

September 17th: Constitution Day



Schools observe the birth of the Constitution.

BASIC

This week schools will celebrate an important day. **From what you see here, what is this holiday, and what day is it on?** (*Constitution Day, on September 17th.*) U.S. Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia helped get this holiday passed as a law. Sen. Byrd thought that all Americans should know more about the Constitution of the United States. **What is the Constitution?** (*The document on which all U.S. laws are based.*)

Under this law, every school that takes money from the U.S. government is supposed to spend part of September 17th learning about the Constitution. September 17th was chosen for this holiday because the Constitution was signed on September 17th, 1787. **Do you think Constitution Day is a good idea? Explain your answer.** NEXT

GENERAL

This week, schools across the country will celebrate the most important document in American history. **From the picture and words here, what is this document?** (*The U.S. Constitution.*) The Constitution lays out the basic set of rules on which all of our laws are based. A few years ago, Congress passed a law saying that schools must teach lessons about the Constitution on Sept. 17th. **Who knows what is so important about this date?** (*The Constitution was signed on Sept. 17th, 1787.*)

Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia came up with the idea for Constitution Day. He is one of the Senate's biggest experts on the Constitution. He carries a copy with him, and often holds it up during debates when he feels that other senators are not

following the rules. Senator Byrd was worried that many Americans, especially young people, do not know enough about the Constitution. He thinks that learning about the Constitution will help make people better citizens by teaching them their rights and responsibilities as citizens. **What do you think it means to be a good citizen? Do you agree with Sen. Byrd? Do you think Constitution Day activities help get people more interested in learning about the Constitution?**

Under this law, places that receive money from the U.S. government must teach about the Constitution on September 17th. **Have you heard anything about this? What are the plans to celebrate Constitution Day in your area?** NEXT

ADVANCED

A few years ago, Sen. Robert Byrd pushed a bill into law celebrating the U.S. Constitution. **Who knows which state Sen. Byrd represents?** (*West Virginia.*) Sen. Byrd, who at age 91 is the oldest member of the Senate, is well known for his knowledge of U.S. history, particularly when it comes to the U.S. Constitution. **What is the Constitution?** (*The document that lays out the basic rules and procedures of the U.S. government.*) He carries a copy of the Constitution with him on the Senate floor, and quotes from it if he thinks another senator is flouting constitutional rules.

In recent years, however, Senator Byrd became concerned that Americans do not understand the Constitution. In fact,

polls have shown that Americans know more about what's on television than they know about the Constitution. **Do you think this is a problem? Why or why not?** Sen. Byrd and others believe that the more Americans know about the Constitution, the better citizens they will be. **Do you think he is right? What do you think it means to be a good citizen? Do you think schools are doing enough to teach students about the Constitution? Why or why not?** Some teachers think the law is redundant and that the federal government shouldn't dictate how schools teach. Others think the law helps schools focus on the importance of the Constitution. **What do you think?** NEXT

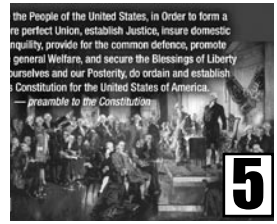
September 17th: Constitution Day (cont'd)

This document was written in Philadelphia in 1787.

BASIC

From 1775 to 1783, the U.S. fought a war to win its freedom from Great Britain. **What is this war called?** (*The Revolutionary War*) On July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed, which said that the U.S. was no longer a part of Great Britain. Soon after that, representatives from each of the 13 states met and came up with rules for the new country. This set of rules was called the Articles of Confederation. But these rules gave the states too much power, and the federal government too little. This was a problem because the states had a hard time agreeing on anything. So they tried again, and leaders from all 13 states

came together in Philadelphia in 1787 for a Constitutional Convention to write a new set of rules. Here you see our country's first leaders at that famous meeting. **Who is the man standing up on the right?** (*George Washington*.) There were many arguments among these leaders about issues like slavery and personal freedom. Finally they came up with a document that begins with the words you see here, called the preamble. **What do you think these words mean?** NEXT



GENERAL

From 1775 to 1783, the United States fought the Revolutionary War to gain its independence from Great Britain. **What important document was signed on July 4th, 1776?** (*The Declaration of Independence*.) Soon after that was signed the leaders from the 13 different states got together and wrote a set of rules to figure out how to get along. These rules were called the Articles of Confederation. These rules gave a lot more power to the states than they did to the national government, which did not have a central leader. But this did not work well. **Can you guess why?** (*States could not agree on important issues like taxes or national defense, and other nations did not consider the states "united" at all.*) So they tried again, and leaders from all 13 states came together in Philadelphia in 1787 for

a Constitutional Convention to write a new set of rules.

This is a painting of the Constitutional Convention. **Can you name some leaders who were part of this convention?** (*Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and George Washington, among others.*) There were a lot of arguments at the convention, but the delegates continued to try to work out compromises. On September 17th, the Constitution was signed by 39 of the original 55 delegates. Over the next two years, as the states ratified, or formally approved, it, the Constitution became the basis for all American law. The words you see here are from the opening statement of the Constitution, called the preamble. It communicates the most important principles found in the Constitution. **What do you think they are?** NEXT

ADVANCED

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4th, 1776. But the Revolutionary War continued until 1783. Even with a war going on, the fledgling country had to develop its own rules for governing. In the year after the Declaration of Independence was signed, representatives from the 13 new states wrote a document that laid out the relationships between them. **What was it called?** (*The Articles of Confederation*.) Because the former colonists were wary of a large central government, this document emphasized the autonomy of each state. But disagreements sprang up among the states about taxes, currency, and national defense, and there was no central power to mediate these disputes.

In the summer of 1787, delegates came together in Philadelphia to write a new

document. This meeting, depicted in the painting you see here, featured Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and other founding fathers. **Who chaired this meeting?** (*George Washington*.) Several delegates were convinced that a strong federal government would mean the death of true democracy in the United States. **Why do you think they might have felt this way?** (*Perhaps, after just winning their freedom from England's monarchy, they worried that a central government could become too powerful.*) Bitter battles were also fought over subjects like slavery and citizens' individual freedoms. The final document they came up with begins with the statement of principles you see here. **What do you think are the most important principles laid out in this preamble?** NEXT

September 17th: Constitution Day (cont'd)

The Constitution grants powers to the government and freedoms to the people.

BASIC

The Constitution is the basic set of rules for our country. Every other law has to be based on it. But the authors realized that changes might be needed in the Constitution. So they gave Congress the right to add changes. Changes to the Constitution are called "amendments," and the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights. These amendments guarantee every American certain freedoms, like freedom of speech. The words you see here are from the First Amendment. This amendment protects more than just the right

to speak your mind. Political protests like the ones you see here are another form of speech protected by the First Amendment. **What other freedoms are mentioned here?** Other amendments to the Constitution outlawed slavery and allowed women to vote. But amendments to the Constitution aren't done very often, and there have only been 27 of them passed since 1787! **What amendment would you add to the Constitution if you could?** END



GENERAL

The U.S. Constitution set up three different branches, or parts, of the government. **Can you name them, and what they do?** *(The legislative branch is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives, and it makes laws for the country. The executive branch, headed by the president, decides how to carry out those laws. And the judicial branch, made up of the U.S. Supreme Court, rules on whether or not the other two branches are doing their jobs legally and correctly.)* These three branches are supposed to be equal in power, to make sure that everyone's rights are protected, and so that no one branch ever takes over the government. **What is another name for this?** *(The "balance of powers," or "checks and balances.")*

The writers of the Constitution made

sure the document could be changed if necessary. Changes to the Constitution are called amendments. **Who knows what the first ten amendments are called?** *(The Bill of Rights.)* The words you see here are from the First Amendment. **What freedoms does it protect?** *(Freedom of speech and of the press, the right to gather peacefully in public places, freedom of religion.)* It also guarantees that the government can't make a national religion. Freedom of speech includes more than just speaking your mind; it also includes political protests like the ones you see here. **What makes each of the rights in the First Amendment so important to our democracy? How do you think things would be different if we didn't have the First Amendment?** END

ADVANCED

The battles at the Constitutional Convention were worked out with compromises. For those who feared an all-powerful central government, the Constitution divided power among the three branches. **How are these checks and balances supposed to work?** *(The legislative branch, made up of the Senate and the House, makes laws for the country. The executive branch, headed by the president, decides how to carry out those laws. And the judicial branch, made up of the U.S. Supreme Court, rules on whether or not the other two branches are doing their jobs legally and correctly. By design, no one branch can overpower either of the other two branches.)*

Some delegates refused to sign the Constitution at first, upset that there was no guarantee of individual rights. They

were appeased by the promise that the Constitution would be amended, with the first ten amendments being the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment protects many forms of expression, including political protests like the ones seen this summer about health care. **What other rights are protected in this amendment? Explain why each one of them is so important in maintaining our democracy. How important do you think the First Amendment is in your daily life? Can you think of current examples where issues pertaining to freedom of speech or religion have arisen? How important do you think other amendments are? What do you think are some of the most pressing Constitutional issues facing this country today?** END