What Is Civics?

Civics is a subject that touches every person’s life. It teaches the value of being an active citizen in the community. It teaches the importance of taking part in politics and helping to choose the leaders of local, state and national government. It teaches how laws shape society and how they protect individuals. It teaches how the rights granted by government come with responsibilities not to abuse those rights.

The word “civics” is based on an ancient Latin word “civicus,” which means “of a citizen.”

American Values

Studying civics gives meaning to values that have come to define what it means to be an American. Many of these values are expressed in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They include:

- The concepts of fairness and equality;
- The commitment to protect the rights of individuals and also to promote the common good;
- Respect for the law and justice;
- Recognition of the importance of diversity, openness and the free exchange of ideas;
- Understanding of how participation in civic and political life can help citizens achieve individual and public goals.
When the United States was formed, it was a nation unlike any that existed at the time. As a representative democracy, it gave citizens the power to choose their leaders. It gave citizens the power to make their own laws and rules to live by. This was far different from governments in which a king or emperor held all the power and set all the rules for the people.

One of the nation’s founders, John Adams, explained the difference when he helped write the Massachusetts state constitution in 1780.

In the United States, he said, we have “a government of laws, not of men.”

**Think About Your Day**

As a class, discuss ways that laws affect the everyday lives of people. Think about everything that affects you from the time you leave your home in the morning until you get to school. Make a master list as a class. Remember that laws cover both big issues — such as the number of days students go to school — and small issues — what people must do at a crosswalk.

How would life be different without the laws you experienced this morning?

**Learn About John Adams**

John Adams did much more than help write the Massachusetts state constitution. He went on to become the second president of the United States, and he is one of just two presidents to have a son grow up to be president as well. Learn more about the things he did in his life by visiting this White House Web link that provides biographies of U.S. presidents. Which of John Adams’ achievements were the most important for the United States? Which would you like to learn more about? Why?

**Get the Picture Online**

What did John Adams look like? View some portraits of him (along with an actor who portrayed him in a TV miniseries) at this link. What kind of personality do you think he had, based on the portraits? Why would the artists paint him as they did?
In the study of civics, you learn how governments work, how they came to be and how they affect the lives of their citizens. So if you were going to set up a government, how would you do it? The first thing you would need to do is draw up a plan. The plan drawn up by the founders of the United States is the U.S. Constitution.

The Constitution was written more than 220 years ago, but it remains one of the world’s great documents. The way it divided power between different branches of government established the idea of “checks and balances” and became a model for other countries.

And in its first 10 amendments, it spelled out some of the most important freedoms Americans have.

**Begin at the Beginning**

What would you say first if you were writing a constitution for a new nation? As a class, discuss ideas you think would be important to state at the beginning. Which would be the most important for the people of the nation to know?

Now visit the website of the National Constitution Center and read what the nation’s founders said first when they started writing the U.S. Constitution. (You can read it in Spanish as well as English and in other languages, too.)

This first statement is called the preamble to the Constitution. What do the first three words of the preamble tell you about this new nation the founders were forming?

What goals for the nation are most important to the founders? What words reveal their interest in having citizens and states of the nation work together? How many times do they express this idea in this short paragraph?

How can you tell the founders were interested in the future as well as the time in which they were living?

**Who Wrote the Constitution?**

The U.S. Constitution was written at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The signers of the Constitution seem larger than life in history, but they were real men who came in all shapes and sizes.

At the National Constitution Center, the Signers’ Hall exhibit above features life-size statues of 42 men who attended the Constitutional Convention (women could not vote at the time and did not take part). Some are tall and some are much smaller than expected when visitors stand beside them. Others seem of ordinary height and build. But what they did was extraordinary.

Visit the Constitution Center online to learn about the founders who took part.

Click on the name of a participant. What was his background and career? How did he contribute to the writing of the Constitution? What did he do after attending the Constitutional Convention? What other contributions did he make to the forming of the United States, or to the politics of his home state?
The U.S. Constitution is a model for the world in the way it divides power between the three branches of government. It also is a model for the way it spells out the rights and freedoms Americans have. The most important of these rights were not included in the original Constitution, however. They were added four years after the 1787 Constitutional Convention in the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. The freedoms listed in these 10 amendments are so important to American life that they are now referred to as the nation’s Bill of Rights.

What Are These Freedoms?
As a class, visit the Bill of Rights Institute website and read the Bill of Rights. Or download a copy to display in the classroom.

The freedoms in the First Amendment are among the most famous in America: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to assemble, freedom of religion and freedom to petition, or ask, the government to take action. They touch the lives of citizens in many ways.

Did you know, for example, that freedom of speech covers not only things you say, but also the content of songs, movies, plays, TV shows and works of art? How would life be different if Americans did not have freedom of speech? And why do you think the nation’s founders felt it so important to guarantee the right to assemble, or get together, with other people? Why is that an important right today?

Freedoms in Art
In 1943, artist Norman Rockwell did a series of paintings called “Four Freedoms.” Two of the freedoms are those listed in the First Amendment. View the artworks here.

How did the artworks capture the ideas and emotions of each freedom? Would the pictures contain different things if they were painted today? Would it change how you feel about the paintings to know that they were painted when the United States was fighting in World War II? They were inspired by a speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Follow this link to listen to an excerpt from that speech. Why do you think President Roosevelt delivered it to the nation?

Follow Rights in the News
The rights in the Bill of Rights are often in the news. The Bill of Rights Institute keeps track of different examples on its website. Check out this week’s news stories. Which rights are involved in each case? Are the rights being denied or protected? Who will be affected most by the cases, other than the people directly involved?
When you study civics and the government of the United States, one of the most important topics is voting. The U.S. Constitution acknowledged the importance of voting right at the start, declaring in Article I, Section 2 that members of the U.S. House of Representatives shall be “chosen every second year by the people of the several states.” Article II, Section 1 set up the process for electing the president. But the nation did not leave it at that. Since the Constitution was adopted in 1787 it has been amended four times to expand voting rights, or to refine the voting process. The 15th Amendment gave African-Americans and people of all races the right to vote in 1870 after the Civil War. The 17th Amendment, approved in 1913, provided for direct election of U.S. senators by citizens, rather than selection by state legislatures. The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote in 1920. The 26th Amendment lowered the voting age for all citizens to 18 in 1971.

Getting People to Vote
While U.S. citizens 18 and older all have the right to vote, not all of them take advantage of that right. In the 2010 election, for example, just 42 percent of all eligible voters actually turned out to elect U.S. senators and representatives and state officials. In the 2008 presidential election, the percentage was 63 percent.

Young people, especially, have not voted in as high numbers as they could. But a number of national groups are reaching out to change that with active, entertaining websites that use music and video to stress the importance of voting.

Rock the Vote, Project Vote Smart and Declare Yourself are some top examples. There is even a Smackdown Your Vote! site created by World Wrestling Entertainment.

Visit the Rock the Vote website. How is it designed to appeal to young voters? How do its features appeal to people who have different interests? Which feature would you check out first? Why?

Art and Music
Art and music can help get people interested in voting. Check out the artworks created in the Get Out the Vote Project sponsored by AIGA, a national association for professional graphic designers. Which posters appeal most to you? Which do you think would be most effective in getting people to register and vote? If you were designing a Get Out the Vote poster, what words and images would you use? Draw a sketch of your ideas.

Now check out this YouTube video of students in Atlanta using music to encourage people to vote in the 2008 election. In what other ways can students play a role in getting family members to register and vote in elections?
The Constitution and the nation’s laws guarantee many rights and freedoms for U.S. citizens. They also have shaped the character of the nation. The values expressed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights have come to define what it means to be an American.

Ask Yourself This …

Upholding these core American values is what is meant when people speak of the responsibilities of being a citizen. People who understand the responsibilities of citizenship see the country’s needs as bigger than any individual’s needs. One of the most inspiring speeches to express this idea was the inauguration address given by President John F. Kennedy on the day he took office in 1961. In that speech he challenged the nation to “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Watch and listen to this portion of the speech online.

How does President Kennedy prepare his listeners for his famous challenge? What topics does he discuss, and what goals does he set? How does he connect the concerns of the United States to the concerns of the world? How does this connection add to the importance of his call for people to be active citizens?

Be Like Ben

Long before John F. Kennedy became president, Benjamin Franklin was demonstrating what it means to be an active and responsible citizen. He certainly appreciated the rights Americans have — he was part of the conventions that wrote both the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. But he did much, much more, giving back to the nation and his community in far-reaching ways. He served as ambassador to France for the new nation. He helped set up the nation’s first subscription library. He helped found the University of Pennsylvania. He created the nation’s post office system. He formed the nation’s first fire company.

He became such an example of a responsible citizen that the U.S. Government Printing Office uses him as “spokesman” for information it distributes on citizenship.

Ben Franklin’s Life

Learn more about Benjamin Franklin by visiting this interactive timeline of his life from the Ben Franklin 300 program. Ben Franklin 300 — officially the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary — was set up in 2006 to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Franklin’s birth.

Which of the interactive features appeal most to you? From what you know of Ben Franklin, which do you think would appeal most to him?
The nation was not built by government alone. Much of the strength of communities comes from individuals, families and private groups who work together to address issues and solve problems in communities.

Acting this way is what people mean when they talk about working “for the common good.” It’s what the nation’s founders meant when they set a goal to “promote the general welfare” in the preamble to the Constitution. And it’s what it means to accept and share the responsibilities of being a citizen.

**United We Serve**

Since the founding of the nation, volunteering has been part of America’s heritage. And volunteering is playing an important role in making the United States stronger today.

The United We Serve program run by the Corporation for National and Community Service is urging people — especially young people — to get involved in volunteer efforts.

Visit the United We Serve website and hear volunteers talk about why volunteering is important. Why did they choose the projects they picked? How did their volunteering help others? What did they get out of volunteering?

**What Would You Like to Do?**

Everyone has talents to share. And in the United States, millions of people share their talents by volunteering. In the year 2009 alone, more than 63.4 million Americans volunteered to help their communities, according to the Volunteering In America website.

As a class, talk about the talents and interests of people in your family, and how you or your family could make use of them in the community if you were volunteers. Then visit the United We Serve website and go to the **Find a Volunteer Opportunity** section. What kinds of opportunities do you see? Which would be ones you or your family might like to try?

If you don’t find an opportunity that interests you, try the **Find a Toolkit** link to set up a volunteer project of your own. What type of project would you like? Why? (REMEMBER: Always discuss any volunteer project with a parent or guardian before starting.)

**Tips for Volunteers**

If you’ve never volunteered, check out these tips for volunteers from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Which do you think would be the most important for someone who is planning to volunteer for the first time?