

The Constitution: Drafting a More Perfect Union

Lesson Overview

This lesson focuses on the drafting of the United States Constitution during the Federal Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia. Students will analyze an unidentified historical document and draw conclusions about what this document was for, who created it, and why. After the document is identified as George Washington's annotated copy of the Committee of Style's draft constitution, students will compare its text to that of an earlier draft by the Committee of Detail to understand the evolution of the final document.

Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson students will be able to:

- Examine documents as primary sources;
- Analyze and compare drafts;
- Describe the significance of changes to the document's text.

Time Required

- One to two classes

Recommended Grade Level

- 9-12

Topics

- Government, Law & Politics

Eras

- The New Nation, 1783-1815

Material provided without charge by St. Mary's University School of Law, <https://law.stmarytx.edu/>.

Source: The Library of Congress Lesson Overview for the Constitution: Drafting a More Perfect Union
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/more-perfect-union/index.html>

Lesson Preparation

This lesson is meant to be an introduction to primary source analysis, but is best used with students who have a basic understanding of events leading up to the signing of the final draft of the Constitution on September 17, 1787.

Materials

Have the requisite materials ready before the activity:

- Committee of Style Report in the Federal Convention, September 1787, page one, [emendations in the hand of George Washington at the Convention] (PDF, 2.43 MB)
 - one copy per student
- Committee of Detail Report in the Federal Convention, August 1787, page one, [emendations in the hand of William Samuel Johnson at the Convention] (PDF, 1.56 MB)
 - one copy per student
- Constitution: Making Comparisons handout (PDF, 41 KB)
 - one copy per student of page one; one copy per student of either the complete set or specific pages by excerpt topic

Teacher Resources

Brief background for the lesson: Delegates to the Federal Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia debated the Committee of Detail's draft of the United States Constitution for a month before referring the document to the Committee of Style. Few critical alterations were made to the Committee of Style's draft before the final draft of the Constitution was signed by the delegates on September 17, 1787. (*Note: Do not share this information with students until after lesson step 3.*)

Before leading students through the exploration process, teachers should make themselves familiar with the background of the drafting of the United States Constitution by reviewing the following Library of Congress resources:

- American Memory Timeline: The United States Constitution
 - <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/newnatn/usconst/consmenu.html>
- Primary Documents in American History: United States Constitution
 - <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Constitution.html>

Lesson Procedure

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1. Working with the entire class, discuss students' understanding of a document. Ask the following questions to frame the discussion:
 - What is a document? (e.g., a record of information)
 - What are examples of common documents? (e.g., letter, diploma, passport, driver's license)
2. Explain that in this lesson, students will take a close look at an important historical document. Distribute copies and engage students with page one of George Washington's annotated copy of the Committee of Style Report (Note: Do not identify the document).
 - Ask students to examine the document. Possible questions include:
 - Where does your eye go first?
 - How would you describe what you're seeing? What do you notice about the physical condition?
 - Which words or phrases can you read? Has the document been altered in any way?
 - Encourage students to speculate about the document, its creator, and its context. Possible questions include:
 - Are there any indications (e.g., names, dates) of ownership or time period?
 - Who do you think wrote this?
 - What do you think this document is about? What words or phrases give clues?
 - What about language, its tone and style? Type of print?
 - Do you think this is a public or private document? What might have been the author's purpose in writing this?
 - Who might have been the intended readers?
 - Do you think this is the complete document or are pages missing?
 - Help students to think about their personal responses to the document. Possible questions include:
 - What surprises you about what you're seeing?
 - What do you want to know about this document?
3. Ask students to draw conclusions about what this document was for, who created it, and why. Reveal (or confirm) its identity as the first page of a draft of the Constitution (George Washington's copy of the Committee of Style Report). Help students review their prior knowledge.
 - Ask students to summarize what they know about the Constitution. Possible questions include:
 - What was happening during this time period?
 - What importance does this document have?
 - Encourage students to think about the drafting of the Constitution. Possible questions include:
 - How might changes have been made and by whom?
 - Where and how might debates and compromises have taken place regarding such changes?
4. Explain to students that an even earlier draft submitted to the Federal Convention by the Committee of Detail also exists. Pass out copies of page one of this draft.
 - Ask students how they could determine changes made to the Constitution during this drafting process. Lead them to the conclusion that a comparison of key

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excerpts from the earlier draft (Committee of Detail Report) prior to any revisions and the later draft (Committee of Style Report) would reveal differences in wording.

5. Model the comparative analysis process using the Constitution: Making Comparisons handout. Use as an example page one, an excerpt from the Preamble. (See step six below for the process.)
6. Assign students (working in pairs or groups) specific pages by excerpt topic from (or the entire set of) the Constitution: Making Comparisons handout for analysis and comparison.
 - Ask students to first identify unfamiliar vocabulary.
 - Encourage students to analyze and compare the two drafts' wording by marking and making notes directly on the Constitution: Making Comparisons handout.
 - Ask students to respond to the following questions on a separate piece of paper:
 - What do you think is the most significant difference(s) in wording between these two drafts of the Constitution?
 - Why do you think this change(s) was made?
 - How does this difference(s) in wording change your understanding of the text's meaning, if at all?
7. Group Conclusions: Working with the entire class, discuss their responses, by excerpt topic, to the questions above. [*For the teacher: Note the different names and respective functions of the Committees of Detail and Style. The Committee of Style's final draft was significantly shorter than the previous draft.*] Conclude by emphasizing that those who created the Constitution understood the potential significance of every word in the document to their own lives, the new nation, and the world.

Lesson Evaluation

- Teacher observation of collaborative work.
- Teacher observation of critical thinking.
- Evaluate the Constitution: Making Comparisons handouts and written responses.

Lesson Extension (segues into other topics)

- Of the handout's excerpt topics (Executive Branch, War Powers, Representation, Taxation), which topic do students think sparked the most debates and compromises? Have students research the Federal Convention's proceedings using Library of Congress resources.
- The U.S. Constitution is often described as a living document. What do students think this means (e.g., changing interpretations, the Bill of Rights)? Have students write an essay about how they view the Constitution: as a finished product or as a work in progress. *Also see LP Living Document v. Original Intent for more.*

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