

Class Constitution

Objectives

- Students will learn the purpose of the U.S. Constitution.
- Students will analyze the language and meaning of the Preamble.
- Students will work in cooperative groups to write a class constitution.

Materials

- **HANDOUT:** U.S. Constitution: Background and Preamble (included in this packet)
- Markers
- Chart paper
- Poster board

Procedure

1. Read aloud the handout, U.S. Constitution: Background and Preamble.
2. Discuss the history of the U.S. Constitution by stressing that the Constitution gave a group of 13 states a way to work together.
3. Read aloud the Preamble to the Constitution. Discuss its meaning by analyzing the following phrases:
 - Form a more perfect union
 - Establish justice
 - Insure domestic tranquility
 - Provide for the common defense
 - Promote the general welfare
 - Secure the blessings of liberty
4. Point out that the class is a group of people who must work together, like our states.
5. Suggest that they need rules to follow, to be successful.
6. Direct students to work in cooperative groups, brainstorming ideas for their Class Constitution.
7. Share each group's ideas and make a list of suggested rules on chart paper. Word everything in positive terms.
8. Work together to write the Class Constitution on the poster board. Each student and the teacher should sign the finished product. Post it in the room for referral throughout the year.

A Sample Constitution

We the students of Room 34, in order to have a more perfect class, promise to work together to become a united team, promoting peace and harmony at all times.

We will respect each other, always being considerate of other people's feelings and their property.

We will always be cooperative and polite, listen carefully to others and their ideas, and praise others for their accomplishments.

We will remember that the class is a place to learn, so we will always complete our assignments to the best of our abilities.

When asked, we will work quietly and independently, thoroughly completing our work.

We will actively participate in class and work cooperatively with a partner or small group.

We will keep our room and desks clean and organized, and will move slowly and safely about the classroom and in the hallways.

We pledge to do whatever we can to make our year in fourth grade a success, and will always try our hardest to be the best we can possibly be!

U.S. Constitution: Background and Preamble

The Constitutional Convention

Social unrest and economic difficulties among the States necessitated the formation of a strong central government and the writing of the United States Constitution. George Washington described the States as being united by a “rope of sand” during the late 1700s. At the time Congress was ineffectual, radical economic and political movements (such as Shay’s Rebellion) arose, and the existing central government was unable to follow through on any agreements it made with foreign nations. In short, the United States needed some reorganization.

In reaction to all of these difficulties, George Washington called upon each state to appoint a representative and attend a meeting, which he called the Continental Congress. Some controversy surrounded this idea, but once George Washington was elected as the delegate from Virginia, elections were held in all of the states except for Rhode Island.

The delegates met at the Federal Convention in the Philadelphia State House in May 1787. Two men from Pennsylvania, Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson, argued vehemently for the formation of a national government. Other delegates included Benjamin Franklin, James Madison from Virginia, Rufus King and Elbridge Gerry from Massachusetts, Roger Sherman from Connecticut, and Alexander Hamilton from New York. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were unable to attend this meeting.

The Convention was only supposed to draft amendments to the Articles of Confederation but, as Madison later wrote, the delegates, “with a manly confidence in their country,” discarded the Articles and built a whole new form of government. The delegates realized that they needed to forge some type of cooperation between the two different powers that existed in America – the local governing power of the 13 semi-independent states, and the power of a central government. They decided that the new central government needed to be respectful of the powers already belonging to the states. However, they wanted the central government to have real power, so they authorized it to coin money, to regulate commerce, to declare war, and to make peace, among other rights.

Although it took most of the summer to create, on September 17, 1787 the Constitution of the United States was signed. The delegates had finally forged a compromise addressing all of their concerns and had created a constitution that was to be voted upon and ratified by all of the states. And, as James Madison wrote in a letter later in his life, no government can be perfect so “that which is the least imperfect is therefore the best government.” The government created by the Constitutional Convention aptly fits that description.

Summary

The oldest federal constitution in existence was framed by a convention of delegates from 12 of the 13 original states in Philadelphia in May 1787; Rhode Island failed to send a delegate. George Washington presided over the session, which lasted until September 17, 1787. The draft (originally a preamble and seven Articles) was submitted to all 13 states and was to become effective when ratified by 9 states. It went into effect on the first Wednesday in March 1789, having been ratified by New Hampshire, the ninth state to approve, on June 21, 1788.

Below is the beginning (or “Preamble”) to the Constitution of the United States:

Preamble

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, 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.