

THINKING ABOUT THE PREAMBLE TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION DISCUSSION GUIDE

Handouts needed:

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| A. Thinking about the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (page 4 below) ¹ | 1 copy per student |
| B. Vocabulary of the Preamble (page 5 below) | 1 copy per student |
| C. Values in the Preamble (page 6 below) | 1 copy per student |

Strategies:

Anyone planning to lead the discussion on the Preamble should examine and modify the strategies which follow:

1. Share with students the rationale for today's discussion:
 - a. Today's discussion is on the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. The Preamble informs us about the rationale or reasons for the United States Constitution. In other words, it tells us why in the United States we have a government and about what our government should be like. In fact, it may serve as a set of ideas for us to use in judging how well our government is working.
 - b. Our aim is to understand the Preamble and in the process to learn more about our government and what it should be like.
2. Distribute to students Handout A ("Thinking about the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution").
3. Ask students to each fill in the center column of Handout A. As some students finish filling in the center column, they may proceed to fill in the right-hand column if time permits.
4. Small group discussion of the meaning of the Preamble:²
 - a. Have students count off by 5s.
 - b. Have all 1s move into one group sitting together, all 2s move into a second group sitting together, all 3s move into a third group sitting together, and so on.

¹ The author of these pages—Warren Solomon, Clinical Associate, College of Education, University of Missouri-Columbia—drew some inspiration and ideas for Handout A from C-SPAN in the Classroom (see its website http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/pdf/ws_preamble.pdf).

² The classroom teacher should assist in helping students get into groups and in specifying locations for the groups.

- c. Assign the small groups areas of responsibility as follows:
 - Group 1: Lines 1 and 2 of the Preamble in Handout A
 - Group 2: Lines 3 and 4 of the Preamble in Handout A
 - Group 3: Lines 5 and 6 of the Preamble in Handout A
 - Group 4: Lines 7 and 8 of the Preamble in Handout A
 - Group 5: Lines 9 and 10 of the Preamble in Handout A
 - d. Distribute to each student copies of Handout B (“Vocabulary of the Preamble”).
 - e. Ask members within each group to do the following:
 - i. share with each other what they wrote individually (see Strategy 3 above)
 - ii. reach a consensus on the meanings of their assigned lines using their own ideas and ideas from Handout B in the process
 - iii. be ready to report to the entire class on their consensus ideas
 - f. Allow sufficient time for the small groups to carry out Tasks 4e, i, ii, and iii (5-10 minutes).
5. Total group discussion on the meaning of the Preamble:
- a. Distribute to students copies of Handout C (“Values in the Preamble”), and ask them to keep that handout and Handout A on their desks for the remainder of the class discussion.
 - b. Have each group report on each of the lines for which it is responsible, ideally with a different student explaining the meaning of each of the group’s lines.
 - c. For some of the lines—not all—ask the students to think of a current issue today that is related to the line under consideration. (Good lines in Handout A for identification of current issues today are those that relate to the values in the Preamble found in Handout C: namely, Lines 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.)
6. Big ideas to explore in total group discussion with Handouts A and C on student desks during the discussion:³
- a. Help the students visualize how some issues involve conflicts among the values. Such issues become

³ The ideas discussed here (6 a, b, c) might be addressed naturally in conjunction with 5c above. The discussion leader should not feel compelled to explore all three of the big ideas listed here. He or she may be selective in deciding what to emphasize.

controversies where different citizens take opposing positions, which in a political system that values freedom is to be expected.⁴ Examples:

- i. Sometimes efforts to provide for the common defense may lead to some restrictions on people's liberty or on justice, especially in times of war. What should be the proper balance among those values? Citizens may hold different points of view.
 - ii. Sometimes efforts to promote the general welfare might reduce people's freedom in some ways (e.g., taxes might need to be raised, which leaves people with less money to spend as they choose). Here again in addressing the question of what should be the proper balance between the values citizens may hold different points of view.
 - iii. Etc.
- b. Help students envision what life would be like under political systems that ignore or oppose one or more of the values found in the Preamble.
 - c. Help students consider how the Preamble might be used as an instrument to evaluate public policy recommendations or decisions to evaluate how our government is working.⁵

7. Concluding the discussion:

When the time comes to end the discussion, thank the teacher for the chance to meet with his or her students and thank the students for their good ideas, reminding them that they were dealing with a most important subject, which all citizens living in this nation need to understand.

⁴ Some of those controversies come to the courts and are addressed by the Supreme Court.

⁵ As a follow-up activity, the classroom teacher might bring in newspaper clippings related to government policy recommendations or decisions for students to examine in the light of the Preamble.

Name _____

Date _____

THINKING ABOUT THE PREAMBLE TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

	Here are the actual words of the Preamble	Rewrite the words of the Preamble in your own words	What questions or comments do you have about those words?
1	We the People of the United States,		
2	in Order to form a more perfect Union,		
3	establish Justice,		
4	insure domestic Tranquility,		
5	provide for the common defence,		
6	promote the general Welfare,		
7	and secure the Blessings of Liberty		
8	to ourselves and our Posterity,		
9	do ordain and establish this Constitution		
10	for the United States of America.		

VOCABULARY OF THE PREAMBLE

Words to think about from Preamble	Definitions or Questions
1. "People of the United States"	Question: What might the authors of the Constitution have chosen to write instead of "We the People of the United States"? Who was included in "People" in 1787?
2. "more perfect union"	Question: What is an example of how the government of the Articles of Confederation failed to be a perfect union? What were some of the improvements in the Constitution that would make this a "more perfect union?"
3 "justice"	Question: Just/Justice: What does it mean for a government to be just to the people living under its rule?
4. "domestic tranquility"	<p>Definition: "Domestic": The word "domestic" is related to the word "domicile," which is another word for "home." "Domestic tranquility" is tranquility <i>within</i> a home or <i>within</i> a nation.</p> <p>Question: "Tranquility": A tranquil sea, which is a calm sea, is the opposite of a stormy sea. What would it be like to be in a boat on a tranquil versus a stormy sea? What would it be like to be in a nation that is tranquil versus a nation that is not tranquil? What were some events which indicated that the US was not a tranquil place before the Constitution was adopted? (Congress chased out of Philadelphia by its own army, Shay's Rebellion in MA)</p>
5. "common defence"	Question: What would be the difference between having one United States government defend the territory of all the states compared to having each of the states responsible for defending its own territory? Is it important for the United States to be able to have a <i>common</i> defense? What is our "common defense"?
6. "general welfare"	<p>Definition: "Welfare" may be defined as "the state of doing well especially in respect to good fortune, happiness, well-being, or prosperity."</p> <p>Questions: How might a government promote the <i>general</i> welfare: that is, the welfare of all the people? (Think of education, roads, libraries, arts, public health, public safety, and so on.) Imagine two governments: one does a lot to promote the general welfare; the other does <i>absolutely nothing</i> to promote the general welfare. What would it be like to live under each government? What are some nations struggling to promote the "general welfare" today? Why is "warfare" an enemy of the "general welfare"?</p>
7. "Blessings of liberty"	Question: Imagine living in a country where people have no liberty. What would life be like to live in that country? What rights, if any, would people have in that country? Be specific. Do all countries try to secure the blessings of liberty for their peoples? Should they? How have various individuals and groups tried to secure the "blessings of liberty" for themselves throughout our history?
8. "our Posterity"	<p>Definition: Posterity comes from the Latin word <i>posterus</i>, which means "coming after."</p> <p>Question: Would "our posterity" refer to our parents or our children and grandchildren?</p>
9. "Constitution"	Question: If a constitution is <i>the basic</i> laws of a government or of an organization, how is a constitution different from the other laws or rules of a government or organization? How does the Constitution provide

	both a blueprint for government and limitations on the powers of government?
10. "United States of America"	Question: How would " <i>United States</i> of America" be different from " <i>Confederation of States</i> of America"?

Handout B

VALUES IN THE PREAMBLE

Union

Justice

Liberty

Preamble to Constitution

Domestic Tranquility

General Welfare

Common Defense