

The Bill of Rights

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,181

Connections

Writing and Art

If you were one of the Founders of the United States, would you have supported the Bill of Rights or opposed it? Why?

Write an essay defending your position.

Social Studies

Choose one of the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights. Research this amendment and design a poster explaining the freedoms it protects.

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The Bill of Rights

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Focus Question

What is the Bill of Rights, and why is it important?

Words to Know

amendment	freedoms
Bill of Rights	guarantee
citizens	lawsuit
Constitution	revolution
Founders	rights
freedom of speech	slavery

Front cover: A replica of the original Bill of Rights

Back cover: Thousands of people gather outside the Wisconsin State Capitol in February 2011.

Title page: University of California students protest for free speech at Berkeley in 1964.

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Correlation

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Mary Beth Tinker (right), with her mother, Lorena, and younger brother Paul, reacts to news of the Supreme Court's 1969 decision. Mary Beth was suspended for wearing a black armband to her junior high school.

Introduction

In 1969, an Iowa school district got a lesson about **freedom of speech**. The district punished five students who protested the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands to school. The school suspended the students when they refused to remove the armbands. Three of the students and their parents filed a **lawsuit** against the district. The case was decided by the Supreme Court of the United States.

The U.S. Supreme Court based its decision on an **amendment** (a change or correction to a written document) to the U.S. **Constitution**. The Court said the wearing of black armbands was a form of speech that was protected by the First Amendment.

The Highest Law of the Land

The First Amendment is part of the **Bill of Rights**, a list of ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution that protect the **freedoms** of **citizens**. The Bill of Rights is part of the U.S. Constitution. All the other laws that get passed need to follow the ideas in the Constitution.



The original U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, is on display at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C.

The United States started out as a group of thirteen colonies ruled by Great Britain. The American colonists felt that their **rights** were being ignored under the rule of the British king, George III. In 1775, they started a **revolution** to win their independence from Great Britain.

The colonists who helped create the United States of America were called the **Founders**. The Founders wanted to make a new government that would protect people's rights.

The Founders created a weak central government. They didn't want to give their leaders the same powers as a king, so they gave most powers to the states.



American soldiers march to fight the British in this painting.



The American Founders debated the Constitution at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

After the war ended, the Founders realized that their system of government was not working. In 1787, they met in Philadelphia to write a constitution that would set rules for this new system. The Founders hoped to give the central government more power without taking away people's rights and freedoms.

The new constitution was finished in September 1787. By mid-1788, all but two of the states had approved it. The Constitution then became the law of the land.

Thinking Critically

Benjamin Franklin was a famous author, inventor, scientist, and politician. He was one of the Founders who participated in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. In 1755, Franklin wrote, "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." What do you think he meant?



Adding the Bill of Rights

North Carolina and Rhode Island said they would not approve the Constitution or join the government unless a bill of rights was added. Some of the Founders worried that creating a list of rights might make people think that any rights not on the list were not protected.

James Madison, a leading Founder, agreed with this position. However, another important Founder, Thomas Jefferson, said the Constitution needed a bill of rights.

Madison and Jefferson were both from Virginia, which had a Declaration of Rights in its constitution. Jefferson said citizens' rights needed to be spelled out in the U.S. Constitution.

Madison finally agreed. He used the Virginia Declaration of Rights as one of his models.

Madison wrote a bill of rights, creating twenty amendments to the Constitution. Congress cut that number down to twelve. North Carolina and Rhode Island now thought that people's rights would be protected. By the end of 1791, the required three-quarters of the states had agreed to ten of the twelve amendments. Those ten amendments became the Bill of Rights.

Do You Know?

The United States was not the first country to adopt a bill of rights that limited the powers of its government. England passed the English Bill of Rights in 1689—more than 100 years before the United States passed its own version.

Today, most democratic countries around the world have written documents that protect the civil and political rights of their citizens. Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Germany, India, and Japan all have written constitutions that include a bill of rights. Forty-seven nations in and around Europe have adopted the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects many of the same rights as those found in the U.S. Bill of Rights.



Marchers exercise their right to demonstrate in San Francisco, California, in November 2011.

What Does the Bill of Rights Protect?

The Bill of Rights protects many individual rights.

The First Amendment protects freedom of speech, the press, and religion. It also says that people are free to meet in groups for peaceful purposes.

Freedom of the press means that reporters have a right to share news and thoughts with the public. It protects newspapers, books, and magazines, and it also protects information on the radio, television, and the Internet.

Many countries around the world have one official religion, but the First Amendment says that the United States can't do that. Americans are free to practice any (or no) religion as they wish.

Important Events for the U.S. Constitution

Year	Event
1787	U.S. Constitution written
1788	U.S. Constitution approved
1791	The Bill of Rights added to the Constitution
1865	13th Amendment — Slavery abolished
1868	14th Amendment — Rights of citizenship granted to all people born in the United States or naturalized
1870	15th Amendment — Right to vote given to all male citizens, regardless of color or race
1920	19th Amendment — Women gain right to vote

Many people still argue about the meaning of the Second Amendment. It gives citizens the right to own and use weapons. Some people think this amendment was meant to apply only to militia groups such as the National Guard. Other people think it gives all Americans the right to own and use weapons.

The Fourth Amendment says police officers can't search or arrest someone unless they have a good reason to think that person has committed a crime. The police must ask a court to give them permission before they can search someone's property.



A person accused of committing a crime stands in court before a judge.

Three amendments protect people who have been accused of crimes: the Fifth Amendment, the Sixth Amendment, and the Eighth Amendment.

The Fifth Amendment says that nobody can be punished for a serious crime without a trial. The criminal charge must be proved in court before the person can be punished. Someone found not guilty of a crime cannot be charged again for the same crime.

The Sixth Amendment says that a trial must be held as soon as possible. The trial must be public, be fair, and take place in front of a jury.

The Eighth Amendment says that punishments for crimes can't be "cruel and unusual." In the 1700s, some criminals were burned with red-hot irons. Others were locked into wooden stocks in public spaces where crowds could throw things at them. Today, those punishments would not be allowed.

Other Important Amendments

Many other amendments have been added in the last two hundred years. Today, the Constitution has twenty-seven amendments.

Two of the most important amendments in the 1800s were the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. They were passed after the Civil War (1861–1865). The Thirteenth Amendment outlawed **slavery** in the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment made all former slaves U.S. citizens.

Another important amendment was the Nineteenth Amendment. It gave women the right to vote. Women fought for this right for more than seventy years before the amendment passed in 1920.

Amendments can only be suggested by Congress or when called for by two-thirds of the



states. Once suggested, three-quarters of the states must vote in favor of the amendment for it to become law.

Women in Cleveland, Ohio, organize for the right to vote in 1912.

Standing Up for Rights Today

The Bill of Rights and other amendments to the Constitution **guarantee** the rights of all Americans, but sometimes people have to fight to keep their rights.

Alondra Jones was a top student at a public high school, but she struggled to graduate. Her high school didn't have enough textbooks to go around, and there were no computers for students to use. The buildings were filthy and filled with rats. One day, Alondra visited another school where students had books, computers, and clean, safe buildings. That trip helped Alondra understand that her school was very different from many other schools in her state.



Alondra Jones appeared at a panel discussion called "Youth Stand Up for Freedom" in Washington, D.C., in 2006.

Alondra decided to stand up for her rights. She joined almost one hundred other students in a lawsuit that changed the way her state funded its public schools. The court that decided the case said that the state was not giving "equal protection" to its students as required by the Fourteenth Amendment.



Protestors fill the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin, in February 2011.

Conclusion

The story of individual rights in America continues to change through new laws, new amendments, and the actions of citizens who are willing to stand up for their rights.

The Founders of the United States created a system that promised liberty and freedom to its citizens. It is up to all Americans to keep that promise alive.

Glossary

amendment (n.)	a change or addition to a document or law (p. 4)
Bill of Rights (n.)	the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution, which guarantee certain rights (p. 5)
citizens (n.)	official members of a country or state (p. 5)
Constitution (n.)	the set of written rules and principles upon which United States laws are based (p. 4)
Founders (n.)	the group of men who helped to establish the United States and its system of government (p. 6)
freedom of speech (n.)	the right of people to share their opinions publicly (p. 4)
freedoms (n.)	the political rights and powers to act and think as one wishes (p. 5)
guarantee (v.)	to promise or ensure (p. 14)
lawsuit (n.)	a legal process by which a court settles a disagreement between people or groups (p. 4)
revolution (n.)	the removal of a government from power by force and its replacement with another (p. 6)
rights (n.)	freedoms or powers that people can justly claim (p. 6)
slavery (n.)	the state or condition of being a slave, or the property of another person (p. 13)