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## The US Constitution: Introduction

The Constitution of the United States is a document that outlines the basis of the federal (national) government of the USA. It was written in 1787 at the "Constitutional Convention," held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in what we now call Independence Hall. The 55 men at the convention are called the "Founding Fathers" of the USA, and are also known as the "Framers of the Constitution." Some of the more famous of the framers are George Washington (the first President of the USA), James Madison (the fourth President of the USA), Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton.

The US Constitution was ratified (approved) by nine states on June 21, 1788 (Delaware was the first state to ratify it); it was later ratified by the remaining states. It replaced the earlier set of government rules, the *Articles of Confederation*, which were the law of the land from 1781 until 1788 (this document created a group of semi-independent states plus a weak national Congress, with neither an Executive nor a Judicial branch).

The Constitution sets up the United States with a federal (national) government plus state governments. It also specifies that the USA will be a republic, with an elected President, a bicameral congress (consisting of two legislative branches, a House of Representatives and a Senate), and a system of courts headed by a Supreme Court.

The Constitution is composed of a Preamble (an introduction), the main body (which consists of seven articles), and amendments (additions to the Constitution made after the Constitution was created).

### **The Preamble of the US Constitution:**

The Preamble to the Constitution is the short, one-sentence introduction to the Constitution; it explains that the document proposes to establish a more perfect government complete with justice, tranquility, and liberty. It states, "**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."

### **The Body of the US Constitution:**

The first three articles of the US Constitution sets up the US government as a republic with three separate branches of government:

US Constitution

The original US Constitution is housed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

- the **Legislative Branch** (which makes the national laws and consists of Congress -- the House of Representatives and the Senate),
- the **Executive Branch** (headed by the President),
- the **Judicial Branch** (which administers justice by interpreting the Constitution and laws, and consists of judges in a system of courts).

This division of the government into branches is an example of **separation of power**, the idea that the enormous power of a government should be split into independent groups, so that any one group cannot have too much power. In this system, the separate groups check (monitor) the behavior of each other, having the effect of keeping an even balance of power; this is called **checks and balances**. The phrase "checks and balances" was coined by Charles-Louis Montesquieu (a French political philosopher) in 1748; he also wrote about dividing the power of a government into a Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branch.

The Legislative Branch is bicameral (it is divided into two parts): the House of Representatives and the Senate. The number of seats that a state has in the House of Representatives is based upon that state's population. Each state has two Senators. This system was agreed upon at the Constitutional Convention after much debate. The states with larger populations favored a system like the House of Representatives (so that they would have more representatives in government and therefore have more power). The states with smaller populations favored a system like the Senate, in which all states have equal representation (so that the larger states would not take too much power). The framers of the US Constitution compromised, and instituted a bicameral Congress.

In addition, the US Constitution sets up a power balance between states and the federal government. It also specifies how to add new states to the USA, and how the Constitution could be ratified and amended.

### **The Amendments:**

Many amendments to the Constitution have been made through the years. The first 10 amendments (additions to the Constitution), called the Bill of Rights, were added in 1791. The Bill of Rights preserve the rights of the people, including the freedom of speech and religion, the right to a speedy trial, and others.

Later, 17 additional amendments were added; so far, there have been 27 amendments to the US Constitution.

### **Legacy:**

The US Constitution has been the model for many countries' constitutions around the world. It is a great document that has withstood the test of time in creating a government that has functioned well for over 200 years while preserving individual liberty and justice.

The U.S. Constitution is the oldest national constitution and the shortest. The original US

Constitution is on display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

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## **A SYNOPSIS OF THE CONSTITUTION:**

**PREAMBLE** (Introduction) - Explains that the Constitution proposes to establish a more perfect government complete with justice, tranquility, and liberty

**ARTICLE I** - Establishes the Legislative Branch (House of Representatives and the Senate).

**ARTICLE II** - Establishes the Executive Branch (headed by the President).

**ARTICLE III** - Establishes the Judicial Branch (a system of courts and judges).

**ARTICLE IV** - Establishes the relationship between the states and the federal government. Describes how to admit new states to the Union.

**ARTICLE V** - Describes how to amend the Constitution.

**ARTICLE VI** - Establishes the Constitution as the supreme law of the USA. Authorizes the national debt (Congress can borrow money). Public officials must take an oath to support the Constitution.

**ARTICLE VII** - Lists the requirements for ratification of the Constitution.

**AMENDMENTS 1-10 (THE BILL OF RIGHTS)** (added in 1791) - Preserves the rights of the people.

Amendment 1 - Freedom of religion, press, speech

Amendment 2 - Right to bear arms

Amendment 3 - Limits the quartering of soldiers

Amendment 4 - Search and seizure of property

Amendment 5 - Right to a trial if accused, no self-incrimination required, no double-jeopardy (you cannot be tried twice for the same crime), right to compensation for takings by gov't.

Amendment 6 - Right to a speedy trial by jury and confrontation of witnesses

Amendment 7 - Right to a trial by jury in civil cases

Amendment 8 - Prohibits cruel and unusual punishment

Amendment 9 - People may have other rights, even if they are not listed here

Amendment 10 - The federal government's powers are limited to those listed in the Constitution

## **AMENDMENTS 11-27**

Amendment 11 (1798) - Judicial limits

Amendment 12 (1804) - Method for choosing the President, Vice President

- Amendment 13 (1865) - Abolished slavery
- Amendment 14 (1868) - Rights of citizenship to all people born in USA or naturalized
- Amendment 15 (1870) - Gives the right to vote to all citizens, regardless of color or race, but women are not mentioned
- Amendment 16 (1913) - Income tax authorized
- Amendment 17 (1913) - Senators elected by the popular vote
- Amendment 18 (1919) - Prohibition - Liquor prohibited
- Amendment 19 (1920) - Women's suffrage (voting rights)
- Amendment 20 (1933) - New terms of office for the President and Congress
- Amendment 21 (1933) - Amendment 18 repealed (overturned)
- Amendment 22 (1951) - Presidential term limited
- Amendment 23 (1961) - Presidential vote given to Washington, D. C.
- Amendment 24 (1964) - Poll taxes barred (you cannot charge people to vote)
- Amendment 25 (1967) - Presidential disability and succession
- Amendment 26 (1971) - Voting age lowered to 18 years old (same as the age at which men can be drafted into the army)
- Amendment 27 (1992) - Congressional pay increases go into effect only during the next Congressional session.

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# The US Constitution

*We the people...*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# The US Constitution

## Introduction

Over 200 years ago, the Founding Fathers of the United States of America wrote a set of rules that state how the country should be run.

This document is called the US Constitution.

The US Constitution was written in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The 55 men at the convention are also called the Framers of the Constitution. Among the framers were George Washington (the first President of the USA), James Madison (the fourth President of the USA), and Benjamin Franklin.

# The US Constitution

## The Preamble

The Preamble to the Constitution is a short, one-sentence introduction to the Constitution. It explains that the document proposes to establish a more perfect government complete with justice, tranquility, and liberty.

It states, "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."

# The US Constitution

## Three Branches of Government

The US Constitution divides the power of the government among three branches, which are:

**Legislative Branch** - elected officials (Congress) who write the national laws.

**Executive Branch** - headed by the elected President (who is the Commander-in-Chief of the US military).

**Judicial Branch** - a system of courts and judges that administers justice by interpreting US laws and the Constitution.



# The US Constitution

## Checks and Balances

The division into three branches of government is an example of **separation of power**, the idea that the enormous power of a government should be split into independent groups, so that any one group cannot have too much power.

In this system, the separate groups check (monitor) the behavior of one another, having the effect of keeping an even balance of power; this is called **checks and balances**.

# The US Constitution

## Summary of the Constitution

**Article I** - Establishes the  
Legislative branch

**Article II** - Establishes the  
Executive branch

**Article III** - Establishes the  
Judicial branch

**Article IV** - Establishes the  
balance between the states and  
the Federal government

**Article V** - Describes how to  
amend (change) the Constitution

**Article VI** - Establishes the  
Constitution as supreme law of the land

**Article VII** - Lists requirements to  
ratify the Constitution (how to  
have it accepted by the states)

# The US Constitution

## Bill of Rights

Amendments are additions to the Constitution. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights (because they preserve the rights of the people).

**Amendment 1** - Freedom of religion, press, speech, etc.

**Amendment 2** - Right to bear arms

**Amendment 3** - Limits quartering of soldiers

**Amendment 4** - Limits the search and seizure of property

**Amendment 5** - Rights of a criminal defendant at trial, no self-incrimination

**Amendment 6** - Right to a speedy trial by jury and confrontation of witnesses

**Amendment 7** - Trial by jury in civil cases

**Amendment 8** - Prohibits cruel and unusual punishment

**Amendment 9** - People may have other rights, even if they are not listed here

**Amendment 10** - The Federal government's powers are limited to those listed in the Constitution

# The US Constitution

## Amendments 11-27

**Amendment 11** - Judicial limits

**Amendment 12** - Method for choosing the President, Vice President

**Amendment 13** - Abolished slavery

**Amendment 14** - Rights of citizenship

**Amendment 15** - Race is no bar to vote

**Amendment 16** - Income tax authorized

**Amendment 17** - Senators elected by popular vote

**Amendment 18** - Prohibition: Liquor prohibited

**Amendment 19** - Women's suffrage (the right to vote)

**Amendment 20** - New terms of office for the President and Congress

**Amendment 21** - Amendment 18 repealed (overturned)

**Amendment 22** - Presidential term limited

**Amendment 23** - Presidential vote given to Washington, D. C.

**Amendment 24** - Poll taxes barred

**Amendment 25** - Presidential disability and succession

**Amendment 26** - Voting age set to 18 years old

**Amendment 27** - Congressional pay increases go into effect the next session

# The US Constitution

## Legacy of the Constitution

The US Constitution has been the model for many countries' constitutions around the world

It is a great document that has withstood the test of time in creating a government that has functioned well for over 200 years while preserving individual liberty and justice.

The U.S. Constitution is the oldest national constitution and the shortest. The original US Constitution is on display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

# The US Constitution

## Questions

When was the US Constitution written?

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In what city was the Constitutional Convention held?

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What is the introduction to the Constitution called?

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What are the 3 branches of the US government?

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What are the first 10 amendments to the  
Constitution called?

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## US Constitution: Cloze Activity

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the blanks in the text below.

**Word Bank:**

Fathers	Executive	power	approved
People	President	changes	Benjamin
branches	Rights	states	Union
Judicial	defense	written	1788
Legislative	speech	27	first

The Constitution of the United States is a document that outlines the basis of the Federal (national) government of the USA. It was \_\_\_\_\_ in 1787 at the "Constitutional Convention" held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The 55 men at the convention are called the "Founding \_\_\_\_\_" of the USA, and are also known as the "framers of the Constitution." Some of the more famous of the framers are George Washington (the \_\_\_\_\_ President of the USA), James Madison (the fourth \_\_\_\_\_ of the USA), \_\_\_\_\_ Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

The US Constitution was ratified (\_\_\_\_\_) on June 21, \_\_\_\_\_. It replaced the earlier set of rules, the Articles of Confederation (which were written in 1781, but gave Congress very little \_\_\_\_\_).

The Preamble of the Constitution is the short introduction to the Constitution; it explains that the document proposes to establish a more perfect government complete with justice, tranquility, and liberty. It states, "We the \_\_\_\_\_ of

\_\_\_\_\_, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common \_\_\_\_\_, 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."

The Constitution sets up the US government as a republic with three \_\_\_\_\_ of government: the \_\_\_\_\_ branch (which makes the national laws and consists of Congress), the \_\_\_\_\_ branch (headed by the President), and the \_\_\_\_\_ branch (which interprets the Constitution and laws, and consists of judges in courts). The Constitution sets up the power balance between \_\_\_\_\_ and the Federal government, details how to add new states to the USA, tells how the Constitution can be amended, and enumerates requirements for ratifying (approving) the Constitution by the states.

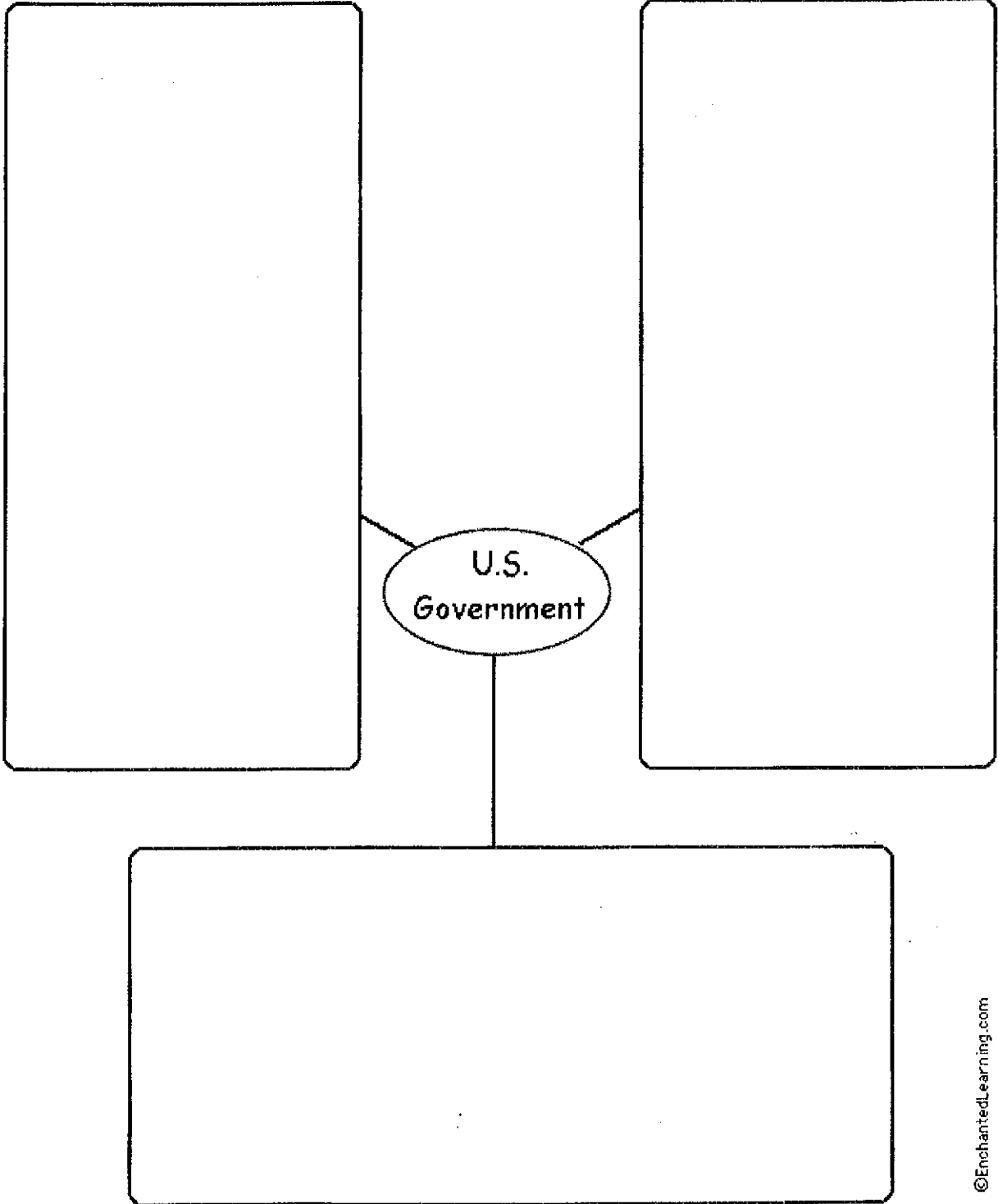
Many amendments (\_\_\_\_\_ to the Constitution) have been made throughout the years. The first 10 amendments, called the Bill of \_\_\_\_\_, were added in 1791; the Bill of Rights preserves the rights of the people, including the freedom of \_\_\_\_\_ and religion, among others. So far, there have been \_\_\_\_\_ amendments to the constitution.

The US Constitution has been the model for many countries' constitutions around the world. It is a great document that has withstood the test of time in creating a government that has functioned well for over 200 years while preserving individual liberty and justice.



### Three Branches of the US Government

List the three branches of the U.S. government, facts about them, and the activities and responsibilities of each. Name \_\_\_\_\_



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Name \_\_\_\_\_

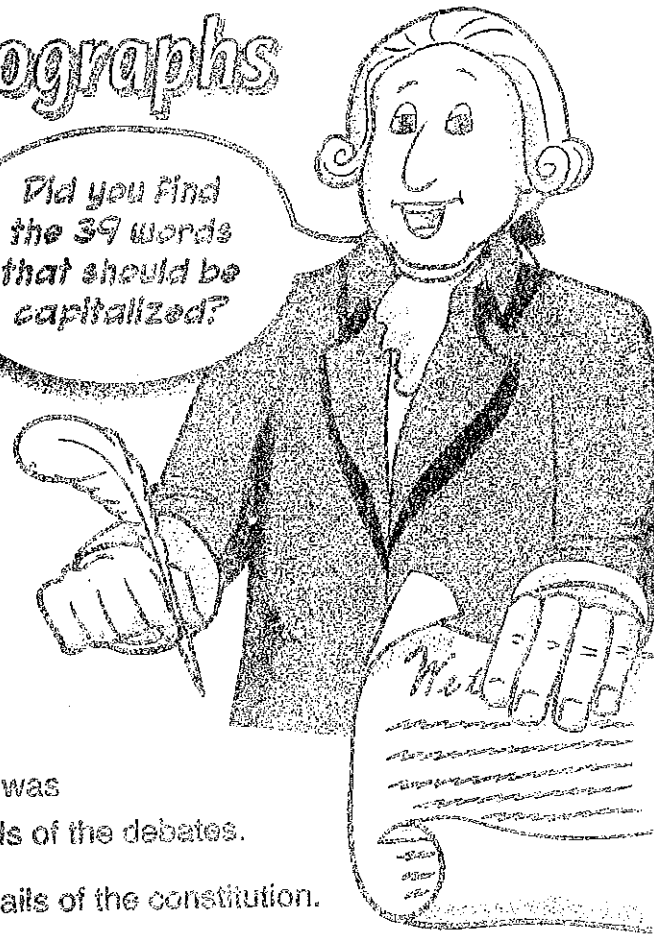
Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Constitutional Autographs

Circle each word that should be capitalized.

1. The Constitutional Convention began may 25, 1787.
2. delegates from 12 states worked on the Constitution for almost four months.
3. They finished on september 17, 1787.
4. On that day, 39 out of 55 delegates signed the United states Constitution.
5. james madison is called the "Father of the Constitution."
6. Madison earned that nickname because he was a powerful speaker and kept the best records of the debates.
7. the delegates often disagreed about the details of the constitution.
8. The first delegate who signed the Constitution was george washington.
9. george washington was one of only two men who signed the Constitution and later became a U.S. president.
10. james madison was the only other man who signed the Constitution and later became a U.S. president.
11. at age 81, benjamin franklin was the oldest person to sign the Constitution.
12. The delegates signed the constitution in geographical order, from north to south.
13. The delegate from new hampshire was followed by the delegates from massachusetts, connecticut, new york, new jersey, pennsylvania, delaware, maryland, virginia, north carolina, south carolina, and georgia.
14. The youngest delegate to sign the constitution was 26 years old.
15. the original constitution is on display in the National Archives Building in washington, DC.

Did you find the 39 words that should be capitalized?



**Bonus Box:** Practice writing your signature (yc full name in cursive) until it looks formal enough th you'd be proud to sign an important document like the U.S. Constitution.

# Constitution Guide

## The Constitution has:

- A preamble (an introduction)
- Seven articles (sections) covering:

**Article I: The Congress**  
(legislative branch)



**Article II: The president** (executive branch)



**Article III: The judges and national courts** (judicial branch)



**Article IV: How states relate to each other and the national government.**



**Article V: How the Constitution can be amended or changed.**



**Article VI: The Constitution is the supreme law of the land.**



**Article VII: Ratification, or approval.**

- The signatures of 39 delegates.

## Amendments to the Constitution

Our Constitution is not perfect. It has been amended, or changed. Twenty-seven amendments have been added. The first 10 are called the Bill of Rights (1791).



1st: freedom of religion



freedom of speech



freedom of the press

freedom of assembly and petition.



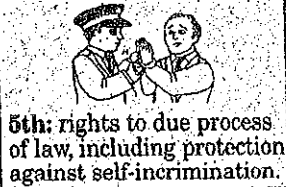
2nd: right to bear arms.



3rd: quartering of soldiers limited.

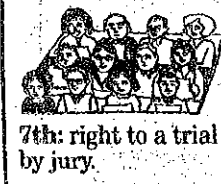


4th: searches and seizures regulated.



5th: rights to due process of law, including protection against self-incrimination.

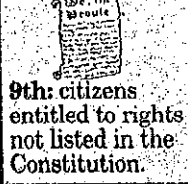
6th: rights of a person accused of a crime, including the right to be represented by a lawyer.



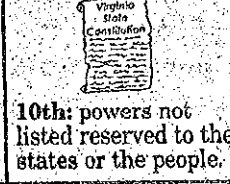
7th: right to a trial by jury.



8th: unfair bail, fines and punishment forbidden.

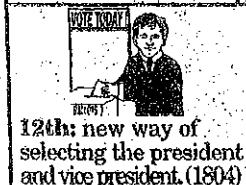


9th: citizens entitled to rights not listed in the Constitution.

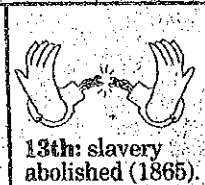


10th: powers not listed reserved to the states or the people.

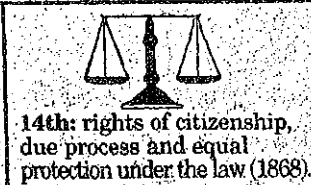
11th: rules for lawsuits against states (1795).



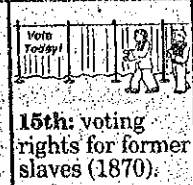
12th: new way of selecting the president and vice president. (1804)



13th: slavery abolished (1865).

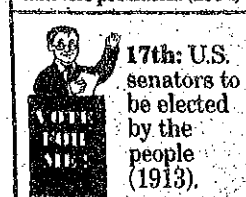


14th: rights of citizenship, due process and equal protection under the law (1868).



15th: voting rights for former slaves (1870).

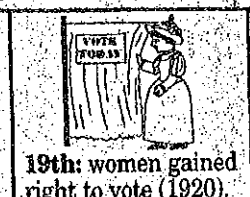
16th: federal income taxes authorized (1913).



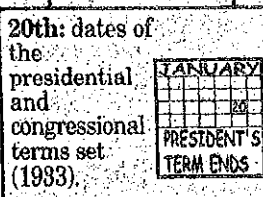
17th: U.S. senators to be elected by the people (1913).



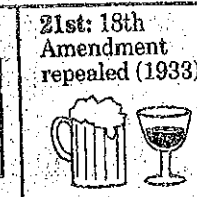
18th: sale of alcohol banned (1919).



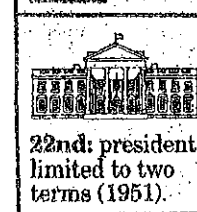
19th: women gained right to vote (1920).



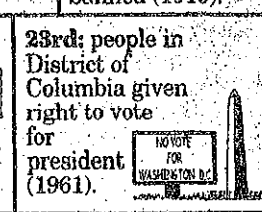
20th: dates of the presidential and congressional terms set. (1933).



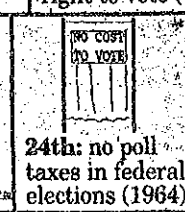
21st: 18th Amendment repealed (1933).



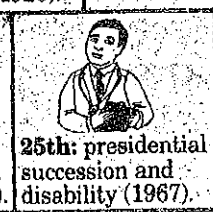
22nd: president limited to two terms (1951).



23rd: people in District of Columbia given right to vote for president (1961).



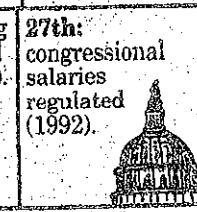
24th: no poll taxes in federal elections (1964).



25th: presidential succession and disability (1967).



26th: voting age lowered to 18 (1971).



27th: congressional salaries regulated (1992).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# How Well Do You Know Your Rights?



Each statement on the grid below is based on one of the amendments to the Constitution. Some of the statements are true and others are false. Read each statement. Write a + in the circle if the statement is true and a 0 in the circle if the statement is false. Then decide which amendment is being addressed in each statement. Write the number of the amendment on the line under each statement.

<input type="radio"/> <b>T</b> 1. You may be charged a fee in order to vote. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>C</b> 2. The police may come inside your home at any time to conduct a search. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>I</b> 3. Women can vote. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>M</b> 4. You may have a lawyer defend you in a trial, even if you can't afford one. Amendment # _____
<input type="radio"/> <b>E</b> 5. A judge can send you to jail without a trial if he is sure you are guilty. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>E</b> 6. Slavery is no longer legal. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>S</b> 7. You have to be at least 18 years old to vote. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>E</b> 8. You cannot own a gun unless you have served in the military. Amendment # _____
<input type="radio"/> <b>A</b> 9. You do not have to testify if you are the one on trial. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>B</b> 10. Newspapers can print opinions about government even if the opinions are critical. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>N</b> 11. People who live in the District of Columbia cannot vote for president. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>D</b> 12. All alcohol sales are illegal. Amendment # _____
<input type="radio"/> <b>S</b> 13. The federal government may collect income taxes. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>E</b> 14. A President may serve for 12 years. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>P</b> 15. Police can treat you cruelly if you are found guilty of a crime. Amendment # _____	<input type="radio"/> <b>R</b> 16. You are entitled to rights other than those listed in the Constitution. Amendment # _____

Of all the delegates, only George Washington and James Madison had something special in common. What was it? To find out, cut apart the 16 boxes. Arrange them in order of the amendments. The letters in the upper right-hand corner of each grid will spell out the answer.