



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Active Use of the First Amendment

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 1-2 class sessions

Description: This lesson will teach students the content of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Students will also learn how they can use their First Amendment rights to become active in their communities and to create change.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14A, 14F

B. English/Language Arts: 1A; 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B

Objectives:

1. Understand and explain the provisions of the First Amendment to the Constitution.
2. Evaluate the usefulness of the First Amendment in real life by evaluating techniques of grassroots organizing.

Materials:

1. Notebook paper/pen
2. Blank overhead or chalkboard
3. As reference material, the Citizen Advocacy Center's "Guide to the First Amendment," available at www.citizenadvocacycenter.org.

Instruction and Activities

Start off with a simple activity illustrating how important the voices of young people can be, in an election, for example:

Ask students how old you have to be to vote.

Answer: 18 years old

Ask students who they think votes in most elections.

First, have all the students stand up and tell them that they represent all the eligible voters in the United States. Now, have half of the students sit down.

The students still left standing represent the percentage of those eligible voters who are actually registered to vote (50%). Now again ask half of those students still standing to sit down. The students now left standing represent the percentage of eligible and registered voters who actually vote in major elections, such as

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presidential elections (25% of **eligible** voters, 50% of **eligible and registered** voters).

Let's move to young people now. Have all the students stand up again, representing all eligible young voters, between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. Now have 2/3 of the students sit down. The students now left standing represent the percentage of young voters who actually vote, 1/3. As a demonstration of the importance of voting, try the following exercise: First ask the group that is still standing what they like to eat for lunch. Solicit a list of three potential lunch items. Ask each of the students who remain standing to vote for one of the three lunch items, then tally the votes and announce the winning lunch item. Inform all the students that the winning food is what they all must have for lunch for the rest of the month. Any suggestions for lunch items made by the group of seated students do not factor into the vote; what they like to eat does not matter because they don't vote.

Consider: 72% of people aged 68-74 vote; the age of most students' grandparents, compared to 33% of people aged 18-24. Do you as young people think that older voters can accurately represent your views and concerns? Why or why not? Do your grandparents have the same concerns as you do? List some of your concerns and some of your grandparents' concerns. What, if any, are the areas of overlap?

Now, let's quickly go over the five freedoms of the First Amendment:

Speech
Press
Religion
Assembly
Petition

Ask students what these freedoms mean to them. Are these freedoms absolute? Can you do or say whatever you want, whenever you want? No, each freedom is yours, but each is limited in certain ways such that your freedoms don't interfere with the freedoms of other people. The government is permitted to limit your First Amendment freedoms through **time, place** and **manner restrictions**. For example, if you are unhappy with the decision of the voting group about what you will be eating for lunch for the next month, you may decide to have a protest outside of the school. Local police and school officials may limit your protest in various ways as illustrated by the following examples:

- **Time:** Protest must occur during the day, so as not to disturb people at night while they are sleeping.
- **Place:** Protesters must stay on the sidewalk; they must stay out of the street to avoid blocking traffic.
- **Manner:** Protesters may use a megaphone only to a certain degree of loudness, so as not to disturb other students in the school who are trying to learn.

Ask students if they think they have the freedoms of the First Amendment while they are in school.

Answer: Yes, students have these freedoms at all times, even when they come into school; but at the same time, the school has the right to limit these freedoms to a certain degree, such that their exercise does not interfere with the educational process. School is a special place in that way.

Activity

How can First Amendment freedoms be used in school and in your community?

1. Brainstorm a list of things that aren't fair at school.
2. Choose one or two issues from the list that are "manageable" for activism purposes.
3. Ask the class: Who is in charge of that particular issue? Who makes the ultimate decision on that issue? Possibilities include: the teacher, the principal, the school board. Using freedoms from the First Amendment, how would students bring this issue to the attention of the appropriate decision-maker? List some ideas and which freedoms they use.

Suggestions:

- Make some noise -- use your voice to express your pleasure/displeasure (speech);
- Make an appointment to talk with the appropriate decision-maker about your concerns (speech);
- Join or create a coalition of students who have similar views on the issue (speech, association);
- Draft a petition, get it signed by people who agree with you, and present it to the appropriate decision-maker (petition);
- Protest (speech, assembly);
- Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper (the most popular section of the newspaper is the Opinion/Editorial section) (speech);
- Write a letter to your local representative (representatives don't hear very often from many of their constituents, so when you take the time to write to them they realize it is important) (petition, speech);
- Volunteer your time for an individual or for a cause you believe in. It doesn't matter how young you are, or how old -- people want your help! (speech, association);
- Give your time, money and/or ideas to an organization or a cause. Time and ideas are often the most valuable things that you can give (speech, association);
- Organize! -- if it is not being done well, do it better (speech, association);
- Testify -- your input is invaluable to decision-makers. At most public meetings, for example, school board meetings, the public has the right to give public comment. Public comment is commonly either at the beginning or the end of the meeting and each speaker may speak for a set amount of time, typically three minutes. Speaking during public comment at an open government meeting is an excellent way to let your representatives know how you feel about a particular subject (petition);
- Start a letter writing campaign, or use fax or e-mail, to inform local leaders about your issue. Also consider creating an on-line discussion group (speech, petition, association); and
- Create a voter guide to let voters know about how particular candidates feel about your issue. Call candidates to ask for their opinions on the subject and then create a voter guide in which you publicize their answers (speech).

Bottom line: Your opinion matters!! No matter your age, you have First Amendment rights and you can use those rights to push for serious change in your community.

Summary of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution

1. Freedom of religion
Freedom of speech
Freedom of the press
Right of people to gather together
Right to petition the government
2. Right to own a gun
3. Right not to have soldiers live in your house
4. Right not to have the police search you or your belongings unreasonably or without cause
5. Right not to incriminate yourself
Right not to be charged twice for the same offense
Right to due process
6. Right to a speedy criminal trial
Right to a jury in a criminal trial
Right to a lawyer in a criminal trial
7. Right to a jury in a civil trial
8. Freedom from cruel and unusual punishment
9. Rights specifically listed in the Constitution do not limit rights not specifically listed
10. Powers not specifically given to the Federal government belong to State governments