Constitution Day

On September 17, 1787, delegates signed the U.S. Constitution. To commemorate this historical event, federal law requires schools that receive federal funding and all federal agencies to hold programs about the Constitution on or near that date each year. Below is a “best of” set of resources featured in past issues of *Justitia*, the Learning Center’s educator e-newsletter.

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Fast Constitution Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. Constitution</th>
<th>Michigan Constitution of 1963</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed September 17, 1787. World’s oldest written constitution still in effect</td>
<td>Written, 1961–62; adopted, 1963; supersedes state constitutions of 1835, 1850, and 1908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begins with “We the People”</td>
<td>Begins with “We the People”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defines the roles and powers of three branches of government</td>
<td>Defines the roles and powers of three branches of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists rights of the people in the Bill of Rights, amendments adopted in 1791</td>
<td>Lists rights of the people in the Declaration of Rights in Article 1, directly following the Preamble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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At the Learning Center

The Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center, a hands-on gallery in the Hall of Justice, offers tours and events, like Constitution Day, for the public.

Free guided tours are available weekdays, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. (except court holidays).

Call to schedule today! 517-373-7171

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At [courts.mi.gov/learningcenter](http://courts.mi.gov/learningcenter)

The Educator Resources page includes an array of information and lessons. See the [Constitutions](http://courts.mi.gov/learningcenter) page for Constitution Day resources and links.
Examining the Constitution

Do you ask your students to examine facsimile or electronic copies of original documents? Many high-resolution versions of the U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Michigan Constitution are available online. Some sites have exciting zoom features, while others allow downloading or printing. If you prefer a low-tech option, you could even purchase paper facsimiles.

Students enjoy working in pairs or triads as they decipher the historical handwriting. It may be helpful to supply typed transcripts or assign older students to transcribe certain sections and compare their findings, since the task can be challenging.

To use online documents, you will need electronic devices, preselected websites that feature original documents, and typed transcripts. For paper documents, you will need printed or purchased facsimiles, typed transcripts, and magnifying glasses.

Websites with Original Documents

Zoom in on the U.S. Constitution and Zoom in on the Bill of Rights, Colonial Williamsburg Constitution Primary Source Set, Library of Congress
Charters of Freedom, High-Resolution Downloads, National Archives and Records Administration
Michigan Constitution of 1835 (image), Archives of Michigan at SeekingMichigan.org

Which Constitution?

Michigan’s judges swear (or affirm) to uphold the Michigan Constitution and the U.S. Constitution, so they must have detailed knowledge of both. How much do you know about these two important documents? (Answers below.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Mich.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) World’s oldest written constitution.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Approved by voters in 1963.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Defines three branches of government.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Begins “We the people . . .”</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Protects the rights of those accused of crimes.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Protects the rights of crime victims.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Guarantees the right of trial by jury.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Separation of Powers

In the United States, the federal government has distinct and independent branches. The U.S. Constitution defines the federal government’s legislative, executive, and judicial branches and their powers in Articles I–III. These three separate branches of government share power, and each branch serves as a check on the power of the others. State governments follow the same model. The Michigan Constitution outlines the branches of government and their powers in Articles IV–VI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>U.S. Constitution</th>
<th>Michigan Constitution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislative</td>
<td>Makes</td>
<td>Article I</td>
<td>Article IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Congress (Senate, Representatives)</td>
<td>Senate, House of Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Enforces</td>
<td>Article II</td>
<td>Article V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial</td>
<td>Interprets</td>
<td>Article III</td>
<td>Article VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supreme Court, Lower Courts</td>
<td>Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, Court of Appeals,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Established by Congress</td>
<td>Circuit Court, Probate Court, and Courts of Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jurisdiction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An Independent Judiciary

The U.S. Constitution provides an important framework for the federal judicial branch of government:

- An independent judiciary with a Supreme Court and other federal courts and their jurisdiction (Article III).
- A process by which the President appoints judges with the advice and consent of the Senate (Article II).
- Protections for judges from retaliation for unpopular decisions – Judges hold office during good behavior, can only be removed through legislative impeachment, and cannot have their salaries reduced as long as they hold office (Article I, Article III).

In much the same way, the Michigan Constitution outlines the state’s judiciary in Article VI. It includes:

- An independent judiciary with power vested in one court of justice, composed of a Supreme Court, a Court of Appeals, a Circuit Court, a Probate Court, and other lower courts. Jurisdictions are also defined.
- Judicial qualifications, elections, and a process of appointments in the event of judicial vacancies.
- Judicial salaries with protection against decreases and a process for handling cases of judicial misconduct.

For more about the state and federal judiciaries, see:

Federal Judicial Center – History
Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society – History
Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center – Michigan’s State Courts
Visualizing Constitution Data

Word Clouds

When analyzing complex texts such as the U.S. Constitution, it can be helpful to create visual representations. Word clouds highlight words that appear frequently in source text (excluding common words). They can be used to identify ideas, themes, and key terms. In fact, scholars from the Comparative Constitutions Project use word clouds to visualize data when comparing constitutions from different countries.

Teachers and students can create and analyze their own word clouds by pasting text from the U.S. Constitution into free websites such as WordClouds or Tagxedo.

Charts, Tables, & Timelines

Below are links to additional graphic data about the U.S. Constitution and constitutions around the world. These sources were created by the Comparative Constitutions Project and their partners.

Table of Common Preamble Phrases featured in the “What’s in a Preamble?” lesson from the American Bar Association, Division for Public Education

Historical Sources for the Bill of Rights, co-created with the National Constitution Center

Timeline of Constitutions

World Constitutional Holidays

“We the People” Video

The phrase “We the People,” which appears at the beginning of the U. S. Constitution and the Michigan Constitution, is featured in a 3-minute video by the Michigan Supreme Court. Appropriate for elementary and above, the discussion is presented by Milton L. Mack, Jr., State Court Administrator and former probate judge.
Writing a Classroom Constitution

In the We the Students lesson from the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago, students use the U.S. Constitution as a model to write their own preamble and “articles” (rules) for their classroom.

Using Primary Sources

Constitution Day is the perfect time to introduce students of all levels to primary sources! The following websites offer resources and ideas for teaching with our nation’s and state’s founding documents.

Constitution Day Primary Source Tool Kit Library of Congress
Docs Teach: Revolution and the New Nation National Archives
Teaching with Documents: Observing Constitution Day National Archives

The Constitution and the Rule of Law

The United States was founded on the concept of the Rule of Law. This principle means that everyone – including the government – is accountable under just laws that are enacted and enforced equally and that justice is delivered by neutral officials (judges).

According to Article IV of the U.S. Constitution, judges in every state are bound to uphold the nation’s founding document as the “supreme law of the land.” Equal treatment is embodied in the Fifth Amendment guarantee of due process of law, and the Fourteenth Amendment, which entitles every citizen to “equal protection under the laws.”

In discussing the Rule of Law, the U.S. Courts website concludes: “Equality before the law is such an essential part of the American system of government that, when a majority, whether acting intentionally or unintentionally, infringes upon the rights of a minority, the Court may see fit to hear both sides of the controversy in court.”

More about the Rule of Law

American Bar Association – Dialogue on the Rule of Law PDF (MS and above)
U.S. Courts – Rule of Law Educational Resources (HS and above)
Utah Education Network – Rules and Laws Lesson Plan (Elementary)
World Justice Project – Rule of Law Index analyzes factors in countries worldwide