Making the Constitution
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Making the Constitution

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Life After the American Revolutionary War

Americans rose up against the British and won their independence. The American Revolutionary War happened because the British king, George III, and his government were not fair to the people of the thirteen colonies. When the American Revolutionary War ended, Americans had to figure out a better way to govern themselves.
Creating a new government wasn’t easy. Americans didn’t agree on how much government they needed. In general, people wanted their new American government to have the power to govern, but they also wanted to make sure they could limit that power.

After all, the British government and King George III *had* gone to war against the thirteen colonies!
The years of fighting the British had been hard. While the men were at war, the women and children had been left behind to carry on. After the war, many families were poorer than they had been before. This made some people angry and upset. Leaders were needed to show that if people from all thirteen states worked together, America could become a strong country.
In May of 1787, James Madison of Virginia traveled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to meet with leaders from most of the other states. George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin also traveled to Philadelphia. These men needed to figure out how a new American government would work, and what powers it would have. We call this meeting in Philadelphia the Constitutional Convention.
The leaders at the meeting decided to keep their talks a secret. They didn’t want anyone finding out about the things they said before they had a chance to really make up their minds. So they met in a room inside what is now called Independence Hall and nailed the windows shut!
Back then, there wasn’t any air conditioning. And that summer turned out to be very hot. The leaders inside Independence Hall were hot, and sometimes angry, as they didn’t always agree with one another. Someone said that it was hard to tell if the men were sweating because they were hot or because they were angry.
The state leaders argued a lot. Some of the men at the convention did not want to give one person—the president—too much power. During that long, hot summer, each leader had to compromise. This meant that they all had to accept that they would not get exactly what they wanted. Finally, on September 17, 1787, the state leaders finished their work and signed what they called the Constitution of the United States. It was a plan for a new system of government.
The Constitution is thought to be one of the most important documents ever written. James Madison is known as the Father of the Constitution, a title he earned for working hard to make sure the Constitutional Convention happened.

Did you know that the leaders who declared America’s independence are known as our Founding Fathers?
Debating the Constitution

Each state had to decide if it would approve the Constitution. This meant that the people in each state had to figure out for themselves if they thought that the Constitution was a good idea. The new American government could begin only if at least nine of the thirteen states voted yes.
Today, it might be hard to imagine that anyone was against the Constitution. But some of the most famous Americans of the Revolutionary War were worried. Patrick Henry of Virginia, who once said, “Give me liberty or give me death,” thought the new Constitution gave too much power to the national government.
One big worry was that the Constitution itself did not list the rights and freedoms that all Americans should have. Some people wanted a bill of rights attached to the Constitution.

A bill of rights would make it clear that every American had freedom of religion and freedom of speech. It was also important that newspapers, or the press, had the freedom they needed to do their job.
The people who supported the Constitution were sure that it would make things better. If America remained thirteen separate states, the states would soon be gobbled up and destroyed by other countries in war, or by disagreements with one another. Only by acting together—as one United States under the Constitution—could they last.
Explaining the Constitution

James Madison and two other men—John Jay and Alexander Hamilton—were sure that if Americans really understood the Constitution, how it worked, and what it was supposed to do, they would realize that it was good and would vote for it.

So they decided to teach people about the Constitution in a series of newspaper articles. They ended up writing more than eighty articles. These articles were soon made into a book called the Federalist Papers.
The three men explained in the articles that the president couldn’t become as powerful as a king. First of all, a king is king for his whole life, but the president would be elected every four years. If people didn’t like what the president was doing, they could vote for someone else. Second, a king is powerful because his word is law. But the president could not make laws. Only Congress could do that.
In 1787 and 1788, the thirteen states voted on the new Constitution. Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina, and New Hampshire voted yes—and the Constitution became the law of the land.

Later, Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island also voted yes. George Washington became the first president of the United States of America.
After the Constitution was approved, James Madison went back home to Virginia and ran for Congress. He was elected, and one of the first things he did was to work on a set of ten amendments, or changes, to the Constitution. These amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, became a part of the Constitution in 1791.

Thomas Jefferson said that Americans had created a new kind of government that would make it easier to solve problems through discussion and by voting.
A Closer Look at the Constitution

The writing of the Constitution was the first time in history when a group of people came together to give power to their government, while also limiting that power. At the time the Constitution was written, most countries were ruled by kings and queens.

Before the U.S. Constitution, the idea of government getting its power from the people was only an idea.
Even today, more than 230 years later, Americans can go to Washington, D.C., and see the original signed Constitution on display at the National Archives building. Not only that—every library in the country has a copy of it.
Anyone who sees the U.S. Constitution notices that the first three words are the biggest words on the page: *We the People* . . . . This means that our government gets its power to make laws from the people—not from a king or a president.

*We the People* means that we decide what the laws should be, and no one can be above the law. *We the People* also means that it is up to us whether this is a country of good laws or bad laws.
The Founding Fathers were a special group of men, but they were not perfect. The men who wrote the Constitution knew it would need to be changed in the future. If it were not possible to change the Constitution—to amend it—it would never have lasted until today. They wrote into the Constitution a system for changing it by adding amendments.
The Constitution has been amended twenty-seven times, and it was last changed in 1992. There have been amendments that ended slavery and that allowed women to vote.

The U.S. Constitution is far better now than it was when it was first written, and we the people can continue to improve it.
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