

# THE WORDS THAT BUILT AMERICA: LESSON PLANS

## LESSON 1

### UNDERSTANDING THE CONSTITUTION

**GOAL:** Students will understand the components of the Constitution and will be able to apply elements of the text to realistic scenarios.

**TIME REQUIRED:** One to two 45-minute class periods

**KEY STANDARDS:** *Common Core Literacy Standards in History/Social Studies: RH.6–8.1; RH.6–8.2; RH.6–8.4; RH.9–10.1; RH.9–10.2; RH.9–10.4*

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:** HBO's *The Words That Built America* documentary (<http://itsh.bo/2i2GMfA>), "Is This Constitutional?" student activity sheet, copies of the Preamble of the Constitution

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Have students brainstorm what they already know about the U.S. Constitution. Explain that today they will have a chance to read this important document firsthand.
2. Show the class the video clip of the Preamble of the Constitution (starting at 11:12 of *The Words That Built America*). Use this section as a model for taking apart a complex text.
  - ★ Write the following on the board: "We the People of the United States... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."
  - ★ Pass out copies of the Preamble of the Constitution and challenge students to restate the missing segment in their own words. Write student responses on the board.
  - ★ Discuss the purpose of the Constitution based on the following segment of the text: "in Order to form a more perfect Union... and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."
  - ★ Assist students in working through new vocabulary. Explain that some words may have more than one meaning, and so they may be used differently in this text (*domestic, common, promote, welfare, posterity*).
3. Introduce students to the structure of the Constitution, which is divided into seven articles.
  - ★ List the topics on the board (The Legislative Branch; The Executive Branch; The Judiciary; The States; Amendments; Debts, Supremacy, Oaths; and Ratification) and review any unfamiliar vocabulary.
4. Show the section of *The Words That Built America* titled "Powers of Congress" (20:53–23:50). Indicate that this is part of Article 1, the Legislative Branch. After watching, discuss:
  - ★ What is Congress able to do?
  - ★ How have you seen Congress use these powers?
  - ★ Why do you think that these powers were given to Congress versus another governing body?
5. Distribute the "Is This Constitutional?" student activity sheet. Show the relevant portions of *The Words That Built America* as listed on the sheet, and ask students to read and respond to the scenarios.
6. Discuss students' responses to the scenarios. As possible, apply these prompts to real-life scenarios (historical or contemporary).
7. To wrap up the lesson, discuss why the Constitution is still relevant today.

**EXTENSION: Ratification Role-Play.** Divide students into 13 groups. Explain that each group will role-play as a delegation from one of the 13 American colonies. Give students an opportunity to research and learn about their colony. Organize a class debate and have group representatives explain their colony's position on whether the Constitution should be signed or not. Have the class determine whether it has enough votes to ratify the Constitution.

## LESSON 2

### HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND TIMELINES

**GOAL:** Students will be able to explain the sequence of events that led to the three founding documents and how these documents are related.

**TIME REQUIRED:** One 45-minute class period

**KEY STANDARDS:** *Common Core Literacy Standards in History/Social Studies: RH.6–8.6; RH.9–10.5; RH.9–10.6*

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:** HBO's *The Words That Built America* documentary (<http://itsh.bo/2i2GMfA>), chart paper and markers, copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights (copies optional)

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Pose the following journal prompt to students: *What types of issues would you face in trying to form a new nation?* Discuss students' responses.
2. Explain that American colonists faced a series of problems against the ruling British government, which resulted in the Revolutionary War in 1775. Subsequently, the founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—were created. These documents can give us insight into the problems and solutions of that time.
3. Show a portion of the Declaration of Independence section of *The Words That Built America* (3:39–8:36).
4. Ask students: *Based on the text, what injustices were the colonists facing?* Have students use chart paper to brainstorm as a group.
5. Explain that the Declaration of Independence was created near the start of the war in 1776. After the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, Americans needed to create a system of governance, and so the Constitution was developed.
  - ★ If students have not yet studied the Preamble to the Constitution, show 11:12–11:35 of *The Words That Built America*. Discuss: What issues or concerns did this text address? Encourage students to point to specific words in the text.
  - ★ If students have already studied the Preamble or need a greater challenge, show 40:26–41:32 (Debts, Supremacy, Oaths—Article 6). Discuss: *What issues or concerns regarding the role of the federal versus state governments did this text address?*
6. Explain to students that even after the Constitution was signed in 1787 and took effect in 1789, Americans still needed to ensure and protect individual civil rights; therefore, a set of amendments known as the Bill of Rights was passed in 1791.
7. Show the Bill of Rights section of *The Words That Built America* (42:18–46:00). As students watch, ask them to look for themes.
8. Have students use chart paper to brainstorm answers to the following questions, then discuss their answers:
  - ★ What rights were asserted?
  - ★ What repeated themes, concerns, or words did you notice?
  - ★ How do they connect to the injustices laid out in the Declaration of Independence?
9. To wrap up the lesson, have students create a concept web to demonstrate how the three founding documents are connected.

**EXTENSION: Amendment Arguments.** Select one or two amendments of interest and invite the class to research their historical context. Ask students to choose a position for or against the amendment and to share their arguments with the class. (Alternatively, assign students a position for or against the amendment.)