



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

How to Draft a Bill

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, Listening and Speaking, Research.

Duration: Up to 5 class sessions

Description: Students will brainstorm ideas for good laws and each student will then draft a Bill from one of those ideas. Once the Bills are drafted, the class will vote on which Bills should be passed into law.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14A, 14C, 14D; and

B. English/Language Arts: 1A, 1C; 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B; 5C.

Objectives:

1. Understand the processes by which bills become law.

Materials:

- Overhead projector or chalkboard
- TV with cable access if possible
- Notebook paper
- Pencil or pen

Instruction and Activities

Introductory Exercise

Consider starting this lesson when an interesting bill is in the process of being introduced in Congress. Many people do not fully understand how a bill moves from conception of an idea through the governmental process to becoming a law. The process usually starts with a simple idea that something “isn’t right” or something “needs to be fixed.” Someone who has such an idea can go to their legislators and ask for help. The next step is to draft a bill.

- How do students think that laws become laws?
- Ask students to outline what they think are the steps needed to draft a bill and write these steps on the chalkboard or overhead.

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- Have students watch C-SPAN for a short time to see how bills are introduced and how they are debated in Congress.

Lecture

Discuss the following steps in creating a bill from an idea:

1. What is the problem that you want to address?
2. What outcomes do you want to see?
3. Could those outcomes be achieved through a law?
4. Are the outcome goals that you wish to accomplish constitutional? (For example, if your goal is that people should not intentionally offend one another, could you prohibit all offensive speech? Answer: No, because such a prohibition would violate the First Amendment right to free speech. Questions such as “What is offensive speech?” or “Who determines if speech is offensive?” need to be considered with the First Amendment in mind.)
5. Does a law already exist on the topic? If so, can the existing law be modified to achieve your goals?
6. Consult with an expert in the area at issue.
7. All bills must contain the following items:
 - a. Definitions -- any ambiguous terms must be defined. The definitions section should also include definitions of terms that seem common sense, but that can potentially be interpreted in different ways, e.g. “public body,” “public record,” “person,” “final action,” “contemplate,” etc.
 - b. Short title -- a phrase by which the bill will be referred, e.g. “The Freedom of Information Act,” “The Student Records Act,” etc.
 - c. Statement of policy -- states the policy behind the bill. Why is the bill being proposed? Why is it important? As an example, read the following preamble to the Illinois Freedom of Information Act:

Pursuant to the fundamental philosophy of the American constitutional form of government, it is declared to be the public policy of the State of Illinois that all persons are entitled to full and complete information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts and policies of those who represent them as public officials and employees consistent with the terms of this act. Such access is necessary to enable the people to fulfill their duties of discussing public issues fully and freely, making informed political judgments and monitoring government to ensure that it is being conducted in the public interest.
 - d. Leading purpose of the bill -- states the actual purpose of the bill. Again from the Illinois Freedom of Information Act:

Each public body shall make available to any person for inspection or copying all public records, except as otherwise provided in Section 7 of this Act. Notwithstanding any other law, a public body may not grant to any person or entity, whether by contract, license, or otherwise, the exclusive right to access and disseminate any public record as defined in this Act.
 - e. Subordinate provisions -- conditions, exceptions, and special cases distinct from the main purpose and important enough to be stated as separate sections. The Illinois Freedom of

- Information Act provides for numerous exemptions that public bodies do not have to provide to the public, such as records that would violate an individual privacy interest.
- f. Administrative provisions -- states which entity has authority and responsibility for administration and regulation of the bill. Who has the right or obligation to enforce the bill? Examples might be the Attorney General, the County State's Attorney, or a citizen. Who is responsible for carrying out the provisions of the bill? What happens if someone violates the provisions of the bill? Is a violation a criminal offense, or is it a civil offense, subject to fine or other court sanction?
 - g. Temporary and transitional provisions -- lists any provisions that need to be in place temporarily to facilitate execution of the bill when it becomes law. Is the transition into full implementation of the bill going to take a long time? Say all public records will need to be imaged onto a computer file; how long will that take? What things need to be done in the meantime?
 - h. Penalties -- lists the punishments to be instituted for failure to follow the requirements of the bill. Penalties could range from criminal sanctions to civil sanctions to fines, attorneys' fees and court costs.
 - i. Emergency clause or nonstandard effective date -- the date when the bill will go into effect as law. Many bills are effective immediately upon signature of the Governor, or they may become effective on specific future date, sometimes a date with special significance, such as having a civil rights bill become effective on Martin Luther King Day.

Homework

Have students either work together in small groups or work individually to brainstorm an idea for a bill. Students should start to research their idea for the bill as homework and into the next class period. Students should be able to specify exactly what change in law they are asking for, why they are asking for the change, why the change is important, why the change is necessary, why other lawmakers should care about the proposed change, and how the change will affect the public. Places to do research:

- Websites discussing topics related to the idea of the bill;
- The Illinois General Assembly website which has all updated laws as well as pending legislation (www.ilga.gov -- section on Compiled Statutes for a list and text of Illinois laws; section on bills and resolutions for pending legislation, where you can find out if similar bills as yours have been proposed);
- State representatives' offices for information on whether bills presently exist or have been proposed; and
- Websites of special interest organizations working in the area of interest.

Based on the students' research, they should start drafting their bills, section by section. They should begin by drafting the policy and purpose, and then proceed to work on the rest of the sections both in class and as homework.

After the student bills have been drafted, the class should be divided into roles that mimic the Illinois House of Representatives, with a Speaker, a Majority Leader, a Minority Leader, representatives and the Clerk (who may be the teacher). With the Speaker of the House

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presiding, each student should stand before the class and propose his or her bill. After each bill proposal, other “representatives” may take the floor to argue for or against the bill based on his or her own concerns or interests. Allow each “representative” a limited time to speak, e.g. three minutes, before moving on to the next speaker. After the debate is finished, the Clerk should call the roll to take the class vote on that bill. Repeat this process for each bill to be proposed.

Once all the bills have been proposed, debated and voted on, break down the experience with the students. How did they feel about drafting their bills? How did they feel arguing for their bills? Why did they vote for some bills and not others? What role did class politics or friendships or cliques play in their voting decisions? Do they think those sorts of concerns might affect real political representatives? Is that good or bad or both? How do you avoid those types of influences in the process of creating legislation?