constitutional Convention, and the 54 men decided a better government was needed that could coin money, raise an army and regulate trade with the states and with other countries.

Creating a whole new Constitution was the easy decision. Since these men would create or "frame" a new constitution they became known as the Framers. Deciding what the new government would look like was a much harder task.

George Washington was chosen to lead the Constitutional Convention, but it was his fellow Virginian, James Madison, who had the most ideas.

Madison suggested that the new government have three branches, with each having a check on the other. This is called separation of powers with a system of checks and balances.

Madison also suggested that the national government and the states each have some powers. This is called federalism—a combination of national and state governments. These two elements of our government have been widely copied by other countries and are still called brilliant ideas! That is why James Madison is called the Father of the Constitution.

The introduction to the Constitution is called the Preamble, and it summarizes what the Framers wanted for our country:

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,

AND SECURE THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY TO OURSELVES AND OUR POSTERITY, DO ORDAIN AND ESTABLISH THIS CONSTITUTION FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

They wanted to improve our country; they were concerned about safety in the states and about threats from foreign countries. They also wanted a government that would protect the people's freedoms.

The biggest arguments at the Convention were between the big and small states. All of the delegates agreed that there needed to be a government that was elected by the people. Of course, the big

states wanted representation to be based on population and the small states wanted every state to have the same number of representatives.

The solution to this argument is known as the Great Compromise: the legislative branch (Congress), the lawmakers, would be made up of two parts. The first part would be a House of Representatives based on population, but every state, regardless of how small, would get at least one representative.

The second part was a Senate where every state gets two Senators. This compromise passed by only one vote.

The Framers signed the Constitution on September 17, 1787, but they had to get the people in each state to approve, or ratify, it.

A group called the Federalists was for the Constitution as it was written. Another group called the Anti-Federalists fought against the Constitution and said they could only support it if some things were added.

In order to get everyone to ratify the Constitution, the Federalists promised they would write a Bill of Rights, 10 amendments to add to the Constitution.

In the fall of 1788, New Hampshire became the ninth state to approve the Constitution, which was the necessary number of states for the Constitution to become the law of the nation.

On December 15, 1791, enough states approved the Bill of Rights as the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. In the 215 years since then, there have only been 17 more amendments. The most notable of those are:

- The Civil War Amendments—13, 14, 15. They outlaw slavery, give free black men the right to vote and make sure the states protect the freedoms found in the Bill of Rights.
- The 19th Amendment, which gives women the right to vote.
- The 26th Amendment, which lowers the voting age to 18.

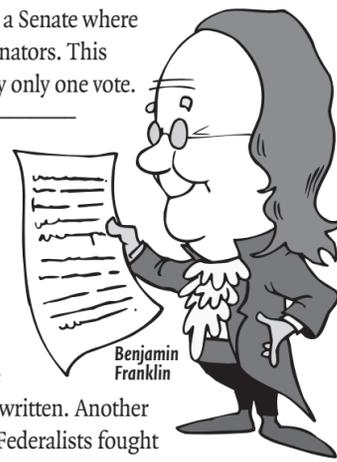
These amendments guaranteed that those people who were left out at the Constitutional Convention were now included in our government.



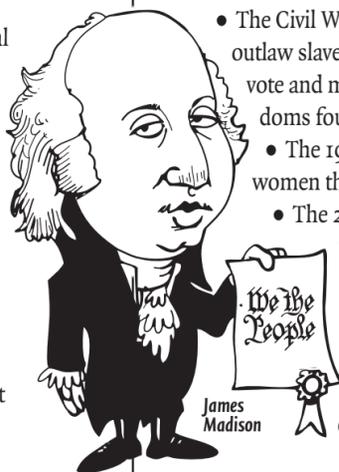
Thomas Jefferson



George Washington



Benjamin Franklin



James Madison

## AMAZING FACTS ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION

1. The Constitution consists of four sheets, approximately 28 3/4 by 23 3/4 inches. It has 4,543 hand-written words.
2. Because it was hand-written, there are some spelling and grammar errors. Most common is "Pensylvania," and the use of "it's," British spellings, such as "chuse," "defence," "controul," and "labour."
3. Established on Nov. 26, 1789, the first national "Thanksgiving Day" was originally created by George Washington as a way of "giving thanks" for the Constitution.
4. At 81, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was the oldest delegate at the Constitutional Convention, and at 26, Jonathon Dayton of New Jersey was the youngest.
5. George Washington was unanimously chosen as president of the Constitutional Convention. He was the only founding father who did not go to college.
6. The original Constitution is on display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, it was moved to Fort Knox for safekeeping.
7. It is considered so valuable that it is stored in a bullet-proof case, with helium and water added to protect the paper. At night, it is kept in a vault designed to withstand a nuclear explosion. Only page one and four are on display daily. The Constitution is called the "living document" because it can be changed by amendments to meet any challenges that may arise.
8. It is the oldest and shortest national constitution.
9. "Democracy" does not appear in the Constitution, nor is there mention of education.
10. Delaware was the first state to ratify the Constitution, and New Hampshire was the ninth state.
11. One of the amendments in the original Bill of Rights that the states considered was a requirement that each representative in the House of Representatives represent only 50,000 people. It did not pass. That is a good thing because if it had, we would have 5,990 representatives! Today we have 435 representatives, because that is the number of chairs that will fit in the House chambers in the U.S. Capitol. So every ten years, after the census is taken, Congress divides the population by 435 and decides how many representatives each state gets.
12. Virginia was the most populous state when the Constitution was ratified and today it is California. Six states have only one representative. Rhode Island, which was the least populated in 1787, now has two representatives.
13. More than 11,000 amendments have been introduced in Congress. Thirty-three have gone to the states to be ratified and 27 have received the necessary approval from the states to actually become amendments to the Constitution.
14. John Adams said the Constitution is "the greatest single effort of national deliberation that the world has ever seen."

### FOR MORE AMAZING FACTS,

GO TO —

[www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)

for an extensive story about the making of our Constitution. While on this Web site, look at the stories on the Framers of the Constitution.

GO TO —

[www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org)

and explore the interactive Constitution.

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## THE ROAD TO THE MAKING OF THE CONSTITUTION

**Colonies come into existence.** The English first come to Virginia in 1584. In 1732, Georgia becomes the 13th British colony in America. **1584-1732**

**The Colonists first try at acting as one country.** They meet to discuss how to protect themselves from Indian uprisings. Benjamin Franklin suggests they form some kind of unified group, but neither the colonists nor the British rulers like the idea.

**The First Continental Congress.** Twelve of the 13 colonies (Georgia did not attend) meet in Philadelphia to discuss the many ways they feel that Great Britain is being unfair to them. **1754-1774**

**The Revolutionary War Begins.** There is no declaration of war. It begins with militias in some of the colonies fighting with British troops. The Second Continental Congress meets after these battles and begins to form an army. It tries to reach a peaceful solution with Great Britain, but the king refuses. **1775-1776**

**Declaration of Independence.** The Second Continental Congress writes and adopts the Declaration of Independence. **1776**

**The United States of America.** The 13 colonies accept the Articles of Confederation and the newly named United States of America wins the Revolutionary War. **1777-1781**

**The Articles of Confederation.** The Second Continental Congress writes the Articles of Confederation, the first governing document for the United States of America. **1781-1787**

**Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.** Men meet to improve the Articles of Confederation. They decide instead to begin to write or "frame" a new Constitution. On Sept. 17, 1787, the Framers sign our Constitution. **1787**

**The Articles of Confederation prove too weak.** Without the rights to tax, coin money, settle fights between states, regulate trade or have a military, the national government has no power. **1787-1791**

**The Constitution continues to evolve.** Seventeen more amendments have been added to the Constitution to ensure rights for those left out of the original Constitution and the Bill of Rights. **1791... 2005**

**Bill of Rights.** As promised by the Framers, a Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, is written and added to the Constitution. **1791**

**Constitution Day.** It becomes law that every school must learn about the Constitution on Sept. 17, the date in 1787 when the Framers signed the Constitution. **2005**

# The U.S. Constitution



## ALL SCHOOL

- Showcase the Preamble.** At an assembly, distribute copies of the Preamble and have the student body read it together. Follow up with having a community member or teachers explain the meaning of the Preamble.
- Have a Constitution Bee.** Invite interested students to learn about the Constitution, the Constitutional Convention and the signers of the Constitution and then come together for a school-wide assembly to compete for the constitutional school champion. Direct students to the Constitutional Timeline and Fast Facts at [www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org). At [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) visit the section on the Constitution and then the section on Meeting America's Founding Fathers.
- High School—Voter Registration Drive.** Work with your local elections officials to register eligible high school students to vote.

## GRADES 1-6

- The Constitution has three sections: The Preamble, which is the introduction, the Articles, which explain the various functions of the government, and the amendments, which are changes to the Constitution. Library books and textbooks are also divided into sections, so that readers can understand where to find information. Create a Venn diagram that explains the similarities and differences between the organization of the Constitution and the organization of one of your textbooks.
- According to the Constitution, government is divided into three branches: Legislative (includes House of Representatives and the Senate), which makes the laws, Executive (includes the President and his Cabinet), which makes sure the law is carried out, and Judiciary (includes state, federal, and supreme courts), which interprets the law. Using the newspaper, find an article that mentions a law. Is someone wanting to create a new law? Is someone accused of breaking the law? Has a law helped to keep someone safe? Discuss these articles as a class.
- The Constitution exists to guarantee our rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech. Many amendments have been added to be certain that the Constitution meets the needs of today's citizens. Imagine your class got to propose an amendment. What amendment would you like to create and why? Present your idea to the class. After everyone has had a chance to present their ideas, vote to see which one amendment you would propose to Congress.
- While at the Constitutional Convention, many of the delegates worked for a long time talking and listening to each other to reach a peaceable compromise. Use today's newspapers to find an example of two people or two groups that are having a conflict. How could this problem be resolved by a compromise?
- Jacob Shallus earned \$30 to write the Constitution by hand in 1787. If you were asked to write the Constitution today, how much money do you think you would be paid? Consider the difference in time periods, inflation, and the cost of living.
- Through the Constitution, the government is designed to have a set of checks and balances, which means that no one person or branch becomes too powerful. With this system, the three branches are seen as equal and they can work together towards a common goal. Have you ever worked with another person or group towards a common goal? What kind of give and take were required? Write a short story about your experience.
- One of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution is the Freedom of the Press. That means that people are allowed to print information and opinions that they may be arrested for in other countries. The editorial section offers a lot of personal opinions and allows readers a chance to express themselves. Read some of the editorials and look at the editorial cartoons. Identify the facts and opinions in the letters. Finally, write your own letter to the editor about an issue that is important to you, or create an editorial cartoon.
- Now that you have had a chance to learn all about the Constitution, create a constitution for your classroom or your family. Display your work.

### MO SHOW-ME STANDARDS:

G1:1, 1:2, 1:4, 1:5, 1:6, 1:7, 1:8, 1:9, 1:10, 2:1, 2:3, 2:4, 2:7, 3:1, 3:2, 3:4, 3:7, 4:1, 4:2, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, SS1, SS2, SS3, SS6

### COMMUNICATION ARTS GIES:

Reading 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1I, 2A, 2C, 3A, 3C, Writing 1A, 3A, 3B, 3E

### SOCIAL STUDIES GIES:

Principles of Constitution and Democracy concepts A, B & C Missouri, United States, and World History concept B Principles and Processes of Governance Systems concept C

## GRADES 7-12

- Go to [www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org) and pull up a copy of the United States Constitution or refer to a written copy. After reading *The Making of the United States Constitution* and *The Road to the Constitution*, as a class, look at the various articles of the Constitution and discuss how the Framers' early experiences with democratic colonial governments and their beliefs about government influenced how they set up the new government. Also discuss how the abuses of the British government led to some interesting sections in the new Constitution.
- As a class, carefully study the preamble of the Constitution. How does the preamble sum up what the Framers thought a government should be about? Also, for an excellent lesson plan on the preamble go to: <http://members.mobar.org/pdfs/educators/preamble.pdf>.
- As he left the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin allegedly was asked what had come out of the convention and he responded, "A republic, if you can keep it." What do you think he meant by that? Why do you think we have been able to keep this republic? (A republic is a form of government where the people elect representatives to speak for them as contrasted with direct democracy where the people speak for themselves.)
- Research both the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights. What ideas from these documents are contained in our Constitution? Compare and contrast a parliamentary government (Great Britain) and a republican form of government (United States).
- Look at the first few paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. What ideas from this document are contained in our Constitution?
- Consider some of the compromises the Framers made at the Constitutional Convention. Do you think the Great Compromise, which resulted in two houses of Congress, is still a good idea today? As you discuss this issue, consider how the formula for deciding the number of each state's congressional delegation is the number of electoral votes each state gets. The other interesting compromises were about slaves. How would you have handled the slavery issue if you had been a delegate?
- Do you think we need a constitutional convention to consider writing a new constitution? Why or why not. Why do you think our Constitution has survived for over 200 years? Do you think the proceedings of a modern constitutional convention could be kept as secret as the first one?
- What do you think of the idea of federalism—the states have some powers and the national government has others? What powers do you think each should have? What decisions are better made at the national level? At the state level?
- Our government is one of separation of powers and checks and balances. What do we mean by that? How does the Constitution provide for both of these concepts? Do you think the branches have equal power? Why or why not?
- The Founders and Framers both feared an executive branch that was too strong; they did not want a king. How do you think they would view how the role of the president has changed over the last 200 years? Use the newspaper to find an editorial about today's executive branch. What is the main idea of the editorial? Does it contain mostly fact or opinion? Do you agree or disagree with the editorial?
- Go to [www.archives.org](http://www.archives.org) for an extensive story about the making of our Constitution. While on this Web site, look at the stories of the Framers of the Constitution.
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### COMMUNICATION ARTS GIES:

Reading 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1I, 2C, 3C, & 3D

### SOCIAL STUDIES GIES:

Principles of Constitution and Democracy concepts A, B & C Missouri, United States, and World History concept B Principles and Processes of Governance Systems concept C

## CONSTITUTION STATS

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| 2/3       | Approval needed by House and Senate to support an amendment   |
| 3/4       | States that need to approve an amendment for it to be found constitutional  |
| 1         | Days of the year that the entire Constitution is on display (September 17th)  |
| 1         | Amendments that have been repealed (The 18th amendment—Prohibition)   |
| 2         | Constitutions that the U.S. has had since 1776—the Articles of Confederation and our present one                                    |
| 3         | Months that James Madison (Father of the Constitution) arrived early in Philadelphia  |
| 3         | Principles protected by Constitution—Liberty, Equality and Justice  |
| 5         | Tons of weight of vault doors that protect the Constitution   |
| 7         | Articles in the Constitution  |
| 10        | Amendments in the Bill of Rights  |
| 12        | States that were represented at the Convention (Rhode Island did not send a delegate)   |
| 24        | Delegates who were lawyers or who had studied law   |
| 26        | Age of the youngest delegate to sign the Constitution (Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey)   |
| 27        | Amendments to the Constitution  |
| \$30      | Fee paid to Jacob Shallus who penned the Constitution by hand   |
| 39        | Delegates who signed the Constitution on September 17, 1787   |
| 44        | Average age of the delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention   |
| 55        | Number of delegates who were present at the Convention  |
| 61        | Years—longest elapsed time between amendments to the Constitution (the 12th and 13th Amendments)                                    |
| 81        | Age of the oldest person to sign the Constitution   |
| 100       | Days—approximate amount of days spent working at the Constitutional Convention  |
| 500       | Proposed amendments to change the Electoral College   |
| 4,543     | Words hand-written by Jacob Shallus (Constitution was worded by Gouverneur Morris of New Jersey)                                    |
| 9,000+    | Amendments that have been proposed since 1787   |
| \$30,000  | Amount of money President Jackson secured from Congress for Madison's journal detailing the events of the Constitutional Convention |
| 40,000    | Population of Philadelphia at time of signing   |
| 4 million | U.S. population when Constitution was signed  |

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