

NEWSEUM FIRST AMENDMENT ACTIVITIES

Would You Fight for All Five? Weighing Our First Amendment Freedoms

Rationale/Main Concept: In this activity, students explore the interplay among the five First Amendment freedoms – religion, speech, press, assembly and petition – drawing on their own lives and what they may have seen or read in the news. They play an elimination game as a class, voting to determine which freedom their group believes is the most important.

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: None

Procedure:

- Tell your students you're going to talk about the First Amendment – the law that's written six stories tall on the front of the Newseum. Ask the students if they can remember the five freedoms in the First Amendment. After guesses/discussion, write the five freedoms on the board and make sure your students understand what each one means:



The First Amendment tablet on the front of the Newseum.

- **Religion** – You can believe what you want, belong to any religion or no religion.
 - **Speech** – You can voice your opinions using words, symbols or actions.
 - **Press** – The government cannot censor information in newspapers, online news sources, TV news broadcasts, etc.
 - **Assembly** – You can gather in a group.
 - **Petition** – You can criticize the government, and you can complain about policies that affect you negatively and ask for change.
- Ask students for examples of using each of these rights. Tell them to think about their own lives and what they may have seen or read in the news.

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- Ask students if they think any one of these freedoms could exist alone, without the support of the other four. For example, would free speech be a powerful right if we did not also have a free press? How would freedom to petition be different if we didn't also have freedom of assembly? Ask the students to think of more examples of how the freedoms work together.
- All five freedoms are linked and often intertwine with each other. But what if we had to get rid of one of our five First Amendment freedoms? Which one would they choose? Tell students you're going to do four rounds of voting to determine which freedom the group thinks is the most important. Ask the students to decide which of the freedoms they would eliminate if they had to pick one. Then have your students show which freedoms they chose using a show of hands. After the first vote, cross out the freedom that received the most votes for elimination. Then ask some of the students who voted for that freedom to explain why they picked it.
- Repeat the voting process three more times, asking the students to vote for the right they would eliminate of the ones remaining on the board. After each vote, ask some of the students who voted for the eliminated freedom why they made that choice.
- After four rounds of voting, only one right will remain. Ask the students if they agree that this right is most important and why or why not. Ask them how this right would be different if it didn't have the four other First Amendment rights to support it. Would it still be a useful right? How would people exercise it? Would people exercising this right have to do anything differently if they didn't have the other four? Has the remaining right lost its meaning because of the elimination of the other four rights?
- Discuss as a class: If you only had freedom of _____, would the events/achievements below have been/be possible?
 - Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on the National Mall.
 - *The Washington Post* uncovering the Watergate scandal.
 - Women gaining the right to vote.
 - An all-night prayer vigil in memory of a fallen soldier.
 - The creation of a Web site that details the sources of politicians' campaign contributions.

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- To wrap up your discussion, tell the students that more than 200 years ago, when our country was just getting organized, there was a lot of debate over whether we should have a Bill of Rights with written rights like we find in the First Amendment. The Bill of Rights is the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution.
- Why would some people think that a Bill of Rights was a bad idea? Have students guess and discuss their answers. Explain that the people who were against a Bill of Rights didn't think the government had the power to infringe on individual rights in the first place. And what if you listed rights, but then left something off the list by mistake? Would that right then not exist?
- Why did other people believe a Bill of Rights was a good idea? Have students guess and discuss their answers. Then explain that the people in favor of a Bill of Rights believed that writing it down ensured that everyone would know the rights they had so they could protect them. They also wanted a permanent guarantee that the government would not violate certain rights.
- In the end, the Bill of Rights passed, giving us the First Amendment. Ask your students if they think that was the best outcome. How different might our country be if we hadn't made a list of rights to protect? Do they think we would still have those rights if they weren't listed in the Constitution?
- In keeping with the fears of those who opposed a Bill of Rights, are there any rights you think our Founding Fathers forgot to put in the Bill of Rights or the First Amendment? What would you add if you had been writing this document 200 years ago? Is there anything you would add today that they didn't foresee?