

**John F. Kennedy Hyannis Museum**  
**Constitution Week**  
**A Lesson for Grade 6 and 7: “To Sign or Not to Sign”**  
**Adapted from A Lesson at the National Constitution Center**

**Introduction**

In this lesson, students will examine the role of the people in sharing the United States Constitution. First, students will respond to a provocative statement posted in their classroom. Next, they will watch a Teacher Tube Video that gives a brief explanation of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Teachers will guide students through a read aloud play depicting two Constitutional Convention Delegates, John Jay, New York, a Federalist and Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts, an Anti-Federalist. The class will discuss the ratification process. The lesson concludes with an opportunity for students to sign the Constitution if they choose, and to discuss what it means to sign or not sign.

**MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education History and Social Science Content Standards:**

**Grade 6:**

**Topic. “A Renewed Mission: Education for Civic Life in Democracy”**

People who are prepared to continue the legacy of democracy in the United States:

- Know the fundamental ideas central to the vision of the 18<sup>th</sup> century founders, the vision that holds us together as one people of many diverse origins and cultures
- Understand the intellectual and political tensions and compromises in the Founders’ ideas and how successive generations in the United States have worked to resolve them
- Understand the purposes, principles, and practices of the United States government as established by the Constitution, which includes their rights and responsibilities, and how to exercise them in local, state, and national government

- Understand that, in the United States, the Constitution has continued to be vibrant and relevant through amendments and decisions of the federal courts
- Are prepared to discuss complex and controversial issues and ideas with people of different views, learning to speak with clarity and respectfulness

### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What does it mean when a person signs a document?
2. What role did the signatures of the framers play in the ratification process?
3. Who ultimately had the power to put the Constitution in place?
4. What was the process for ratification of the Constitution? (Article VII)
5. What were the major differences between Federalists, represented by John Jay and Anti-Federalists, as shared by Elbridge Gerry?
6. Who won the debate, the Federalists or Anti-Federalists? What data supports your conclusion?

### **Learning Objectives:**

1. Students will develop respect and understand the responsibility involved in the decision to sign a document
2. Students will understand that the Constitutional Convention of 1787 led to the establishment of a new form of government
3. Students will be able to summarize Article VII of the United States Constitution
4. Students will be able to compare the different viewpoints of Federalists and Anti-Federalists regarding the Constitution and construct arguments based on those viewpoints
5. Students will identify the compromise that led to the ratification of the Constitution

### **Lesson Materials**

- Poster with provocative statement: *"Effective September 17, 2019, schools will close every year in honor of Constitution Day"*
- Teacher Tube Video [www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video\\_id=5604&title=Creating\\_the\\_Constitution](http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=5604&title=Creating_the_Constitution).
- Constitution Poster

- Copies: *To Sign or Not to Sign: A Read Aloud Play*

## **Lesson Activities**

### **The Power of a Signature**

1. As students enter the classroom, ask if they would like to sign their name on a large sheet of paper with the following statement on it: *Effective September 17, 2019, schools will close every year in honor of Constitution Day.*
2. After everyone has had an opportunity to sign, lead a discussion about why students decided to sign or not to sign the statement
3. Discuss how signing is a statement of your belief. It is a willingness to take a stand and risk your reputation.
4. When the 39 delegates of the 1787 Constitutional Convention signed the Constitution, they were taking a stand and risking their own reputations
5. Watch the Video *Creating the Constitution*
6. Share the Constitution poster to familiarize students with the document. Focus their attention to Article VII.
7. Share with students that just because they signed the statement about schools closing for Constitution Day, it does not make it happen. There must be a process of *Ratification*. Read Article VII to share the Process of Ratification for the Constitution. By signing, the delegates were deciding *whether they believed the Constitution should be ratified by the people*.

### **Debate: Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists**

1. Share copies with students of the play *To Sign or Not to Sign*. Decide how you would like students to share the two-character play (pairs, small groups or whole class).
2. After students have had an opportunity to read the play, ask them to work in their groups to decide:
  - What is the strongest reason John Jay gave for signing the Constitution?
  - What is the strongest reason Elbridge Gerry gave for not signing the Constitution?
3. Explain how there was not a “winner” in the debate regarding the ratification of the Constitution. If the Federalists had not prevailed, we would not have had a Constitution. If the Anti-Federalists hadn’t dissented, the Constitution would not have had a Bill of Rights.

## We the People

1. Review with students that ratifying the Constitution was an important process that only happened through the will of the American people
2. Review the ratification process:
  - What role did the signatures of the framers play in the ratification process?
  - Who ultimately had the power to put the Constitution into place?
3. The most important idea of the Constitution is the idea of popular sovereignty, government of the people by the people. The framers of the Constitution imagined a Government where the final authority was in the hands of the citizens. This was a radical idea at that time.

## Application/Personal Response

1. Invite students to sign the Constitution poster if they choose.
2. Explain that today's Constitution is not the same as the original one the framers signed. It is longer. It's been changed by amendments and Supreme Court interpretation. Here are some of the changes:
  - It has the Bill of Rights
  - It was amended after the Civil War to abolish slavery and promise "equal protection of the laws" to freed slaves and eventually other groups. Other amendments have authorized the income tax, provided for the direct election of senators, and expanded voting rights
3. The Constitution still begins with three perfect words: "*We the People*", but the document is not yet a perfect document. On Constitution Day, we need to reflect and decide should I sign or not sign?
4. How do we create a more perfect union, by signing or not signing? Why did you choose to sign, or not sign? Share your reasoning.