

Week 7: Preamble to the Constitution

Weekly Focus: Comprehension
Weekly Skill: Determining Central Ideas/Claims in Historical Documents

Lesson Summary: In this lesson, students will focus on critically reading and comprehending a foundational document of the United States government. Students will work to determine the central ideas of the Preamble to the Constitution. For the grammar portion students will be introduced to the rules for commas in a series.

Materials Needed: Constitutional Topic: The Preamble, Preamble Worksheet, Preamble Lesson (2 pages used), Declaration of Independence Rap, and Comma Handout

Objectives: Students will be able to...

- read and comprehend a foundational document
- identify main ideas within the text
- demonstrate understanding of main ideas by rewriting them in a new context
- identify rules for correctly using commas in a series and demonstrate comprehension through correctly punctuating examples
- practice correctly writing commonly misused homonyms

Common Core Standards Addressed: W.11-12.2, RI.11-12.4, RI.11-12.7, RI.11-12.9, L.4.1g, L.6.1e, L.4.1g

Notes:

This week's focus is once again on Critical Comprehension. Remind students of this and of the necessity of comprehension in order for them to succeed not only on the Reasoning through Language Arts portion of the test, but also in all of the other sections, including Math and its word problems.

Finally, this week will begin the homonym "quizzes" at the start of class instead of the Creative Writing. Tell students that they need to arrive promptly in order to participate in the quiz. The idea is that students will begin to pay attention to these words in their own writings, rather than to develop an entire lesson to homonyms. Like other mechanics, homonyms must be addressed constantly during writing.

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Activities:

Warm-Up/Review: Mechanics

Time: 15 minutes

Homonyms Quiz. To, two, too, their, they're, there. Come up with seven sentences using these homonyms. Have the students number their papers from 1-7. Read the sentences out-loud. Have students write what they believe the correct homonym is (not the whole sentence) by the number. Go over the answers.

Reading and Writing Activity: Rewriting the Preamble

Time: 100 minutes

Context:

- 1) Remind students of this unit's essential question: "What does Independence mean?" Explain that today we will be thinking about what Independence meant for the United States as a young nation.
- 2) **Briefly** give students some historical context for the Preamble to the Constitution. Some questions you may want to cover are: *What year did the United States declare its Independence? What country did the United States break away from? What was one reason the United States gave in its decision to become independent? What were the Articles of Confederation?* Do not spend a large amount of time on this. Students need only understand that the Constitution was written after we had declared our Independence from Great Britain and were searching to solidify our own laws.
- 3) Finally, show the Declaration of Independence Rap Video as a summary of why the United States broke away from Great Britain.

Activity: 1) Break students into groups. Hand out **page 3** of the PDF document found in the [Preamble Lesson](#). Read through the Preamble together as a class.

2) Next, hand out The Preamble Worksheet. Have students work in groups to fill in the **bottom box** for each phrase: What do I think this phrase of the preamble means? Students can look up words in the dictionary.

3) After each group has thought about each phrase, hand out the "Constitutional Topic: The Preamble" article. Assign each group a different phrase of the preamble to read. Have students work as a group to read the assigned section and fill in the Warrant section on their worksheets. (Example: Instruct students to read "We the People of the United States" and then write an answer **in their own words** that completes the Warrant section based on the reading.)

4) After 15 minutes, have each group stand up and present to the class what they learned about the assigned phrase—in their own words. Have the other students take notes on their worksheet about what was said. **Tip:** Have students-- with their pencils down--listen to the group until the group finishes talking. THEN, ask the class, "What did they say?" Finally, have students write down a few notes or phrases from what the group presented.

5) Hand out **page 6** of the [Preamble Lesson](#) and have students work in pairs to label each box with the appropriate preamble phrase each description refers to. This will bring these ideas into a modern day context. Go over answers after 15 minutes.

6) Lastly, give students time to individually answer the question on the last page of the worksheet. Ask for a couple of volunteers to share their responses with the class.

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**Overall, be sure that students understand that by putting the Preamble into their own words, they are practicing skills that will aid them in Comprehension. Many primary documents, including several U.S. Foundational Documents that they will see on the GED test might be difficult to understand because they were written for a different audience. Students must still be able to find a way to comprehend these documents, and two comprehension skills to aid in this are to 1) try putting the main ideas into your own words and 2) thinking about the main ideas in a modern context.

Break: 10 minutes

Grammar Activity: Commas in a Series

Time: 45 minutes

Review: Review what makes a complete sentence with students (subject, verb, complete thought). Ask students to give you an example of a complete sentence.

Introduction:

1) Hand out comma rules. Explain to students that this unit you will be going over three important rules for how to use commas in a sentence correctly. Today you will focus on rule number 3: Commas in a series.

2) Go over rules for using commas in a series with students. Project the Preamble to the Constitution onto the overhead and ask students to identify which commas are being used to separate items in a series. In pairs, have them highlight these commas on their preamble handout. Go over together as a class.

Practice: Ask students to think about their experience working in groups to study the preamble today. Then, write these questions on the board. Model an answer for each question first and then have students work individually or in pairs to answer them.

1) What three things did you most enjoy about working in a group? Write a one sentence answer in which you correctly use commas in a series.

2) What are three things that you learned today? Write a one sentence response that correctly uses commas in a series.

Go over responses together.

Assessment: Before class, come up with 10 sentences that use commas in a series. Then, write each word of the sentence on a notecard (including commas and punctuation). Mix up the notecards for each sentence and hand them to pairs. Have each pair correctly put the sentences in order. Repeat, switching sentences.

Wrap-Up: Whip Discussion

Time: 10 min.

Have students form a circle. Then, go around the circle and have each student answer the following question. The idea is to go quickly, like a "whip" being cracked.

Question: What is one thing that you will take away from today's discussion?

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Extra Work/Homework:

Ask students to write a one to two paragraph summary about the format of the United States Constitution and have them present their findings to the class.

Differentiated Instruction/ELL Accommodation Suggestions	Activity
Have lower level students create a vocabulary sheet of words from the Preamble that they don't understand.	Reading

Online Resources:

Suggested Teacher Readings: TBA

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Constitutional Topic: The Preamble

[Taken from "U.S. Constitution Online" http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_pre.html]

The Constitution was written by several committees over the summer of 1787, but the committee most responsible for the final form we know today is the "Committee of Style and Arrangement". This Committee was tasked with getting all of the articles and clauses agreed to by the Convention and putting them into a logical order. On September 10, 1787, the Committee of Style set to work, and two days later, it presented the Convention with its final draft. The members were Alexander Hamilton, William Johnson, Rufus King, James Madison, and Gouverneur Morris. The actual text of the Preamble and of much of the rest of this final draft is usually attributed to Gouverneur Morris.

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We the People of the United States

The Framers were an elite group — among the best and brightest America had to offer at the time. But they knew that they were trying to forge a nation made up not of an elite, but of the common man. Without the approval of the common man, they feared revolution. This first part of the Preamble speaks to the common man. It puts into writing, as clear as day, the notion that the people were creating this Constitution. It was not handed down by a god or by a king — it was created by the people.

in Order to form a more perfect Union

The Framers were dissatisfied with the United States under the Articles of Confederation, but they felt that what they had was the best they could have, up to now. They were striving for something better. The Articles of Confederation had been a grand experiment that had worked well up to a point, but now, less than ten years into that experiment, cracks were showing. The new United States, under this new Constitution, would be more perfect. Not *perfect*, but more perfect.

establish Justice

Injustice, unfairness of laws and in trade, was of great concern to the people of 1787. People looked forward to a nation with a level playing field, where courts were established with uniformity and where trade within and outside the borders of the country would be fair and [unharmful]. Today, we enjoy a system of justice that is one of the fairest in the world. It has not always been so — only through great struggle can we now say that every citizen has the opportunity for a fair trial and for equal treatment, and even today there still exists discrimination. But we still strive for the justice that the Framers wrote about.

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insure domestic Tranquility

One of the events that caused the Convention to be held was the revolt of Massachusetts farmers known as Shays' Rebellion. The taking up of arms by war veterans revolting against the state government was a shock to the system. The keeping of the peace was on everyone's mind, and the maintenance of tranquility at home was a prime concern. The framers hoped that the new powers given the federal government would prevent any such rebellions in the future.

provide for the common defence

The new nation was fearful of attack from all sides — and no one state was really capable of fending off an attack from land or sea by itself. With a wary eye on Britain and Spain, and ever-watchful for Indian attack, no one of the United States could go it alone. They needed each other to survive in the harsh world of international politics of the 18th century.

promote the general Welfare

This, and the next part of the Preamble, are the culmination of everything that came before it — the whole point of having tranquility, justice, and defense was to promote the general welfare — to allow every state and every citizen of those states to benefit from what the government could provide. The framers looked forward to the expansion of land holdings, industry, and investment, and they knew that a strong national government would be the beginning of that.

and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity

Hand in hand with the general welfare, the framers looked forward to the blessings of liberty — something they had all fought hard for just a decade before. They were very concerned that they were creating a nation that would resemble something of a paradise for liberty, as opposed to the tyranny of a monarchy, where citizens could look forward to being free as opposed to looking out for the interests of a king. And more than for themselves, they wanted to be sure that the future generations of Americans would enjoy the same.

do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America

The final clause of the Preamble is almost anti-climactic, but it is important for a few reasons — it finishes the "We, the people" thought, saying what we the people are actually doing; it gives us a name for this document, and it restates the name of the nation adopting the Constitution. That the Constitution is "ordained" reminds us of the higher power involved here — not just of a single person or of a king, but of the people themselves. That it is "established" reminds us that it replaces that which came before — the United States under the Articles (a point lost on us today, but quite relevant at the time).

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Comma Use: Three Rules

1. Use commas after introductory a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main clause.

a. Common starter words for introductory clauses that should be followed by a comma include **after, although, as, because, if, since, when, while**.

While I was eating, the cat scratched at the door.

Because her alarm clock was broken, she was late for class.

If you are ill, you ought to see a doctor.

When the snow stops falling, we'll shovel the driveway.

However, don't put a comma after the main clause when a dependent (subordinate) clause follows it (except for cases of extreme contrast).

Incorrect: She was late for class, because her alarm clock was broken.

Incorrect: The cat scratched at the door, while I was eating.

Correct: She was still quite upset, although she had won the Oscar. (This comma use is correct because it is an example of extreme contrast)

b. Common introductory phrases that should be followed by a comma include participial and infinitive phrases, absolute phrases, nonessential appositive phrases, and long prepositional phrases (over four words).

Having finished the test, he left the room.

To get a seat, you'd better come early.

After the test but before lunch, I went jogging.

The sun radiating intense heat, we sought shelter in the cafe.

c. Common introductory words that should be followed by a comma include **yes, however, well**.

Well, perhaps he meant no harm.

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2. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off clauses, phrases, and words that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Use one comma before to indicate the beginning of the pause and one at the end to indicate the end of the pause.

Here are some clues to help you decide whether the sentence element is essential:

- If you leave out the clause, phrase, or word, does the sentence still make sense?
- Does the clause, phrase, or word interrupt the flow of words in the original sentence?
- If you move the element to a different position in the sentence, does the sentence still make sense?

If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, then the element in question is nonessential and should be set off with commas. Here are some example sentences with nonessential elements:

Clause: That Tuesday, *which happens to be my birthday*, is the only day when I am available to meet.

Phrase: This restaurant has an exciting atmosphere. The food, *on the other hand*, is rather bland.

Word: I appreciate your hard work. In this case, *however*, you seem to have over-exerted yourself.

3. Use commas to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

The Constitution establishes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

The candidate promised to lower taxes, protect the environment, reduce crime, and end unemployment.

The prosecutor argued that the defendant, who was at the scene of the crime, who had a strong revenge motive, and who had access to the murder weapon, was guilty of homicide.

This worksheet excerpted from The Purdue OWL's "Extended Rules for Using Commas," which can be found at: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>