

Project-based
learning

The First Amendment

OBJECTIVES

Student pairs will:

- ▶ use USA TODAY and other resources to research First Amendment rights and controversies.
- ▶ analyze the scope and meaning of the First Amendment.
- ▶ conduct a survey on First Amendment freedoms.
- ▶ evaluate how the First Amendment applies to the press as well as to ordinary citizens.

WEEK 1: The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” During this project, you are going to examine the scope and meaning of the First Amendment and how it applies not only to the press, but to ordinary citizens just like you. The First Amendment is not limited to just freedom of speech; in fact, it protects five liberties: religion, speech, press, assembly and petition. Divide the class into five groups, and assign each one of the liberties protected by the First Amendment. Have students research and explain what their assigned freedom means. Students should also identify a landmark Supreme Court ruling related to their assigned freedom.

WEEK 2: Last week, groups defined each of the rights protected by the First Amendment. This week, students are going to identify First Amendment controversies that are making headlines. For example, while most people believe in the right to free speech, they debate the scope of this right vigorously (e.g., whether it should cover flag-burning or controversial music lyrics, etc.). Others oppose references to God in public domains, such as state courthouses, schools or on government-issued currency. And still others believe that there should be limits on what the media (press) can publish, especially in times of war and with regard to national security. These are just some of many examples. Spend the next week clipping out newspaper and other articles related to the First Amendment right assigned to you and the controversies surrounding it. In writing, explain the current debate.

WEEK 3: A survey released in January 2005 found that one in three high school students believe the press ought to be more restricted. The survey further revealed that when asked whether the press enjoys too much freedom, not enough or about the right amount, 32% answered too much, 37% said it has the right amount, and 10% percent said it has too little.* This week, you are going to survey 20 students and 20 adults and pose the following questions/statements: 1.) How many freedoms are protected by the First Amendment? (Answer: five) 2.) Name as many of those freedoms as you can. (Answer: speech, religion, press, assembly, petition) 3.) The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. (Possible answers: strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree; no opinion) 4.) Overall, do you think the American press has too much freedom, too little freedom, or about the right amount of freedom? (Possible answers: too much; too little; about the right amount; no opinion) Generate a fifth question related to the particular freedom you are researching. Compile the results of your survey, and convert responses into percentages.

*Source: USA TODAY

WEEK 4: Throughout this project, you have researched the scope, meaning, protections and limitations of the First Amendment. You have clipped news articles related to First Amendment controversies and have polled citizens about both their knowledge of and their views on the First Amendment. During the final week of this project, you will evaluate the results of your efforts and present your findings to classmates. With your group members, develop a presentation that explains the meaning of the freedom you were assigned to research, highlights the current and past debates over this freedom, and presents the results of your survey.

After all groups have presented their findings, discuss the following questions as a class: What specific actions are and are not protected by the First Amendment? How informed are people about their First Amendment rights? Which of the five protections do you think is most important? Least? Why? Why should citizens be concerned about protecting these freedoms?