

CONSTITUTION DAY GUIDE

For Parents, Grandparents, Caretakers and more!

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Happy Constitution Day! September 17 is the anniversary of the day the Constitution was signed in 1787. The *Declaration of Independence* and the *United States Constitution* are the legal foundations for the greatest nation the world has ever known. While our country has certainly had its dark periods, we still remain the world's beacon for freedom and opportunity. This is demonstrated by the fact that the United States is the one place most of today's oppressed peoples want to go.

While the assertions these documents contain are the nuts and bolts that sustain our American enterprise (and for which we have provided resources for you and your students), the reasons why our system works are what bring the American Story to life and make it pertinent to modern audiences. Its compelling drama lies in why our "Founding Fathers" chose those particular initiatives on which to build their futures as opposed to all the other possibilities available to them.

The *Declaration of Independence* declared the underlying principles and the immediate reasons why the American colonists chose to separate from England. In reasoned terms, the *Declaration* explained to the English king and his Parliament what had been happening from their perspective, what they wanted, and why. When in the following years the rag-tag colonial army had accomplished the impossible and won their victory over the single greatest military force of their time, they were faced with an even greater challenge: while the victory was clearly theirs, how could they keep it intact? How could they preserve their original goals for the generations to come?

Their first attempt, *The Articles of Confederation* (1781), was a complete failure and cast a cloud over the union. Their second attempt, *The Constitution of the United States of America* (1787) and the subsequent *Bill of Rights* (1791), provided the legal framework that the Founding Fathers finally hoped would preserve the victory for which so many of their friends and constituents had lost their lives.

Many of the Founding Fathers had been classically educated and keenly understood history. They were well aware of what had happened to many nations before ours.

Many had personal libraries and read Latin, the language of the classics. They knew what had caused the downfalls of the Greek and Roman republics before them. They had a strong grasp of human nature, recognizing both our strengths and our weaknesses. History had already made it abundantly clear that if their enterprise didn't address both, it would surely fail.

The Founding Fathers also lived through the period we have since come to know as **The Enlightenment**, a roaring turbulence of fresh thought that broke the back of the Middle Ages and spawned the revolutionary thinking that was crossing the spectrum of human endeavor. The philosophies of John Locke and others opened their minds to new possibilities. The Virginia state constitution proved to be a worthy model for their efforts.

While many feared another despot, and the smaller states feared the larger ones, and while each region had its deal-breaker interests, and while they recognized the trouble that western expansion would bring—especially concerning slavery and the balance of power—the Framers' agenda was full to overflowing with thorns, thistles, and pitfalls. How could they possibly weave the strands from this seemingly-impossible knot of hope into a fabric that could clothe us all?

That was the challenge before them in 1787, and it is the challenge now placed before your students as you present to them the very foundation for the lives they lead every day.

Objective One: Knowledge

James Madison, known as the “Father of the Constitution,” once said, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” What he meant was that in order to keep freedom alive and to maintain the idea of “power to the People,” we need citizens that possess *knowledge* of those rights we are guaranteed and the system of government we have. The work that you are doing as an educator is absolutely invaluable in this task!

Knowledge provides a framework from which to then achieve *understanding*. Our classroom curriculum focuses on several key areas of knowledge that would be helpful topics of conversation leading up to reading and discussing the Constitution with a young person in detail.

The first is the basic history of the American nation: how the Revolutionary War came about and was won, the contents and significance of the Declaration of Independence, how the Articles of Confederation rose and collapsed as America’s first attempt at united government, and how the Founding Fathers came to develop the U.S. Constitution.

The second is a breakdown of the three branches of government: what they are, what the requirements of each consist of, how their functions differ, and how each is involved in the lawmaking process. Finally, our knowledge area introduces students to the ten (10) rights protected in the Bill of Rights and a selection of the seventeen (17) other amendments added to the Constitution.

Many of these crucial facts and contents comprising the Constitution are found in the Q&A flashcards that are contained inside each Liberty Day Institute Constitution booklet. Some materials are also available on our website.

Objective Two: Understanding

Once young people learn and *know* the basic facts about Independence, the Declaration, and the Constitution, it's critical that they *understand* the core concepts associated with the knowledge they've gained. In particular, we believe students should understand the core principles that the colonies claimed for the Revolution, the goals they hoped to meet, and how the Constitution was set up to achieve and preserve those objectives.

Here we focus on four key concepts: **(1)** governing for “We the People,” **(2)** the importance of protecting individual rights and freedoms, **(3)** what the U.S. Constitution is and why it is necessary; and **(4)** checks and balances and how they protect against tyranny.

- (1)** The concept of a government set up to represent “We the People” was truly a revolutionary one. Never before had a nation been founded upon the principle that the People would be the cornerstone of their government, but the Founders knew that representation was required for a free society. They did not want to be ruled by kings or despots any longer, knowing how dangerous that would be, so the People should rule through their elected representatives.
- (2)** Under British rule individual rights were continually violated (e.g. Americans were taxed without representation). The Founding Fathers believed that the rights of the individual were important and should be

protected, and that the power of the government shouldn't lie in the crown, like it was in England, but in the People. We fought the Revolutionary War and established the Constitution specifically to protect our natural rights and freedoms.

- (3) The U.S. Constitution is the rulebook for our government (the people who run the country and make laws), similar to a rulebook in sports like football or baseball. It tells us the basic rules for the government, what it can and can't do, and some of the freedoms we are guaranteed as Americans. The Constitution was designed to preserve and protect both (1) and (2).
- (4) Finally, students should understand the concepts of "checks and balances" and why we have three branches of government. The Framers of the Constitution didn't like how power in England was mostly held by one person, the King (Crown). Moreover, the original Articles of Confederation, America's first attempt at united government, failed because it was simply a one-legged stool with all the power vested in the Congress. It couldn't stand up under its own weight. For these reasons, they divided the government into three coequal branches, each with different powers, so that one person or branch could not become all-powerful (establishing a sturdier "three-legged stool").

Objective Three: Appreciation

It's not enough that a young person knows and understands the basic foundations of America's representative democracy. In the course of learning the material, students should grow an *appreciation* for the founding ideals of **freedom, self-governance, individual rights, and good citizenship**, especially when exercising their rights responsibly.

As noted previously, the remarkable thing about the American experiment is that it was an experiment in self-

government. Never before had there really been a society or a system of government focused so much on exercising the will and freedom of the People. But our nation’s Founders knew that in order to prosper and provide the greatest opportunity for people, we had to let the People rule through a representative democracy.

The Framers of the Constitution understood that the rights of the individual are natural, not something given to us by government. The Declaration of Independence made this underlying principle clear, and in establishing a rulebook for the government as they did, the Constitution protects those fundamental values.

However, what our early leaders also knew was that a diverse and free society requires good **citizenship** as well. That not only means that we should vote and participate in the political process, but it goes much deeper than that—to a level that even relates directly to students. Good citizenship requires that we do not abuse our rights and liberties: we should treat others with respect, no matter who they are; we should care for those in need and do our best to help them get back on their feet; we should be responsible citizens online, not engaging in bullying or other harmful behavior; we should be careful what we say and how we say it, especially in the classroom.

Good citizenship is the best way to preserve and protect our way of life, and it allows us all to come together, regardless of our different backgrounds, to share in the wonderful, universal values of the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Our rights as Americans are only as good as the willingness of each and every one of us to take responsibility for those rights. A government “of the People, by the People, for the People” requires good citizenship to “keep the Republic.”