

American Government

Grade Level: Fourth Grade

Presented by: Katie Russell, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

Length of Unit: Nine Lessons

I. Abstract

This unit is intended to provide fourth graders with a basic overview of American Government. More specifically, through nine lessons, this unit will help children gain a better understanding of why government is important, how our government was formed, the kind of government we have in the United States, and ways our lives are affected by government. These lessons will cover specific content from the Core Knowledge Sequence such as, but not limited to, the Constitution, Checks and Balances, the Bill of Rights, and the separation and sharing of powers. Finally, the students will participate in a culminating activity that includes a personal government portfolio and a unit test that will provide an overall assessment of the student's knowledge.

II. Overview

A. Objectives

1. Identify the purpose of government and why it is needed.
2. Understand how our Constitution came about; what it is, and how it affects our lives.
3. Understand the role of each of the three branches of government and its system of checks and balances.
4. Be able to identify the Bill of Rights and its purpose.

B. Specific Content (from *Core Knowledge Sequence*)

1. Constitutional Convention
2. Preamble to the Constitution
3. James Madison
4. Three-Fifths Compromise
5. Bill of Rights
6. How a Bill Becomes a Law
7. Checks and Balances
8. Executive Branch
9. Judicial Branch
10. Legislative Branch

C. Skills to be Taught

1. The students will create their own Constitution.
2. The students will role-play what it means to compromise.
3. The students will design their own Preamble to the class Constitution.
4. The students will write letters to the President
5. The students will learn the steps of how a bill becomes a law.
6. The students will debate the fairness of laws.
7. The students will learn a government song.
8. The students will role-play the process of how a bill becomes a law.
9. The students will create their own Bill of Rights.
10. The students will create a government portfolio.

III. Background Knowledge

A. For Teachers:

1. Boehm, Hoone, McGowan et al. *America's Story*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997. (ISBN: 0-15-302042-3)

2. Hardy, Richard. *Government in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993. (ISBN: 0-395-61217-9)
- B. For Students:
1. Kindergarten: George Washington, Current United States President
 2. Grade 1: Slavery, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington
 3. Grade 2: Constitution, James Madison, Preamble to the Constitution

IV. Resources

- A. *Core Knowledge Sequence: Content Guidelines for Grades K-8*. Canada: Core Knowledge Foundation, 1997.
- B. Culminating Activity: (<http://www.coe.missouri.edu/~kyle/ssCongressClassroom46.htm>)
- C. Government Song: (<http://www.Cwells2@Trinity.edu>)
- D. Historical Documents: (<http://www.gettysburg.edu/project/edu/units/coffey.htm>)
- E. Lesson #1: (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/aug25usg.htm>)
- F. Lesson #2 (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/oct6usg.htm>)
- G. Lesson #6 (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/checks.htm>)
- H. Levy, Elizabeth. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*. New York: Scholastic Inc, 1992. (ISBN 0-590-45159-6)
- I. Overhead Projector
- J. The Constitution of The United States: (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/const.html>)
- K. The Bill of Rights: (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/bor.html>)
- L. Unit Test: Bonewitz, Jennifer. Hawthorne Elementary. San Antonio, TX.

V. LESSONS

Lesson One: The Constitution

- A. Objectives
 1. *Lesson Content*: The Constitutional Convention, James Madison
 2. *Concept Objective*: The students will be able to see how the Constitution came about, what it is, and how it affects people's lives.
 3. *Skill Objective*: The students will create their own Constitution.
- B. Materials
 1. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*
- C. Key Vocabulary
 1. Constitutional Convention
 2. Constitution
 3. Founding Father: "Father of the Constitution"
- D. Procedures
 1. Have the class list all of the services the government provides.
 2. Ask the students what it would be like if there weren't any form of government to do these services.
 3. Ask the class what makes the government do these things? (They will say laws, rules etc. = Constitution)
 4. The teacher will read them page 7 out of the book *If You Were There* . . .
 5. Tell the kids they are going to establish their own Constitution.
 6. Have students, in groups, brainstorm ideas about all the issues that effect learning in a classroom. Have them then make a rule for their two most important issues.
 7. Have the class vote on their favorite five rules. Then tell them they have made a Constitution for the class.
 8. Explain to the class that they have established a type of classroom government and that this is the same way other types of government are formed. Ask the kids if they had trouble deciding what to have as their rules. Then explain that when people get together like this, problems arise. But once people have themselves

organized and establish rules to live by, they write them down in the form of a Constitution. Government is the established way of following those rules and guaranteeing the freedoms granted by the Constitution.

9. Ask the students the question: What would probably happen if we didn't have a Constitution?

E. Evaluation/Assessment:

Ask the kids to write on a piece of paper three things that they have learned about the Constitution today based on the book the teacher read and their creation of a Constitution. This will show if they learned anything about the US Constitution when they created their own. Have the kids share their responses.

F. Standardized State Test Connections:

1. TAAS: Reading Objective #4-Predicting Outcomes
Language Arts #5-Persuasive
2. TEKS: The Purpose of government
The role of rules in society

Lesson Two: The Three-Fifths Compromise

A. Objectives:

1. *Lesson Content:* Three-Fifths Compromise
2. *Concept Objective:* The students will discuss the Three-Fifth's Compromise.
3. *Skill Objective:* The student's will role-play what it means to compromise.

B. Materials:

1. Topic Cards
2. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*

C. Key Vocabulary

1. compromise
2. delegates

D. Procedures:

1. Ask the students about last lesson and how they made a Constitution. Ask: In order to come up with just two laws in your group, what did your group have to do (compromise)?
2. Discuss the definition of compromise
3. Tell the kids that is exactly what the delegates (representatives of each state) had to do when they were writing the Constitution. One of the biggest things they talked about which they had to come to a compromise about was slavery.
4. Read p. 50-51 in *If You Were There When. . .* about the 3/5 Compromise.
5. Define 3/5 compromise.
6. Have the kids pair up and give each of them a topic card (current ideas like uniforms, music, TV). Tell kids that one person has to agree with the topic and one person has to disagree. Discuss your differences by giving two reasons each that support why or why not you feel that way. Then reach a compromise about the subject together.

E. Evaluation/Assessment:

To assess the students understanding, pick a few of the kids to role-play in front of the class what they just did in their groups. When the role-playing is over, the teacher should ask the class questions: what are their two points of view; how does _____ feel about _____; how did they come to a compromise; can you think of any other ways they could have compromised?

F. Standardized State Test Connection:

1. TAAS: Reading Objective #5-Understanding Feelings
Language Arts Objective #5-Persuasive Writing
2. TEKS: Using problem solving skills and decision making skills; Working with others

Lesson Three: The Preamble to the Constitution

- A. Objectives
 - 1. *Lesson Content:* Preamble to the Constitution
 - 2. *Concept Objective:* The students will understand the purpose of the Preamble.
 - 3. *Skills Objective:* The students will design their own Preamble to the class Constitution.
- B. Materials
 - 1. Copy of the Constitution
 - 2. Overhead Projector
- C. Key Vocabulary
 - Preamble to the Constitution
- D. Procedures
 - 1. Put up a copy of the real Constitution on the overhead. Point out where the Preamble is.
 - 2. Read the Preamble with the class. Talk about how it sounds and the kinds of things it contains. Ask the kids what is the purpose of the Preamble? What is the main idea of the Preamble?
 - 3. Have students work in groups to design a preamble to their class Constitution. Brainstorm ideas as a class of things that they might have in their Preamble. Since they already discussed that the Preamble stated the purpose of the Constitution, make sure the students know this is what their Preamble should contain.
 - 4. Have the kids read the Preambles out loud to the class and vote on which Preamble they want to have for their Constitution. In order to decide which one they want, the teacher should ask questions like, what Preamble best summarizes the purpose of their Constitution?
 - 5. After you have done the Preamble, have the kids sit back down to examine one more thing about the Constitution. Show how the Constitution discusses three branches of government; engage in a small discussion because in the next lesson we will examine these branches in depth.
- E. Evaluation/Activity
 - Have the students make a Venn diagram to illustrate how the class' constitution is similar to the U.S. Constitution's Preamble and how it is different. This will assess if the students understand what is necessary for a Preamble.
- F. Standardized Test Connection:
 - 1. TAAS: Reading Objective #3-Identifying the main idea and best summary
Language Arts Objective #4: Compare and Contrast
 - 2. TEKS: Purpose of government

Lesson Four: Executive Branch

- A. Objectives:
 - 1. *Lesson Content:* The Executive Branch and its roles.
 - 2. *Content objective:* The students will understand the role of the Executive Branch.
 - 3. *Skills objective:* The students will write letters to the President and will begin making a graphic organizer for the branches of government.
- B. Materials:
 - 1. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*
 - 2. green & brown paper, scissors
 - 3. "Branches of Government" song
- C. Key Vocabulary
 - 1. Executive Branch
 - 2. President
 - 3. Citizenship

D. Procedures:

1. Ask the kids if they remember examining the constitution in Lesson 3; remind them of the three branches of government.
2. Have a big tree created and put it up in front of the class. (*See Appendix # 1*) Make a graphic organizer by labeling the three branches on the tree Legislative, Executive, and Judicial. Tell the kids that today we are going to be talking about the Executive branch of the tree.
3. Read p. 57-60 of "If You Were There. . ." because it talks about the role of the president, how a president is chosen, and who the first president was.
4. After reading and discussing the story, fill in the graphic organizer under the Executive branch. Ask the kids who they might think is head of the Executive Branch, what some of his roles might be, what type of person do you think he has to be (age, citizenship), and where the executive branch works.
5. Now the kids can start making their own government tree. Give them a green sheet of paper, a brown sheet of paper both with the parts of the tree outlined. Give them directions on how to make their own tree. When they are done making it, have them write under the executive branch what was discussed.
6. Teach kids first part of the "Branches of Government" song. (*Appendix #2: See Resources*)

E. Evaluation/Activity:

In class, have the kids begin letters to the president. To assess if the students understand the role of the President, tell them that their letters should include: what they know about what he does, why the student feels that those duties are important, and a question that they want to ask them. The kids can finish this as homework. (Be sure to go over the correct format for writing a letter.)

F. Standardization Test Connection:

1. TAAS: Reading Objective #2-Following Directions; Objective #5-Using sources
Language Arts Objective #1-Descriptive Writing; Objective #3-Narrative
2. TEKS: The role of public officials and authority

Lesson Five: Legislative Branch

A. Objectives:

1. *Lesson Content:* Legislative Branch and its roles.
2. *Content objective-* The students will understand the role of the Legislative branch and the process of how a bill becomes a law
3. *Skills objective-* The students will be able to put the steps of how a bill becomes a law in the correct order.

B. Materials:

1. Government tree
2. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*
3. Overhead for the steps of how a bill becomes a law
4. Film: School House Rocks
5. *Branches of Government* song

C. Key Vocabulary

1. House
2. Senate
3. Law/Bill

D. Procedures:

1. Read p 63-65 in book, *If You Were There When. . .* and discuss that someone makes the laws and that the branch of government that does that is the Legislative Branch.
2. The teacher then gets out the big class government tree and begins the discussion about the Legislative branch. First, the class must understand that the Legislative

Branch is split between the House and Senate. Then continue to discuss the roles of each part, where members work, who is a part of the branch, how long they are a part of the branch, and how many members. Have the kids logically predict what they think these numbers are based on the Executive Branch statistics.

Then have the kids fill out their own government tree.

3. Ask the kids how do you think the Legislative Branch makes these laws? Do you think they just say this is going to be a law? Tell the kids that there is a special process for making a law and that first it starts off as a bill.
 4. On the overhead the teacher will go over the steps of how a bill becomes a law. The students will write it on their handouts. (*See Appendix #3*)
 5. Watch the film, *School House Rocks* that explains how a bill becomes a law.
 6. In groups of four and five, slips of paper contain all of the steps. Have them put the steps in order on their desk.
 7. Teach Legislative part of the “Branches of Government” song.
- E. Evaluation/Activity:
- On a sheet of paper, write a step on how a bill becomes a law. Tie a piece of string around the top of the paper so that each student can place one of the steps to how a bill becomes a law around his/her neck. Split the class into groups of six so that each member of the group is one of the steps. Have the students try to get themselves into the right order. Once they have done that, give them a ball/bean bag with “bill” written on it; have them sit down and toss the ball to each other in line in the correct order. As they pass the bill, they should identify the step according to what hung around their neck. You could also make this a contest between the two groups. This is a good way to target other learning styles and to assess the student’s knowledge of how a bill becomes a law.
- F. Standardized Test Connection:
1. TAAS: Reading Objective #2-Sequencing events
Language Arts Objective #2-How to writing
 2. TEKS: Use problem solving skills and decisions making skills

Lesson Six: The Judicial Branch

- A. Objectives:
1. *Lesson Content:* Judicial Branch
 2. *Content objective:* The students will learn about the roles of the Judicial Branch.
 3. *Skills objective:* The students will debate whether or not a rule is fair, and they will complete four other tasks for reinforcement of the branches of government (government tree, song, handout, the Important Book).
- B. Materials:
1. government tree
 2. *Branches of Government* song
 3. “Important Book”
 4. paper made into a blank book for each child
 5. Handout: who, what, where of the branches of government
 6. Topic cards with scenarios of students who violated a school rule
- C. Key Vocabulary:
1. Supreme Court
 2. Chief of Justice
- D. Procedures:
1. Read p. 66 of *If You Were There When. . .* to discuss the Supreme Court.
 2. Get out the government tree and go over the roles of the Judicial Branch, who is a part of it, how many people, and where it is.
 3. Have the kids fill in the information the class went over onto their tree.

4. Break the kids into groups and give them scenarios of students who violated a school rule. Their job is to discuss the rule of school and if the punishment they received was just or unjust (fair or not).
 5. Learn the Judiciary part of the song, “Branches of Government.”
 6. Show the class a picture of the different places each branch works (Capitol building, White House, Supreme Court building).
 7. The teacher will give each child a handout that answers the “who, what, where” of the different types of government. (See Appendix #4.)
- E. Evaluation/Activity:
Have the kids create the “Important Book” about the branches of government. For review, the teacher can read the “Important Book” about a spoon, and model the way to write it. (The important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it. It’s like a little shovel. You hold it in your hand. You can put it in your mouth. It’s hollow. But the important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it.) By creating this book, the students will understand the different roles of the different branches of government.
- F. Standardized Test Connection:
1. TAAS: Reading Objective #3-Summarizing
Language Arts Objective #1-Descriptive writing
Objective #4-Compare/Contrast writing
Objective #5-Persuasive writing
 2. TEKS: Working independently; purpose of government

Lesson Seven: Checks and Balances

- A. Objectives:
1. *Lesson Content:* Checks and Balances
 2. *Content objective:* The students will understand the need for checks and balances and how the system works.
 3. *Skills objective:* The students will create a flow chart of the checks and balances system and role play the exact process of how the system works.
- B. Materials:
1. Overhead of the checks and balances
 2. Overhead Projector
 3. Handout on the checks and balances
 4. Checks and balances worksheet chart
 5. Scenarios and roles for each group on a piece of paper
- C. Key Vocabulary
1. Checks and Balances
 2. “minority” opinions
 3. “majority” opinions
 4. Memorandum
 5. Chief Justice
- D. Procedures:
1. Ask the kids what would happen if the principal just didn’t like people with brown hair, and he/she made a rule that no students with brown hair could go to recess? Could he/she get away with that? No, because there are a series of checks and balances that occur in a school to ensure that no one person can abuse his/her power. This is similar to our national government. There are checks and balances on the branches of government we have been talking about.
 2. Display the flow chart on an overhead of how the checks and balance system works. Have the kids analyze the chart by asking them questions about it. Be sure to show only the part of the handout on the overhead that you’re covering so the student doesn’t get confused by all of the arrows. (See Appendix #5)

3. Have students develop their own flow chart similar to the overhead that illustrates the major points of the three-branch checks and balance system.
 4. Break the class up into three groups; each one represents a different branch of government. The legislative group should be divided into two groups: the House and the Senate. The teacher should designate a President in the Executive group. The Judicial Branch should have an odd number of people.
 5. Hand each of the groups the appropriate scenario on one or more slips of paper. Groups should not know the contents of the each other's instruction.
 6. The Legislative Branch: Their duty is to write a bill that restricts the content of what can be put on the television. It must be a proposed law that will make it illegal to place any show on the air that contains foul language and any violence. They should list examples of types of violence, and specific TV shows that would be made illegal if the law was passed. Students in this group must write the bill, be ready to debate the bill in class, and vote on it. The final results of the bill must be that it passes and is sent to the President. If the President vetoes the bill, Congress will make amendments to the bill and resubmit it to the President for approval.
 7. The Executive Branch: Congress is going to submit a bill that will make it illegal to have violent TV shows on the air. This branch must decide if the bill should be approved by the President or vetoed. Each of the president's advisors in the group must write a "memorandum" to the president stating his or her position on the bill with a recommendation to the president whether or not it should be vetoed. If the President vetoes the bill, Congress must make amendments and resubmit the bill to the President. The bill should ultimately be approved by the President.
 8. The Judicial Branch (Supreme Court): The Congress is considering a bill that will make violent TV shows illegal. If the bill is approved by Congress and by the President, The Supreme Court must be ready to ask the Congress questions about the bill in order to learn facts that will lead to a decision in a lawsuit brought by the Press against the bill. The Supreme Court must develop five to seven questions it can ask lawyers on both sides. The Supreme Court will also have to vote on the constitutionality of the bill. Those in favor and those opposed to the bill must write a "majority" and "minority" opinion in the case. The Supreme Court announces its decision. The Chief Justice presents the majority opinion.
 9. To check for understanding, ask the students questions about what examples of Checks and Balances were used.
- E. Evaluation/Activity:
Have the students fill out the checks and balances system worksheet. This will test their knowledge about the powers of different branches and the branches that are being checked. (*Appendix #7: See Resource.*)
- F. Standardized Test Connection:
1. TAAS: Reading Objective #2-Sequencing; Objective #5-Using graphic sources
Language Arts Objective #2- How to writing; Objective #- Persuasive writing
 2. TEKS: The roles of rules in society; the purpose of governments; the role of public officials and authority, apply critical thinking skills

Lesson Eight: Bill of Rights

A. Objectives:

1. *Lesson Content:* Bill of Rights
2. *Concept objective:* Students will be able to know what the Bill of Rights are and what real life issues are affected by these Bill of Rights.

3. *Skills objective*: Students will create their own Bill of Rights and draw pictures which illustrate these Bill of Rights.
- B. Materials:
1. *If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution*
 2. Overhead of Bill of Rights
 3. Pictures illustrating how the Bill of Rights affects our lives
 4. Overhead Projector
- C. Key Vocabulary:
1. Amendment
 2. The Bill of Rights
 3. “due process law”
 4. “trial by jury”
 5. “cruel and unusual punishment”
 6. “unreasonable searches and seizures”
 7. Freedom of religion, speech, and the press
- D. Procedures:
1. Ask the class if they remember our lesson yesterday and how we created a law and passed it. When the President didn’t like the law, what did we have to do (we changed it)? Another way of saying that is that we made an amendment.
 2. Read p.67-69 in *If You Were There When . . .* to introduce the Bill of Rights
 3. Discuss how the Bill of Rights came about and its purpose.
 4. Use overhead to go over the ten Bill of Rights.
 5. Have the kids brainstorm some changes that might make their constitution better. Have them come up with rules that might make the Constitution work better. List them on the board; once the class has suggested at least 15 changes, tell the class they must limit themselves to making only 10 changes to the constitution. Allow them to work in groups of four or five students. Have each group present their ideas to the whole class about why they chose some changes and discarded others. After the class has talked about the changes, have the whole class vote on the amendments they want to keep for their Constitution. Explain to the class that this is exactly what happened when the Bill of Rights was formed. Now the class will have a Bill of Rights, too.
 6. After having done that activity individually, the students pick two rights from the Bill of Rights. Have them draw two pictures to illustrate each one of them to check for understanding.
- E. Evaluation/Activity:
- The teacher should cut out pictures in magazines of real life incidences that illustrate each one of the ten Bill of Rights. The kids have a handout with ten numbers down the side of the paper. Place the pictures on the board for the whole class to see and label them with a letter from a-j. The students must correlate what right goes with what picture. The Bill of Rights should be available for the students to look at as their doing the activity. This will allow students to reflect on the Bill of Rights as it impacts their lives.
- F. Standardized Test Connection:
1. TAAS: Reading Objective #5-Drawing Conclusions (From this picture it can be concluded that. . .) Language Arts Objective #1-Descriptive Writing
 2. TEKS: The roles of rules in society, communicate in visual forms, working individually and in a variety of settings.

VI. CULMINATING ACTIVITY

At the end of the unit, the teacher should have the kids create a portfolio on the US government. First, have the students gather all of the handouts they have completed for the unit.

(It will make it easier you remind the students to save these things because they are going to compile them all.) In addition, give the students a piece of parchment paper and a feather. Have the kids tape the feather to their writing utensil so that it looks like an ink well feather pen of the 1800's. Have the kids create their own individual copy of the class Constitution they made, including their Preamble and the Bill of Rights. For the cover of the portfolio, have the students draw a picture illustrating some aspect of government they found interesting. Have the kids sing the whole "Government Song" while they are completing their portfolio. Be sure to finish the book, **If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution**. Then the kids will finish up the unit by taking the unit test. (See Appendix #7)

VII. HANDOUTS/WORKSHEETS

- A. Appendix #1: Government Tree
- B. Appendix #2: "Branches of Government" Song (<http://www.CWells2@Trinity.edu>)
- C. Appendix #3: How a Bill Becomes a Law
- D. Appendix #4: Who, What, Where of Branches of Government
- E. Appendix #5: Flow Chart of the Checks and Balances
- F. Appendix #6: Checks and Balance Worksheet
(<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/checks.htm>)
- G. Appendix #7: Unit Test

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- E. *Core Knowledge Sequence: Content Guidelines for Grades K-8*. Canada: Core Knowledge Foundation, 1997.
- F. Culminating Activity:
(<http://www.coe.missouri.edu/~kyle/ssCongressClassroom46.htm>)
- G. Government Song: Wells, Cindy. Center for Educational Leadership.
(<http://www.Cwells2@Trinity.edu>)
- H. Historical Documents: (<http://www.gettysburg.edu/project/edu/units/coffee.htm>)
- I. Lesson #1: (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/aug25usg.htm>)
- J. Lesson #2 (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/oct6usg.htm>)
- K. Lesson #7 (<http://www.fred.net/nhhs/lessons/checks.htm>)
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- P. The Bill of Rights: (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/bor.html>)
- Q. Social Studies OFCN's Academy Curricular Exchange: (gopher.cjmk@ofcn.org.)
- R. Unit Test: Bonewitz, Jennifer. Hawthorne Elementary. San Antonio, TX.

