



Exploring the Purposes of Government: A Lesson on the Preamble

This lesson was adapted from lessons in the *VOICE* and *More Perfect Union* curriculum units developed by and available from the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, 407 S. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60615; www.crfc.org

Introduction:

One important goal of civic education is to help students understand the founding documents of our democracy. For example, understanding the Preamble is critically important because it provides the vision for the government; it explains who is forming the government (“We the People”) and why.

The language of these documents is difficult, however, and we must help students decipher the language through vocabulary development activities. Beyond the paraphrasing level of understanding is deeper understanding of what the phrases of the Preamble mean in day-to-day life. One way to do that is by translating them into a different form—in this case a visual.

Objectives: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the importance of the Preamble.
- Demonstrate understanding of the Preamble by paraphrasing it and representing it in visual form.

Materials:

You will need a copy of the Preamble as an overhead or poster. For younger students, it will be helpful to have a restatement of the words in the Preamble; one such restatement can be found in *We the Kids*, by David Catrow (New York: Dial Books, 2002). Older students will need dictionaries for use in paraphrasing the Preamble. For the drawing activity, you will need large sheets of posting paper, markers, and student instructions; note that you will need seven copies of the “Instructions for Block Design Groups” with one phrase of the Preamble written on each.

Procedure:

1. Draw students’ attention to the Preamble on the overhead or poster you have prepared. Tell students that the Preamble, or introduction, to the U.S. Constitution is a very important document. It begins with an important phrase, “We the People of the United States.” Ask: Why are these words important? (*Because they tell us that the government’s power comes from the people.*)

2. Explain that the Preamble is also important because it outlines several purposes or functions of government. It explains why the government was created by the Framers. Clarify vocabulary with students or organize the students into groups and assign each group to look up words in one phrase and come up with a “translation” of the phrase into everyday language. Compile their translations into a class restatement of the Preamble. For younger students, you may wish to present and discuss a “translation” such as the one found in *We the Kids*.
3. Tell students that they are going to be representing what the Preamble really means by creating a Preamble quilt. You will be dividing the class into eight groups; seven groups will create quilt squares representing phrases of the Preamble. The phrases will be:
 - We the People
 - In order to form a more perfect union
 - establish Justice
 - insure domestic Tranquility
 - provide for the common defense
 - promote the general Welfare
 - secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity
4. The last group will put the entire quilt together. They may give other groups instructions, such as how to orient their drawings (horizontally or vertically if using large rectangular pieces of paper), symbols to avoid (if too many groups use a map or flag, the quilt will not be as interesting), etc.
5. When the quilt is assembled, encourage students to ask questions of other groups to explore why they chose to represent their phrase as they did. Conduct a class discussion using such questions as the following as prompts:
 - Do you disagree with the way in which any phrases are represented on the quilt?
 - How does looking at the quilt change your thinking about the meaning of the Preamble?
 - How did creating a quilt block change your thinking about the meaning of the phrase you represented?
 - Has rephrasing and visually representing the Preamble given you any new ideas about the purpose and function of government?

Extension:

To extend their understanding of the purposes and functions of government, older students might categorize government activities according to which of the purposes of government listed in the Preamble they fulfill. For example, “U.S. troops prepare for a raid on an Iraqi town where terrorists are believed to be operating” would likely be categorized as providing for the common defense. A page of examples is provided for your convenience, but government activities covered in the newspaper could also be categorized in this fashion.

Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

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.

Instructions for the Organizing Team

Your job is to put the quilt together. You should decide on a structure for the quilt—that is, how all the pieces will be placed in order to form a coherent work of art.

You can give tips to the Block Design groups. For example, you may want to tell them all to draw vertically or horizontally on their sheets of paper. You may also want to make sure that all the blocks are unique. For example, if too many groups are using flags or maps on their blocks, the quilt may be boring.

You may want to create a block to represent any parts of the Preamble that groups aren't working on. Or you may want to create a way to tie the pieces together visually.

Teams are working on representing the following phrases:

- We the People
- In order to form a more perfect union
- establish Justice
- insure domestic Tranquility
- provide for the common defence
- promote the general Welfare
- secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity

When all the groups have finished their blocks, your group will assemble the quilt.

Instructions for Block Design Teams

Your job is to create a section or block of a quilt. Overall, the quilt will represent the Preamble. Your particular section will represent the following phrase:

You can choose to represent this phrase in any manner that you wish to, but your section of the quilt can be no larger than one piece of posting paper.

The organizing team will be deciding how all the pieces of the quilt will fit together and may have some suggestions for your group that will help your section fit into the overall work of art.

Functions of Government Cards

U.S. troops are sent to Haiti to help maintain order when the government is overthrown.	U.S. troops prepare for a raid on an Iraqi town where terrorists are believed to be operating.
The Department of Agriculture puts out the food pyramid, which helps people plan a healthy diet.	The Treasury Department issues paper money and mints coins.
The Department of Energy provides funding for research on wind energy.	The Transportation Department maintains the nation's interstate highway system.
The Veterans Administration operates hospitals where people who have served in the military can receive health care services.	The Department of Labor gives \$1.9 million to the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union to train Hispanics and other immigrants for hospitality industry jobs in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J.
The Food and Drug Administration requires drug companies to do multiple tests on new drugs before they can be sold in the United States.	Federal prosecutors seek an indictment against a company it believes is using unfair business practices.
Armed federal marshals ride on many flights within the United States.	Congress passes a law requiring that students be tested regularly to make sure they are meeting achievement standards.
The Supreme Court hears a case on whether dogs can be used to search for drugs in a car stopped for a traffic violation.	The federal government provides disaster relief funding to help communities struck by spring flooding and tornados.
The National Park Service announces the re-opening of the Statue of Liberty.	An immigration judge rejects the asylum application of a 16-year-old Guatemalan gang member who claimed he would be murdered if he returned to his home country.
The National Institute on Aging funds a study on how long Alzheimer's patients live after they are diagnosed with the disease.	The United States maintains diplomatic relations with about 180 countries around the world.
The Bureau of Land Management opens certain government-owned lands to mining.	The government collects and publishes information about the economy.