

TAH Lesson Plan

Title: Defining America: The Preamble of the Constitution as a lens to view the changing definition of American-ness.

Possible Subject Area(s);

The changing interpretation of the Constitution, specifically the Preamble of the Constitution, about the expectations and enforcement of civil rights.

Overview:

The goal of this series of discrete, but linked, lessons is to use the Preamble of the Constitution to examine the changing interpretations of who are “the People of the United States” as well as to explore how different generations have interpreted and acted upon the mandate to “form a more perfect Union.” These lessons will serve as a reflection piece and a touchstone of continuity linking three different periods: the Revolutionary and Early Republican Period, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement. By examining the same basic questions about defining “American-ness” and the role of the government in disparate time periods we will be able to see the changing nature of American society and politics.

Essential Understanding:

The definitions of who are “the People of the United States” and what it means to “form a more perfect Union” have always been political issues.

The interpretation of the Preamble to the Constitution and the definition of American-ness have evolved alongside the nation itself.

Essential Questions:

Who are “the People of the United States” and how is this different at different times in U.S. history?

How have different generations interpreted what it means to “form a more perfect Union?”

How and why have different interpretations of the previous two questions been problematic throughout U.S. history?

CT Standards:

1.8-The student will be able to describe the interactions between citizens and their government in the making and implementation of laws.

1.9-The student will be able to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

3.2- The student will be able to analyze and evaluate human action in historical and/or contemporary contexts from alternative points of view.

Objectives:

- The students will interpret the Preamble of the Constitution and synthesize a modern translation based on their personal interpretation.

- The students will analyze the changes in interpretations of the Preamble over the course of U.S. history.
- The students will predict, based on the past, the direction of future civil rights jurisprudence.

Materials Needed:

There will be no additional materials needed. Students should utilize previous knowledge as well as any specific materials from previous units.

Suggested Activities/Procedures:

Day 1: Introduction to the Preamble

- The students will begin by taking a short quiz where they write the Preamble to the Constitution by memory (5 minutes)
- After the quiz, each student will write an interpretation of what the language of the Preamble actually means. They will then share with partners and, finally, with the class as a whole. (20 minutes)
- After discussing the meaning of the words, I will discuss with the students the function of the Preamble and its connection to the historical time period of the Revolutionary and Early Republican Periods. In this discussion, we will also address the fact that the “framers’ interpretations of the Preamble would be different from our interpretation. (20 minutes)

Day 2: The Preamble and the Civil War

- We will begin by reviewing, as a class, the ideological debate that occurred in the U.S. prior to the Civil War, examining what issues were important and how they are connected to the Civil War. (10 mins)
- I will divide the class into three groups and give each group an Amendment to translate, the 13th, 14th, or 15th. After translating, the groups will share with the class (20 mins)
- In the final minutes of class, we will discuss how the nation’s interpretation of the Preamble must be changed in light of the Civil War and the new Amendments to the Constitution (15 mins)

Day 3: The Preamble and the Civil Rights Movement

- I will divide the class into three groups and give each group an area of inequality civil rights activists sought to change, voting rights, access to equal education, or integration of public places and institutions. Each group will write a paragraph or two about the types of inequality present in its segment of society as well as a paragraph or two explaining the changes that occurred during or following the Civil Rights Movement (20 mins)
- Each group will then share its written work with the rest of the class and as a whole class we will add to any areas we still have been overlooked. (10 mins)
- In the final minutes of class, we will discuss the connection between the Amendments made at the end of the Civil War and the changes that occurred

during the Civil Rights Movement. We will also discuss how the framers of the Constitution might have felt about the Civil Rights Movement.

Suggested Assessment/Evaluation

- Because this is a touchstone activity that is designed to link units, I do not feel it is necessary to have a formal piece of assessment for each lesson. Instead, I will use the informal assessment technique of student in-class writing and discussion.

Possible Extensions/Resources

- The nice aspect of this style of lesson is that it is a touchstone that can be connected to almost any social movement. It could just as easily been used when talking about the Progressive Era, the Women's Suffrage Movement, or even the Gay Rights Movement of the present.