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# Exploring the Meaning of the Bill of Rights

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## Title: Exploring the Meaning of the Bill of Rights

### Overview

In this lesson students will use the primary resource of the Bill of Rights to explore and determine the meaning of the first ten amendments. Students will look at the Bill of Rights and in small groups work to decide what each amendment means. They will then share their thoughts with the class by putting their ideas in their own words through sentences, a picture or a short skit.

### Goal

Students will use the inquiry process to determine the meaning of the first ten amendments to the Constitution known as the Bill of Rights.

### Objectives

- Students will work collaboratively in small groups.
- Develop skills in reading and understanding text, especially primary resources
- Learn to analyze and draw inferences from sources
- Develop an understanding of the Bill of Rights

### Investigative Question

What did you think the first ten amendments to the Constitution mean, in your own words?

### Time Required

Two 45 minute class periods

### Recommended Grade Range

4th – 5th grades

### Subject

Bill of Rights, Social Studies

### Standards

#### Common Core:

RI.4.7. Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

RI.4.10. By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

District 200

#### Subject Expectation

(State Goal 14)

The student will understand political systems with an emphasis on the United States.

14.A.1 Understand and explain basic principles of the United States government

14.A.2 a. define fundamental concepts including:

- rights and responsibilities of citizens
- amendments

14.A.2 b. explain the importance of major documents including:

- Bill of Rights

Subject Expectation  
(State Goal 16)

The student will understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of the United States.

Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation

16.A.2c c. ask questions and seek answers by collecting and analyzing data from historic documents, images and other literary and non- literary sources

Credits

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## PREPARATION

Materials Used

Copy of the Bill of Rights (John Beckley copy) enlarged to poster size and cut apart like a puzzle into 20 puzzle pieces

Copy of the first ten amendments, one per child

Chart for students to fill out as they investigate the amendments.

Chart to record what each amendment means during presentations.

Resources Used

United States of America (1789). United States Constitution--Bill of Rights. John Beckley copy. Washington, D.C.: United States of America. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/madison/images/s12.jpg>

United States of America (1789). United States Constitution--Bill of Rights. John Beckley's copy of the Bill of Rights, 1789 as sent to the states. Washington, D.C.: United States of America. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/bill-of-rights/pdf/beckley.pdf>

United States of America (1950). A bill of rights as provided in the ten original amendments to the constitution of the United States in force December 15, 1791. N.p.: United States of America.

Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/bill-of-rights/pdf/billofrights.pdf>

## PROCEDURE

Hand out puzzle pieces to students as they walk in to the room. Gather everyone to a large space and have the students work cooperatively to complete the puzzle on the floor or a table.

Discuss what is on the puzzle (the Bill of Rights) (15 minutes).

- What is this document?
- What year was it written?
- Who was it written to?
- What else do you notice as you look at it (ex: number of sections)?
- What do you think this document is about?
- What do you already know about this document?

The purpose of the discussion is to get the students to share their background knowledge and to look carefully at the primary resource as a whole before they look at its individual parts.

Discuss the instructions for the activity: (10 minutes)

Discuss the goal of today's lesson: to understand what the Bill of Rights is about and share our understanding with the class through a written paragraph, skit or pictures and caption. Discuss the expectations that students will carefully examine all of the words in the text and use the text and their background knowledge to share in their own words what it means. It will be important here to notice that some of the letters are written differently – especially the s that looks like an f. Also discuss what to do with vocabulary words they do not know – use a dictionary, ask a friend, use the context, ask a teacher.

Model how to fill out the table with comments and questions and their own thinking.

Student work: (25 minutes)

Divide the students into groups of 2 or 3 (depending on class size) and assign each group one of the ten amendments to report on. Give them a copy of the first ten amendments. Also hand out to each group a chart that will guide them through looking at the amendment. Groups start working together to discuss the meaning while the teacher circulates to encourage and listen to their thinking. Once the students have filled out the chart, they should begin to create a way to share it with the class. This can be a skit – where the group acts out what they think the amendment means or an example of the amendment in real life. Or the group may write a short summary of the amendment in their own words. Groups may also choose to draw an illustration of the amendment along with a caption that explains the picture.

Assessment: (45 minutes – on day two)

Have groups share their presentations with the class.

As presentations are given, have students record what each amendment means on a separate chart.

#### 14. Extensions

Use a kid-friendly book on the Bill of Rights, such as *The Bill of Rights and You* by Syl Sobel to see what the Bill of Rights means and compare that to what the students thought it meant. Make any corrections on our chart on the section called clarification.

Explore how the Bill of Rights is important to us today and affects our everyday life using websites and books from literature (this could be a 1-4 day extension).

#### EVALUATION

Student learning will be evaluated by their presentations:

Score	Expectation
4	Accurately understanding the meaning of the amendment and communicating it creatively and clearly to their classmates in their own words.
3	Understanding most of the meaning and creatively clearly presenting it to the class in their own words.
2	Understanding most of the meaning but not clearly presenting the information to the class.
1	Showing little understanding by using the same or almost the same language as the amendment in their presentation.

Students will also be informally assessed on their participation and comments during their group work time.

#### Understanding the Bill of Rights

Look carefully at the amendment as a group. Discuss what words are used and what they mean. What is the intent and purpose of the amendment?

Fill out the chart below as you discuss.

Amendment number \_\_\_\_\_

key words used	What I think it means	Questions I have

What right it is expressing	In my own words this means	Questions I have
Words in the text that are clues	Where do I think these ideas came from?	Questions I have
Other details I notice	what I think it means	questions I have

In summary this amendment is stating:

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### Understanding the Bill of Rights

Fill in the chart as you listen to the presentations

Amendment	what we think it means	further clarification
One		
Two		
Three		
Four		

Five		
Six		
Seven		
Eight		
Nine		
Ten		

Reflection on Bill of Rights Lesson  
Using Primary Resources  
Laurie Macy

I thought this lesson was both successful and effective. Using the puzzle pieces to capture the students' interest was a fun and engaging way to start the lesson. They enjoyed putting the puzzle together and worked well as a class. It was helpful to have them all close around the puzzle as we worked on it so that everyone could participate and see what was happening. About half way through completing the puzzle, I had the front row switch with the back row of students so that everyone could have a turn being close to the picture and that worked well to keep all the students participating. After we completed the puzzle I had a large copy of the picture (text) that was not cut into puzzle pieces that I put overtop of the puzzle. This was much easier to read than the completed puzzle. This allowed us to have a more productive discussion of the primary source.

The particular copy of the Bill of Rights that we were looking at as a group was a rough draft that had 12 articles, instead of the final 10. If I had it to do over again, I think I would stick to a text that only listed the final ten. It was good for the students to see that there was a rough draft and that changes were made after the initial writing of the Rights, but it made it confusing when the students began working in groups on the articles. For instance, if I told a pair that they would be working on article two, it was really article four on the rough draft. This was difficult for them to track and remember and I had to go around from group to group to make sure they were working on the correct article.

It was really important for the groups to have sheet that guided them through the discovery of the meaning of the Right they were assigned. The wording in the primary document is very difficult and the sheet helped them locate and define those hard words. Then they put the ideas of the article into their own words. Part way through their group work, I stopped the class to show them how to replace the difficult word in the text with the definition (synonym) as they reread the article. This strategy gave further insight into the meaning of the text and helped students begin to grasp what the article was about.

Since I had 20 students, it was easy for me to break up the articles and give each pair one article to work on. If a classroom has more than 20 students, teachers could break apart a few of the articles that have more than one right listed within (such as article one) and have multiple groups working on different parts of the same article. As the students were working I circulated around the room, making sure the students were on task, answering any questions, and helping to guide their discussion and discovery when they were confused. This was very helpful to the students, and let me see where there were problems I could help address.

When the students were broken into groups, I purposefully put higher level students with lower level students since I knew this would be a more difficult assignment. This proved helpful. I gave each group a choice of how they wanted to present information to the class, which I liked because I think there is more ownership when students have choice. I had groups choose all three options when they presented – skit, drawing or verbal summary. Some groups did fantastic and really got the idea of the Right and communicated effectively. Some groups did really poorly. I'm not sure what I could do to change that – it's bound to happen, especially because the text was so hard to understand. To help with that situation, I had the class help the pair think about what the Right could mean. That way we had 20 ideas instead of only two. While the groups were presenting, students had a new chart to fill in what the group said the Right was about. We worked on this as a class after each presentation. This allowed for any further clarification.

The next day I had the same groups get together with a book to read a synopsis of each Right. On the chart we filled out about each other's presentations, there was a space to add further clarification. Using the First Amendment, I modeled for the whole class how to read the text of the book about the Bill of Rights and add more information to their chart. After that, I had pairs read and discover new insights into each Right on their own. For the most part, we discovered that many of the groups were mostly accurate in their interpretation of the Right. But there were a few where we added new information to clarify the true intent. I thought this was a very necessary and helpful next step for the students because it gave more information at their reading level, on each Right. We then went over the chart again as a class, agreeing on any further clarifying information we added.

As a final activity, I am going to take my students to the computer lab where we are going to do some online activities on the Bill of Rights. Many of the sites I found have the students use their knowledge of the Bill of Rights to answer questions or solve problems for "cases" or scenarios. I like this because it reviews the Bill of Rights. I also think it is valuable because it lets the children see how the Bill of Rights relates to our every day living situations.



I thought, in general, that the lessons went well. There is very little that I would change the next time I do this. The lessons had the students go from the primary document to its application in the present day (the computer activities). The students were engaged the whole time and I could tell from their presentations to the class what they understood or needed help with. My goal was not for them to memorize or be held accountable to know all ten rights. Instead, my goal was to expose them to using primary documents using the inquiry model to assess the document (text), and to creatively present to the class what they discovered. I wanted the children to be exposed to the Bill of Rights and have to manipulate them through discovery. These lessons did a great job of meeting those goals. I will do this lesson again next year with new students!!