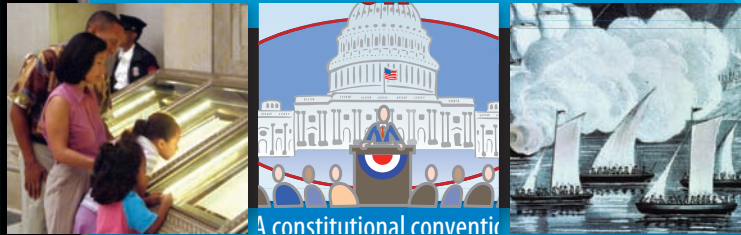


There's More Online!

- ✓ **GRAPHIC ORGANIZER**
Organization of the U.S. Constitution
- ✓ **CHARTS**
Comparing Governments
Amending the Constitution
- ✓ **VIDEO**



Lesson 3

The Structure of the Constitution

ESSENTIAL QUESTION *Why do people create, structure, and change governments?*

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The U.S. Constitution sets up the structure of our government and the basic laws of our nation.

NGSSS covered in
"The Parts of the Constitution"



- SS.7.C.1.6** Interpret the intentions of the Preamble of the Constitution.
- SS.7.C.1.7** Describe how the Constitution limits the powers of government through separation of powers and checks and balances.
- SS.7.C.3.3** Illustrate the structure and function (three branches of government established in Articles I, II, and III with corresponding powers) of government in the United States as established in the Constitution.
- LA.7.1.6.1** The student will use new vocabulary that is introduced and taught directly.
- LA.7.1.7.3** The student will determine the main idea or essential message in grade-level or higher texts through inferring, paraphrasing, summarizing, and identifying relevant details.

The Parts of the Constitution

GUIDING QUESTION *How does the U.S. Constitution organize the government?*

The main purpose of the United States Constitution is to provide a plan of government. However, the document is much more. It is the highest authority in the nation. It is the basic law of the United States. The powers of the three branches of the federal government come from it. Like the American flag, the U.S. Constitution is a symbol of our nation. It represents our system of government. It also stands for our basic ideals, such as personal liberty and democracy.

The Constitution has three main parts. First is an introduction called the **Preamble** (PREE•AM•buhl). It states the goals and purposes of the government. Next are seven **articles**, or main parts. They describe the way the government is set up. Third are 27 **amendments**. These are additions and changes to the Constitution.

As plans of government go, the Constitution is fairly brief. It contains a little less than 7,000 words. Unlike most other constitutions, it does not go into a lot of detail. This flexibility has proved a strength over the years.

Reading HELPDESK

Taking Notes: Summarizing

As you read, complete a table about the three parts of the U.S. Constitution.

LA.7.1.7.3

Organization of the U.S. Constitution

Major Part	Purpose
1. Preamble	
2. Articles	
3. Amendments	

Content Vocabulary

- **Preamble**
- **article**
- **amendment**
- **legislative branch**
- **executive branch**
- **judicial branch**

The Preamble

The Preamble consists of a single, powerful sentence. It begins and ends as follows:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“We the People of the United States . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

—Preamble of the U.S. Constitution

These carefully chosen words make clear that the power of government comes from the people. The middle part of the Preamble states six purposes of the government:

1. To “form a more perfect Union”—to unite the states so they can act as a single nation, for the good of all
2. To “establish Justice”—to make sure that all citizens are treated equally
3. To “insure domestic Tranquility”—to provide peace and order, keeping citizens and their property from harm
4. To “provide for the common [defense]”—to be ready militarily to protect the country and its citizens from attack
5. To “promote the general Welfare”—to help people live healthy, happy, and prosperous lives
6. To “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity”—to guarantee the basic rights of all Americans, including future generations (posterity)

The Seven Articles

The seven articles after the Preamble begin with the Roman numerals I through VII. The first three articles state the powers and responsibilities of each branch of government.

Article I outlines the lawmaking powers of the **legislative branch**, or Congress. It states that Congress, made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives, will have all lawmaking authority. It describes how members of each house will be chosen and what rules they must follow in making laws.

Article II sets out an **executive branch**, or law-enforcing part of government headed by a president and vice president. It explains how these leaders are to be elected and how they can be removed from office.

Visitors to the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., can view a carefully preserved Constitution. President Hoover called the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence “the most sacred Documents of our history.”

CRITICAL THINKING

Assessing Which part of the Constitution do you think has most helped the document adapt to changing times?



PHOTO: Michael Ventura/Alamy

Preamble the opening section of the Constitution

amendment any change in the Constitution

legislative branch the lawmaking branch of government

executive branch the branch of government that carries out laws

article one of several main parts of the Constitution

The Constitution corrected several weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation.

▶ CRITICAL THINKING

- 1 **Analyzing** How did the Constitution strengthen the power of the national government?
- 2 **Comparing** What were some powers that the national government had under both the Articles and the Constitution?

ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

Organization

- Strong independent states with weak central government
- One-house legislature with equal representation for each state

Powers

Congress

- Declare war
- Make treaties
- Coin and borrow money
- Make laws, although not empowered to enforce them
- No power to tax
- No power to regulate trade

No executive branch
No judicial branch

CONSTITUTION

- Strong central government with certain powers reserved to states
- Two-house legislature: House of Representatives, with representation based on state population; Senate, with equal representation for all states

Congress

- Declare war
- Make treaties
- Coin and borrow money
- Make nation's laws
- Tax
- Regulate trade

President

- Commander in chief of armed forces
- Carries out the nation's laws

Supreme Court and lower federal courts

- Interpret the law

Article II lists the president's powers. They include leading the armed forces and making treaties with other nations.

Article III sets up the **judicial branch** of government. This branch interprets the laws and sees that they are fairly applied. The article calls for "one supreme Court" and lower courts as Congress determines. It lists the powers of the federal courts. Article III also describes the kinds of cases the courts may hear.

Article IV explains the relationship between the states and the national government. Article V describes when and how the Constitution can be changed. Article VI declares the Constitution the "supreme Law of the Land." Article VII describes how the Constitution was to be ratified.

The Amendments

Amendments form the last part of the Constitution. There are 27 of them. The first 10 amendments make up the Bill of Rights.

✓ PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying What branches of government does the Constitution establish?

judicial branch the branch of government that interprets laws

Amending and Interpreting the Constitution

GUIDING QUESTION *In what ways can the Constitution be changed?*

Any change made to the Constitution is called an amendment. Would it surprise you to know that thousands of amendments to the Constitution have been considered over the years? Yet only 27 have been ratified. Few proposed amendments achieve ratification because the Framers—the delegates who framed, or wrote, the Constitution—deliberately made the amendment process difficult. After much debate and compromise, they understood that the Constitution was delicately balanced. Changing even one small detail could have dramatic effects throughout the government. Therefore, the Framers made sure the Constitution could not be amended without the overwhelming support of the people.

At the same time, the ability to change the Constitution is necessary. The Framers had seen how, under the Articles of Confederation, the opposition of only one state made it almost impossible to make important changes to the structure of government. Moreover, amending the Constitution allows for changing social conditions. For example, it took amendments to the Constitution to free enslaved people and give women the right to vote. If the Constitution could not have been changed to protect the rights of African Americans, women, and other groups, it—and our government—might not have lasted.

Why It MATTERS

Changing the Rules

The Constitution provides a method for changing, or amending, the document. Find out if your school, club, or other organization has a formal method for changing its rules. How difficult is it to make rule changes?

NGSSS covered in “Amending and Interpreting the Constitution”



SS.7.C.3.5 Explain the Constitutional amendment process.

AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION

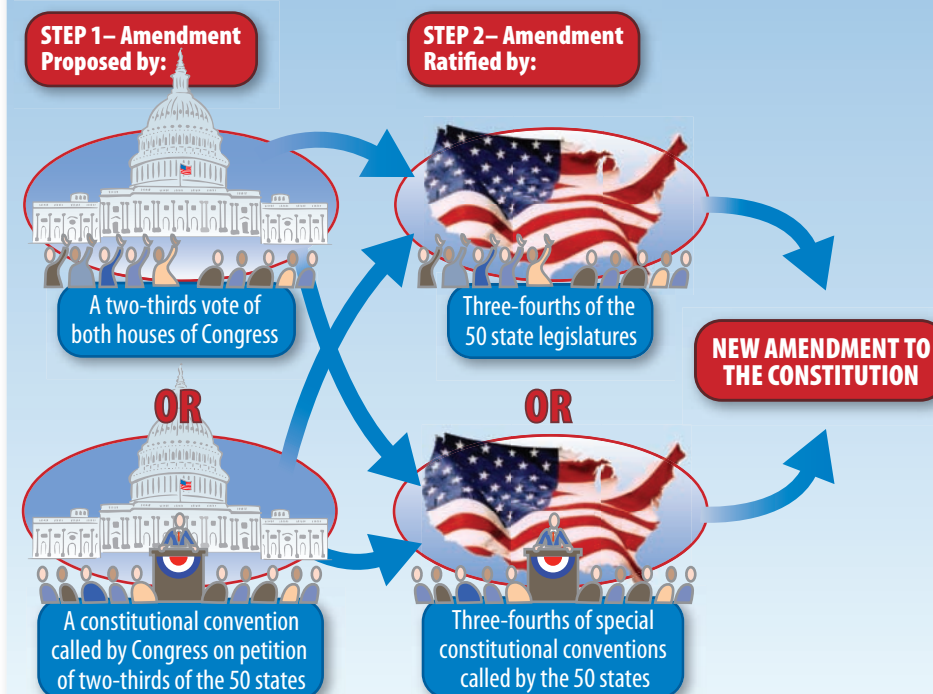


CHART SKILLS

The Constitution provides two ways for proposing amendments and two ways for ratifying amendments.

- 1 Describing** In what ways can an amendment to the Constitution be proposed?
- 2 Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think more states are required to ratify an amendment than to propose one? **SS.7.C.3.5**



PHOTO: MPI/Getty Images

Only Congress has the power to declare war. Yet President Thomas Jefferson used his power as commander in chief to send a squadron of naval ships to defend U.S. ships from pirates in the North African port city of Tripoli.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Evaluating How have presidential actions like Jefferson's changed the meaning of the Constitution?

Formal and Informal Amendments

Amending the Constitution, as stated in Article V, is a process made up of two steps. These are proposal and ratification. An amendment may be proposed in either of two ways. The first method—used for all amendments so far—is by an act of Congress. A vote of two-thirds of the members of both houses of Congress is required. The second method is by a national convention called by two-thirds of the state legislatures.

Once an amendment has been proposed, three-fourths of the states must ratify it. Ratification can be voted on by the state legislature or by a special state convention. Only one amendment, the Twenty-first Amendment, has been ratified by means of state conventions.

Official, or formal, amendments are part of the Constitution. However, certain actions by the president have led to informal, or unofficial, changes as well. For example, in 1841 William Henry Harrison became the first president to die in office. Vice President John Tyler **assumed**, or accepted, the powers of the president as authorized by the Constitution. The Constitution, however, was not clear on whether Tyler automatically became president or he was merely acting as president until the next election. Tyler took the presidential oath. Not until 1967, when the Twenty-fifth Amendment was ratified, was Tyler's action formally made part of the Constitution.

Interpreting the Constitution

The writers of the Constitution knew that the world would change in ways they could not predict. For this reason, they attempted to keep the document as general as possible. They went into great detail about some matters. However, they left other matters open for interpretation, or explanation.

Article I lists the powers of Congress. The Constitution gives Congress the power to “make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper” to carry out its duties. This is called “the necessary and proper clause.” It allows Congress to use powers not directly listed in the Constitution. These powers are known

Reading HELPDESK

Reading Strategy: Making Inferences LA.7.1.7.3

When you make an inference, you draw a conclusion based on facts and generally accepted ideas. What do you infer from the inclusion of the “necessary and proper” clause of the Constitution?

Academic Vocabulary

assume to take on or accept a role or responsibility

as “implied powers.” Much of what the federal government does today—from licensing television stations to regulating air pollution—is based on the implied powers of Congress.

Of course, not everyone agrees on which laws are “necessary and proper.” Some people think Congress should be allowed to make any laws the Constitution does not forbid and that fit its purposes. These people believe in a “loose” interpretation of the Constitution. Others think Congress should make only the kinds of laws mentioned in the Constitution. They believe in a “strict” interpretation of the Constitution.

The final authority for interpreting the Constitution is the Supreme Court. Over the years, the Supreme Court has interpreted the Constitution in different ways—sometimes strictly, sometimes loosely. With each new interpretation by the Court, our government changes.

Congress and the president also interpret the Constitution by taking actions not directed by it. For example, nowhere in the Constitution does it state that the president should propose bills or budgets to Congress. Yet since the presidency of George Washington, each year the president has proposed hundreds of bills to Congress.

The interpretation of the Constitution has also changed as customs have changed. For example, the Constitution does not mention political parties. However, political parties quickly became an important part of our political system. These days, they help organize the government and conduct elections.

The Constitution in the present day includes many changes from the document written in 1787. In the next 200 years, it will probably go through many more changes. However, the basic organization and principles of our government will likely remain.

PROGRESS CHECK

Summarizing How can Congress change the Constitution? Are these types of changes formal or informal?

LESSON 3 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. Describe the organization of the Constitution using the words *Preamble*, *article*, and *amendment*.
LA.7.1.6.1

2. What is the purpose of the *legislative branch*? The *executive branch*? The *judicial branch*? **SS.7.C.1.7**

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. **Identifying** What are the purposes of Articles I, II, and III of the Constitution? **SS.7.C.3.3**

4. **Describing** How are the states involved in the process of ratifying an amendment to the Constitution? **SS.7.C.3.5**

5. **EXPOSITORY WRITING** Do you think that informal changes to the Constitution are as important as formal amendments? Explain why, using supporting information from your reading.
SS.7.C.3.5