

Student Group Activity: Learn the Five Freedoms

Objective: Have students work in small groups to learn about one of the five freedoms and consider how they might live that freedom. Then, have students come back together to review each freedom and learn more about the history and limitations of all the freedoms, as well as the way the five freedoms work together to support participatory democracy.

Materials: 5 Flipcharts, 5-10 Markers, 5 Activity Guide Printouts for Volunteers/Chaperones, Printouts of the First Amendment

Part One: With all students present, the activity leader will explain the text and basic historical context of the First Amendment. (10-15 minutes)

Part Two: Split the students and volunteers into five groups and send them to an area with a flipchart to discuss their assigned freedom in more depth. Have the volunteer/chaperone use the activity guide sheets to help keep the discussion on track. The students will think of 3-5 ways they could live their freedom and write it on their flipchart. (10-20 minutes)

Part Three: Bring the students back together and have them share the ways they could live their assigned freedom. The

activity leader will then explain limitations on the freedoms and give more historical and legal context to each freedom, explain that there can still be social (if not legal) consequences for exercising these freedoms, and emphasize the role the freedoms play in supporting participatory democracy.

(20-30 minutes)

PART 1: THE FIRST AMENDMENT & THE FIVE FREEDOMS

Activity Leader Guide

Objective: Introduce the First Amendment and its basic context, prepare students to engage in the small group activity, create small groups and assign one of the freedoms to each.

Note: Give the chaperones/volunteers the Activity Guides before the activity begins and explain how to use them. Set up flipcharts in each room with Freedom name at the head and numbered list 1-3, with extra room for any additional ideas they come up with.

Script: Hello! My name is _____, and I'm so excited that you're here to learn more about the First Amendment. Does anyone here know what the First Amendment is? Does anyone know what important document it's a part of? *(It's the first*

amendment in the Bill of Rights, which is part of the US Constitution). Does anyone know when it became part of the Constitution? (*1791*) You can tell it's 227 years old because even though it is in English, the way it's written is a little old-fashioned. Who is brave enough to volunteer to read it out loud for everyone? (*reads*) Great, thank you very much! Ok, so the First Amendment is a very important part of our Bill of Rights, because it guarantees American citizens five important freedoms: Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Assembly, and the Freedom of Petition.

Here at the museum, we call these Five Freedoms the "cornerstone of democracy" - in other words, our system of democracy depends on American citizens having and using these freedoms. You might not realize it, but many of you use these freedoms every day! Today, what we're going to do is split up into five groups. Each group will be assigned one freedom to think about in more depth, and I want you to work together to do two things: Figure out how to describe the freedom in your own words, and come up with 3-5 ways

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you might practice that freedom in your everyday life. Then, we'll come back here and each group can share what they've learned about their freedom, and I'll explain a little bit more about why the First Amendment freedoms are so important to democracy. Let's do it!

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Activity Guide

Objective: Work together as a group to discuss the meaning of the Freedom of Religion clauses in the First Amendment, and create a list of at least 3 ways someone might live that freedom.

Read aloud, emphasize underlined portions: 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.

Ask students these questions, giving them 2-4 minutes to respond to each:

- How would you explain the clause that says "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" in

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your own words? What does it mean to “establish a religion?”

- o *Example Answer: “The government can’t say there is an official religion or that it supports only one kind of religious belief.”*

- How would you explain “Congress shall make no law ... prohibiting the free exercise thereof” in your own words?

What does “thereof” refer to in this sentence?

- o *Example Answer: “The government can’t stop a person from practicing the religion they choose, or from choosing not to practice a religion.”*

- Why do you think the people who wrote the constitution included this in the First Amendment? What kinds of problems might come up if the government had one official religion, or if the government could tell Americans what kind of religion to practice?

- o *Example Answer: “The government could make people go to a church they don’t agree with, people could be prevented from practicing their own religion, people could become afraid and hide their religious beliefs.”*

Ask students to come up with 3-5 ways they might practice Freedom of Religion in their lives, and have them write the list on their flipchart. If students are struggling, use these questions to help them think about their freedoms:

- What do you think it means to “freely exercise” your

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- Does anyone here belong to a church, mosque, or religious community? What kinds of things do you do with your religious community?
- What kinds of things are you free NOT to do because of the religion clauses?

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Activity Guide

Objective: Work together as a group to discuss the meaning of Freedom of Speech in the First Amendment, and create a list of at least 3 ways someone might live that freedom.

Read aloud, emphasize underlined portions: 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.

Ask students these questions, giving them 2-4 minutes to respond to each:

- How would you explain “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech” in your own words? What do you think “abridging” means here?
 - o *Example Answer: “The government can’t make a law that reduces or takes away people’s right to express their thoughts and opinions”*

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- What do you think counts as “Speech”? If speech can refer to ways of expressing yourself, what are some other ways you might “speak” besides specifically saying words out loud?
 - *Example Answer: “writing a poem or a book, writing an email or post online, wearing a shirt with a meaningful symbol on it, having a bumper sticker with a political message on your car.”*
- Why do you think the people who wrote the constitution included this in the First Amendment? What kind of problems might come up if the government could restrict what people were allowed to say?
 - *Example Answer: “People might not be allowed to criticize the government, or talk about politics. People with unpopular views could be sent to jail. People might become afraid to share their opinions.”*

Ask students to come up with 3-5 ways they might practice Freedom of Speech in their lives, and have them write the list on their flipchart. If students are struggling, use these questions to help them think about their freedoms:

- What are some different places or platforms where you could express yourself?
- Have you learned about anything in history class where people expressed unpopular opinions? How did they share those opinions, and why?

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- Does anyone here belong to a church, mosque, or religious community? What kinds of things do you do with your religious community?
- What kinds of things are you free NOT to do because of the religion clauses?

FREEDOM OF PRESS

Activity Guide

Objective: Work together as a group to discuss the meaning of Freedom of Press in the First Amendment, and create a list of at least 3 ways someone might live that freedom.

Read aloud, emphasize underlined portions: 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.

Ask students these questions, giving them 2-4 minutes to respond to each:

- How would you explain “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom ... of the press” in your own words? What do you think “abridging” means here?
 - o *Example Answer: “The government can’t control what appears in newspapers, books, or what’s on TV or radio or online. People can publish news, information, and opinions”*

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- Why do you think the people who wrote the constitution included Freedom of the Press in the First Amendment? What kinds of problems might come up if the government could control what was published in newspapers, books, etc?
 - *Example Answer: "The government could prevent people from sharing important news stories if it made the government look bad, or people could decide to change what they say and censor themselves to avoid getting in trouble. The government might decide a book is too dangerous to let people read."*

Ask students to come up with 3-5 ways they might practice Freedom of the Press in their lives, and have them write the list on their flipchart. If students are struggling, use these questions to help them think about their freedoms:

- How do you learn about what's going on in the world?
- Have you ever read any books that had controversial ideas or shocking scenes in them?
- Does your school have a student newspaper?

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Activity Guide

Objective: Work together as a group to discuss the meaning of Freedom of Assembly in the First Amendment, and create a list of at least 3 ways someone might live that freedom.

Read aloud, emphasize underlined portions: 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.

Ask students these questions, giving them 2-4 minutes to respond to each:

- How would you explain the clause that says “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the right of the people to peaceably assemble” in your own words? What do you think “assembly” means? What do you think “peaceable” means?
 - *Example Answer: “The government can’t stop people from gathering in public or private, people can participate in non-violent protests or go to political meetings”*
- Why do you think the assembly has to be “peaceable”?
 - *Example Answer: “The government isn’t saying people can cause a fight or a riot or act as a mob, because that could be very dangerous.”*
- Why do you think the people who wrote the constitution included Freedom of Assembly in the First Amendment? What kinds of problems might come up if people were not allowed to assemble?
 - *Example Answer: “The government could prevent people from protesting or stop groups from expressing their views in public. People might not be able to advocate for changes they think are important.”*

Ask students to come up with 3-5 ways they might practice Freedom of Assembly in their lives, and have them write the list on their flipchart. If students are struggling, use these questions to help them think about their freedoms:

- Have you recently read or heard about anything that sounds like a “peacable assembly” – a peaceful gathering of people in a public place?
- If there was a law you felt was unfair, how could you use your freedom of assembly to do something about it?
- How could a group of people communicate their message better than a single person?

FREEDOM OF PETITION

Activity Guide

Objective: Work together as a group to discuss the meaning of Freedom of Petition in the First Amendment, and create a list of at least 3 ways someone might live that freedom.

Read aloud, emphasize highlighted portions: 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.

Ask students these questions, giving them 2-4 minutes to respond to each:

- How would you explain “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of the people to . . . petition the Government for a redress of grievances” in your own words? What do you think “petition” means? What do you think “redress of grievances” means?
 - o *Example Answer: “Citizens are allowed make direct complaints about what the government does, and to ask the government for changes to laws and policies.”*
- “To petition” is an action, but what is “a petition”? Does anyone know they work?
 - o *Example Answer: “A petition is a written request to the government. Petitioners often gather signatures from other people who agree with the request, then they submit that petition to Congress to show that the request is popular.”*
- Why do you think the people who wrote the constitution included Freedom to Petition the government in the First Amendment? What kinds of problems might come up if people were not allowed to petition the government?
 - o *Example Answer: “People wouldn’t be allowed to say if something was unjust, and it would make it harder to undo bad or unfair laws. People would not be allowed to ask the government directly for changes.”*

Ask students to come up with 3-5 ways they might practice Freedom of Petition in their lives, and have them write the list on their flipchart. If students are struggling, use these questions to help them think about their freedoms:

- If you had an issue that you cared a lot about, how could you use petition to gain support for your issue?
- If no one else agreed with you, could you still petition the government? How could you do that?

PART 3: HISTORY, LIMITS, AND FUNCTIONS OF THE FIVE FREEDOMS

Activity Leader Guide

Objective: Review the five freedoms with the whole group, talk about the ways the students came up with to live their freedoms, use that as a segue to explain historical background, legal and social limitations, and the democratic function of the five freedoms.

Emphasize the following points about each freedom while discussing the students' lists:

Religion:

- These clauses were included to try and prevent arguments about a state church, or the funding of one particular church with tax money. In England, the Church of England was the official church of the state and tried to suppress all alternate forms of worship, especially after the violent civil war was fought in the 1640s on religious/political grounds. It's important to note that the First Amendment only applied to the federal government until court cases led to Incorporation in the 20th century, so state governments like Connecticut could and did have official religions for many years, payed for by tax money.
- The two clauses seem straightforward, but there is tension between them. The government must walk the line between not supporting and not prohibiting a particular religion – they can't show favoritism or give financial help to one, but they also need to make sure people are not prevented from freely exercising their chosen religion by the government's decisions.
- The biggest controversies over this Freedom come when a religious practice violates some kind of civil law – for example, Rastas from Jamaica smoke marijuana as a religious ritual. Does the First Amendment's religion clause protect their right to do so? The Native American Church uses peyote, another controlled substance, does the First Amendment cover them? These questions have yet to be entirely settled by the courts.

Speech:

- The protection of speech was inspired by the unfairness of British “Seditious Libel” laws – you could be prosecuted for saying anything critical about a powerful person, even if you were just stating a verifiable fact. The authors wanted people to be free to speak out against injustices in the government, because in a democracy, the government should be responsible to the people.
- There are limits to speech – the current test is the “Imminent Lawless Action” test, which asks if the speech directs someone to “lawless action,” and how likely the speech is to result in that lawless action.
- As with all the Freedoms, the First Amendment protects against legal consequences for free speech, but it doesn’t necessarily protect against social consequences. You may not go to jail for saying a racial slur or announcing your support for Nazi ideology, but you might lose your job at a private company or be rejected by people in your community.

Press:

- The press refers to the printing press, and this protection was created because under British law a printing press had to get a special license to print news, and no newspapers were allowed to publish things critical of the government. Thomas Jefferson said that if he had to choose, he’d have newspapers instead of government any day.
- The courts have ruled that the “press” as an institution doesn’t have special protections beyond the freedom of

the freedom of expression that individual citizens have, but this freedom is still important – the people have a right to know, and a right to read, and a right to write what they want to write.

- This doesn't mean the press hasn't been censored or attacked in the US – Elijah Parish Lovejoy, a Mainer, was murdered by a mob in Illinois for publishing an anti-slavery paper, and many attempts have been made to ban books in public schools and libraries. That's why it's important that we have this freedom enshrined in law.

Assembly:

- In the lead up to the Revolutionary War, there were a number of instances where a group of rebels gathered in the streets and were dispersed by the military, and in the case of the Boston Massacre this led to violence and death. The authors felt people should be able to gather together around ideas, though they specified that the assemblies should be “peaceable” – not violent mobs.
- You don't see many protests start late at night in a residential area – that's because there are laws on the books that DO limit this freedom, laws against loitering or requiring protesters to have permits. These laws are only constitutional when they are applied in a content neutral way, meaning that they aren't being applied because of WHAT the protesters are saying, only the way they are doing it.
- MLK Jr's tactic of non-violent protest was meant to conform strictly with the “peaceable” part of “peaceable

assembly,” because this made it harder for the government to justify the violent police response to Civil Rights protests. When Americans saw quiet, calm protesters blasted with fire hoses by the police, many were outraged – the protesters were clearly within their rights and couldn’t be dismissed as a “mob.”

Petition:

- The colonists had repeatedly petitioned the English King to address their problems, and the crown did not respond – that is part of why America separated from England. The authors included the right to petition because they felt people should be able to speak directly to their government in a democracy, a government by and for the people.
- Unfortunately, they didn’t say the government had to respond. Before the civil war, Congress received thousands of anti-slavery petitions, at which point they decided to just ignore them!
- The spirit of petition is what makes it an important freedom. It allows people to articulate their views, get other people to literally “sign on” to that idea, and show the government and the public that the idea has support.

Sample Answers

Religion: Going to a church service, going to a mosque, praying, reading the Bible, reading the Q’uran, not going to

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church, saying you don't believe in god, wearing a religious symbol like a cross or Buddhist prayer beads, celebrating a religious holiday like Hannukah or Diwali, putting a religious statue on your lawn, wearing religious garments like headscarfs or sacred undergarments, having a wedding in a church, having a wedding not in a church, etc.

Speech: Saying you support a political candidate or party, criticizing the president, criticizing your representatives, flying a symbolic flag outside your house, setting a flag on fire, posting a political sign on your lawn, wearing a shirt with a written or symbolic message on it, sharing your opinion at a town meeting, writing a poem, writing a tweet, listening to a speech, etc.

Press: Reporting factual news in an article, reading the newspaper, watching the TV news, publishing a blog post or magazine, writing a book, listening to the radio, fact-checking the news, reading a controversial book, etc.

Assembly: attending a march or protest, attending a meeting of a political group, organizing a protest, starting a group that focuses on a social issue, etc.

Petition: Signing a petition for an issue you support, creating your own petition, helping get signatures for a petition, writing a letter to congress, etc.