



## The Founders' Library: Thinking as a Founding Father

**Author:**

**Eli J. Lesser**

**Director of Teacher Education and Civic Outreach**

### About this Lesson

*This lesson is designed to introduce students to the Constitution. It can be used as a one-day lesson to fulfill the Constitution Day requirement or as a means to begin a conversation about the framers of the Constitution. It has been carefully designed to highlight the three spheres of civic education as detailed by the National Constitution Center; that is, the lesson includes civic knowledge, active citizenship, and democratic deliberation.*

*The Founders' Library refers to the prior knowledge the Founding Fathers brought to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787. Students will examine these ideas and use them to analyze the Constitution and Bill of Rights. At the same time, students will be considering ideas and information that relate to their own lives.*

*Students will finish the lesson by considering the idea of prior knowledge. Each student will be asked to think of books, music, movies, or television shows that impact ideas about the United States. The combination of personal experience and the critical examination of the Constitution will allow the students to have a deeper understanding of the creative imagination that was necessary to write and debate the Constitution of the United States*

*This lesson is designed for one forty-five minute high school class period. It does not have to be limited to the social studies classroom, but can be completed in a variety of settings from a small seminar to a traditional humanities classroom.*

## Grade(s) Level

7-12

## Classroom Time

1- 45 minute class

## Handouts

- Constitution of the United States  
<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution/constitution.pdf>
- Influences on the Constitution- Student Worksheet
- Divided sections of the "Founder's Library Books" packet, one or two sections for each group

## Constitutional Connections

### Articles

I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII

### Amendments

1-10

## Background

In the summer of 1787, a group of fifty-five men gathered at the State House in Philadelphia. They were sent to Philadelphia by their respective state governments in an attempt to amend the failing Articles of Confederation. Quickly, this convention of delegates from 12 states (Rhode Island chose not to participate) decided that the Articles could not be saved, and a new government must be created.

The men present in Philadelphia during that hot summer in 1787 were not writing the document alone. They shared the company of the great thinkers of their time and those of the past. John Locke, Sir William Blackstone, Jonathan Swift, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Thomas Paine are just a few of the writers and thinkers who had an impact on the final product of the Convention. The men present possessed a variety of educational backgrounds. During the Convention in Philadelphia, the Library Company, one of the nation's first libraries, opened its doors and collection to all delegates, giving them access to the books and ideas they sought.

The Constitution of the United States may have been written in the closed door convention of 1787, but its word and ideas were created over the course of human history. The Constitution is one of the great political writings of all time, and, by reading it in the presence of the thinkers that influenced its creation, students can see that, although our Founding Fathers were great and imaginative thinkers, this document was not a miracle of thought, but a document whose day had come.

## Objectives

Students will:

- Compile a list of books, movies, articles, music that have influenced them and the decisions they make
- Examine the writings that influenced the Founding Fathers
- Compare the writings to the Constitution and Bill of Rights
- Identify the influence of specific thinkers on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights
- Analyze personal writings and ideas, and identify the influence of specific thinkers

## Classroom Activity

### Warm Up

Ask students to compile a list of their favorite books, movies, music, and television shows. Students should write down a couple of choices for each category. The teacher should encourage students to think about items they feel have had an influence on them and not just choose the first item that comes to mind. The list should be compiled on a separate piece of paper and set aside for use later in the lesson.

### Primary Activity

1. Introduce the Constitutional Convention to the class:
  - The Convention was called in 1787 to address the problems of the *Articles of Confederation*.
  - State governments appointed delegates to attend the convention. Twelve states sent delegations (Rhode Island did not participate).
  - Delegates were civic leaders, members of congress, leaders of state governments, and revolutionary war veterans.
  - The Convention was held in Philadelphia, the largest city in the United States at that time.
  - The Library Company, one of the nation's first libraries, provided books and reference material for the Convention delegates.
2. Brainstorm with students the definition of prior knowledge. Record responses in the front of the classroom.
3. Divide students into groups of 3-4 students and assign each group 2-3 sections of the *Founders' Library Books* handout, provide one copy of *Influences on the Constitution* student handout to each group, and provide a copy of the *United States Constitution with Bill of Rights*. Provide the groups with the following instructions:
  - Read the assigned sections of the *Founders' Library Books* handout as a group.
  - Reading through the Constitution and Bill of Rights (Amendment 1-10), identify key sections that hold similar ideas as those presented in the assigned passages.
  - Note on the document using a highlighter or pen the sections that correlate with the assigned section.
4. Once all of the groups have completed their work, bring the class back together as a whole. In the front of the classroom, project or copy the text of *Influences on the Constitution* blank handout. Ask a member of each group to fill in their portion of the handout, creating a master compilation that all the students can see.
5. Use the following questions to guide discussion about the completed worksheet:
  - Did one thinker or book have more influence on the Constitution?
  - Some have called the Constitution one of most revolutionary documents ever produced. If all of these works had been written before the Constitution was ever conceived, how can it be revolutionary?
  - What other documents, ideas, or events do you think should have been included?
6. Ask students to return to their groups, return each students lists from the warm-up activity to each student, and provide the following instructions:
  - As a group, you have to write a paragraph on the current conditions of citizens in the United States.
  - Allow time for each group to complete the paragraph, and then ask the groups to review their paragraphs and look for influences they listed.
7. Going around the class, ask students to share their findings.

## Influences on the Constitution

Directions: Read assigned sections of *The Founders' Library Books* handout; compare each idea and statement to the Constitution. Fill in the name of the thinker or book next to the appropriate Article or Amendment.

<b>Article I</b>
<b>Article II</b>
<b>Article III</b>
<b>Article IV</b>
<b>Article V</b>
<b>Article VI</b>
<b>Article VII</b>
<b>Amendment 1</b>
<b>Amendment 2</b>
<b>Amendment 3</b>
<b>Amendment 4</b>
<b>Amendment 5</b>
<b>Amendment 6</b>
<b>Amendment 7</b>
<b>Amendment 8</b>
<b>Amendment 9</b>
<b>Amendment 10</b>

# The Founders' Library Books

## An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke, 1690

Locke thinks that human nature is a blank slate on which the environment operates. He states that individuals are responsible for their own judgments in religion and politics.

*"We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us; for of that they are very capable."*

## Two Treatises on Government, John Locke, 1690

Locke believes that human beings join together and form governments in order to protect their natural rights to life and property. When a government fails to protect these rights, he maintains, the people can replace that government with another.

*"The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom."*

## Commentaries on the Laws of England, Sir William Blackstone, 1765-69

Blackstone's political conservatism troubles many revolutionaries. But his Commentaries is a sourcebook on English common-law rules and procedures and is part of every American lawyer's bookshelf.

*"Civil liberty, rightly understood, consists in protecting the rights of individuals by the united force of society: society cannot be maintained, and of course can exert no protection, without obedience to some sovereign power; and obedience is an empty name, if every individual has a right to decide how far he himself shall obey."*

## Magna Carta, 1215

In this Great Charter of Liberty, English kings conceded that government must be based on the rule of law, and guaranteed certain basic rights to all freemen.

*"No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed, or outlawed, or banished, or in any way destroyed, nor will we go upon him, nor send upon him, except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land."*

Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith, 1776

Smith believes that economic prosperity is more likely through the self-interested decisions of thousands of individuals than through government monopolies and controls. This corresponds nicely with the idea that people should have political freedom as well.

*“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages.”*

The Prince, Niccolo Machiavelli, 1532

Machiavelli argues that human beings act out of self-interest and that an effective ruler must learn how to harness greed and ambition for the benefit of the state rather than relying on public virtue.

*“Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.”*

Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy, Niccolo Machiavelli, 1531

Machiavelli’s Discourses highlight the importance of “civic virtue” to the well being of a republic.

*“The Citizens in a Republic who attempt an enterprise either in favor of Liberty or in favor of Tyranny, ought to consider the condition of things, and judge the difficulty of the enterprise; for it is as difficult and dangerous to want to make a people free who want to live in servitude, as to want to make a people slave who want to live free.”*

Cato’s Letters, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, 1724

These essays show how courtiers around the King subverted the liberty of Englishmen and the independence of Parliament. The authors confirm American suspicions of executive power.

*“It is nothing strange, that men, who think themselves unaccountable, should act unaccountably, and that all men would be unaccountable if they could”*

Gulliver’s Travels, Jonathan Swift, 1726

Swift’s political satire on the universal human tendency to abuse political power and authority is familiar to American readers.

*“Mistakes committed by Ignorance in a virtuous Disposition, would never be of such fatal Consequence to the Publick Weal, as the Practices of a man whose Inclinations led him to be corrupt, and had great Abilities to manage and multiply, and defend his corruptions.”*

Politics, Aristotle, BC 384-322

Aristotle's emphasis on a higher law interests American thinkers. It provides a classical pedigree for their ideas about "fundamental law" and "natural rights."

*"Constitutions which aim at the common advantage are correct and just without qualification, whereas those which aim only at the advantage of the rulers are deviant and unjust, because they involve despotic rule, which is inappropriate for a community of free persons."*

Lives of Noble Romans, Plutarch, 46-120

Plutarch provides practical examples of courageous and public-spirited leadership to emulate, as well as examples of folly and vice to avoid.

*"Ambitious men, who embrace the image and not the reality of virtue, produce nothing but ugly deeds."*

The Spirit of the Laws, Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron Montesquieu, 1748

Montesquieu explains that liberty rests upon separating the different powers of government: especially the power to enact laws from the power to enforce them.

*"When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner."*

Letters, and Reflections on the Causes of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron Montesquieu, 1734

Montesquieu likes the idea of "civic virtue," but thinks it hard to attain in complex commercial nations. He believes that "self-interest" will have to substitute.

*"There is nothing so powerful as a republic in which the laws are observed not through fear, not through reason, but through passion"*

An Essay on Crimes and Punishments, Cesare Beccaria, 1764

The Italian legal reformer Beccaria maintains that laws should be simple, clear, and sensible, and that to deter crime they should make punishment swift and proportional to the offense.

*"The end of punishment, therefore, is no other than to prevent the criminal from doing further injury to society, and to prevent others from committing the like offence. Such punishments, therefore, and such a mode of inflicting them, ought to be chosen, as will make the strongest and most lasting impressions on the minds of others, with the least torment to the body of the criminal."*

History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon, 1776-88

The Revolutionary generation thinks that Gibbon shows how greed and ambition led to tyrannical government in Rome and finally to the collapse of the Republic.

*“All that is human must retrograde if it do not advance.”*

Common Sense, Thomas Paine, 1776

Paine denounces monarchy as inherently corrupt and tyrannical and also describes how an independent America will achieve greater prosperity when freed of colonial restrictions.

*“This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from EVERY PART of Europe. Hither have they fled not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster, and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still.”*

A System of Moral Philosophy, Francis Hutcheson, 1755

Hutcheson believes that “self-interest” is a virtue in itself. Challenging John Locke, he says that ideas of right and wrong are not based on reason, but on a “moral sense” implanted by God.

*“Our moral sense, by the wise constitution of God, more approves such affections as are most useful and efficacious to the publick interest.”*

Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, David Hume, 1753-68

The Framers have mixed feelings about Hume. Though some delegates admire his work, they are dismayed by his idea that royal corruption of members of Parliament is necessary to maintain the balance between royal authority and popular power.

*“We may, therefore, give to this influence what name we please; we may call it by the invidious appellations of corruption and dependence; but some degree and some kind of it are inseparable from the very nature of the constitution, and necessary to the preservation of our mixed government.”*



Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer, John Dickinson, 1768

Dickinson denounced British efforts to tax Americans and groped for a rational way to divide central and local power. He's at the Convention himself, trying to solve this problem.

*"In fact, if the people of New York cannot be legally taxed but by their own representatives, they cannot be legally deprived of the privilege of legislation, only for insisting on that exclusive privilege of taxation. If they may be legally deprived in such a case of the privilege of legislation, why may they not, with equal reason, be deprived of every other privilege?"*

A Summary of the Views of the Rights of British America, Thomas Jefferson, 1774

Jefferson summarized the American argument that Parliament deprived Americans of liberty by trying to govern and tax them without the consent of their representatives.

*"Let them not think to exclude us from going to other markets to dispose of those commodities which they cannot use, or to supply those wants which they cannot supply. Still less let it be proposed that our properties within our own territories shall be taxed or regulated by any power on earth but our own."*

Works, John Woolman, 1774

Woolman, a Pennsylvania Quaker, believes that owning slaves is inconsistent with the Christian religion. His writings contribute to the growing international debate over slavery.

*"These are people who have made no agreement to serve us, and who have not forfeited their liberty that we know of. These are the souls for whom Christ died, and for our conduct towards them we must answer before Him who is no respecter of persons"*

Institutes of the Laws of England, Sir Edward Coke, 1628

Coke believes that the Magna Carta confirms the ancient, fundamental rights belonging to all Englishmen. He says common law preserves those rights and that judges should carefully guard them. He is greatly admired by many of the Delegates.

*"The common law has no controller in any part of it, but the high court of Parliament; and if it be not abrogated or altered by Parliament, it remains still."*

The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament and the New, 1782

The Framers respect the Bible as the source of religious belief. Their thinking about "natural law" and "natural rights" has a religious foundation.

*"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."*

Thoughts on Government, John Adams, 1776

Adams is keenly interested in the structure of government. He champions the case for checks and balances.

*“A representation of the people in one assembly being obtained, a question arises, whether all the powers of government, legislative, executive, and judicial, shall be left in this body? I think a people cannot be long free, nor ever happy, whose government is in one assembly.”*