

# THE CONSTITUTION

## An Introduction

1. It is important for all Americans to know and understand the Constitution. It is the basic law under which each and every one of us lives.
2. First, let's look at the **Preamble**, the very first part of the Constitution. Preamble means "to walk before."
3. The Preamble to the Constitution tells you what the Constitution aims to do. That is, the Preamble tells you what is going to be in the Constitution.
4. To help you understand what the Preamble means, here are the meanings of some of the words in it:
  - Tranquility:** peace
  - Defence (Defense):** to protect oneself
  - Posterity:** those who come after us
  - Ordain:** make part of

The Preamble reads:

*5. We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

6. To understand what the Constitution says and means, you must understand a little about the men who wrote it. Those are the men we call the Founding Fathers.
7. You also need to understand their ideas about laws. When they wrote the Constitution they were thinking about all the laws that would be needed for the country. They were thinking about the rights of individual people when they set up the Supreme Court for all Americans.
8. They did not want a government so strong that it would take away the rights of the people. On the other hand, they did not want one so weak that it could not rule.
9. They made a federal government, with the power divided between the states and the central government. There are certain things that only states can do, certain things that only the central government can do, and other things that can be done by both.
10. Only the central government can make money or declare war. Only the state governments can have police. Both can have courts, but the courts, rule on different matters.
11. The Founding Fathers made a representative form of government. That is, the people do not vote directly on the laws that are made. The people elect representatives to sit in Congress, and those representatives make the laws that govern us.
12. Finally, they formed a system of checks and balances. This system makes sure that none of the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) gets too strong. It was their belief that if one branch of government got too powerful it would control all of the government.
13. Under this system, the President may not make laws. If he should like a certain law to be passed, he must ask Congress to do it for him. Congress may or may not listen to what he wants.

14. Congress makes all the laws of the country. The president may veto (say no to) any law passed by Congress. After a veto, that law can take effect only if two-thirds of the members of Congress vote for it again.

15. The judicial branch decides if laws or acts made by Congress are in line with the Constitution. If not, they can declare a law unconstitutional. It will then no longer be the law.

16. In those ways, each branch of government keeps a check on the others. No branch can act alone to make and carry out acts that would take away rights or harm the people or the nation.

17. After the Constitution was passed, many people wanted the rights of Americans spelled out more clearly than they were in the Constitution. "Just what rights do Americans have?" was the question they were asking.

18. To answer the question, Congress passed amendments (changes) to the Constitution. The first ten amendments, passed in 1791, are called the Bill of Rights.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ to the Constitution tells what the Constitution is trying to say.
2. In a federal government, the powers are divided between the \_\_\_\_\_ and a strong \_\_\_\_\_.
3. To make sure that no one branch of government would become too strong, the writers of the Constitution built in a series of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. If the Congress passes a bill and the President refuses to sign it that is called a \_\_\_\_\_. After that, two-thirds of the Congress must vote if it is to become a \_\_\_\_\_.
5. If a law is decided to be \_\_\_\_\_ by the judicial branch it can no longer be a law.
6. A representative form of government is one in which:
  - a. all the people vote directly for new laws themselves
  - b. the people vote for representatives who make the laws for them
  - c. no laws are necessary
  - d. the President makes the laws
7. Match the word with its meaning:

- |                     |                                      |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. tranquility      | 1. those who come after us           |
| b. defense          | 2. to say no to                      |
| c. posterity        | 3. peace                             |
| d. ordain           | 4. change                            |
| e. judicial         | 5. make part of                      |
| f. unconstitutional | 6. not according to the Constitution |
| g. amendment        | 7. protecting oneself                |
| h. veto             | 8. relating to courts                |

My answers are: a. \_\_\_\_\_, b. \_\_\_\_\_, c. \_\_\_\_\_, d. \_\_\_\_\_,  
e. \_\_\_\_\_, f. \_\_\_\_\_, g. \_\_\_\_\_, h. \_\_\_\_\_.