



# The First Amendment “Keep It Strong” Classroom Activities

## I. The FIRST AMENDMENT in context

### Activities

1. As an anticipatory activity, give a pre-test on the First Amendment. The pre-test measures students’ knowledge of some of their First Amendment rights, and it sets the stage for some of the concepts that will be covered in the unit. Grade the test in class and discuss what students discovered about themselves by taking the test.
2. What would it be like without the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights? Individually or in small groups, assume the role of a dictator and censor a newspaper. Take the newspaper, and using a magic marker, cross out every story or item that contains critical information about the government, every story that could cause citizens to become upset with the government, and every other story that a dictator would not want published. Compare results with other individuals or groups. Discuss the rationale used in deleting stories. How does this kind of censorship hurt the welfare of citizens and the nation?
3. Have students use their creative art/design skills to build a scale model or draw a blueprint of a First Amendment “fortress.” The fortress could have five walls, each wall representing a freedom — religion, speech, press, assembly, petition. The center could represent the individual or the people whose rights are being protected.
4. Go through a newspaper and label every article that in any way relates to one of the first ten amendments. Be sure to identify the amendment and tell how it is relevant to the newspaper article. Discuss why old history (the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791) is still relevant today.
5. Review the cartoon page in a newspaper and cut out every cartoon that even remotely could be related to one of the Bill of Rights amendments. For example, a cartoon showing an employee complaining to his boss could be an illustration of “petitioning ... for a redress of grievances.” Discuss how cartoons can carry political messages that are protected by the First Amendment.

## II. THE FIVE FREEDOMS

### Activities

1. Divide the class into groups of two, three, or four. Have each group decide if they had to give up one of the five freedoms, which one would it be? Each group gives its rationale for its decision. Could the groups reach consensus? Did the different groups come up with the same freedom?
2. Clip from a daily newspaper examples of stories or photos that deal with each of the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment: religion (church meetings, religious celebrations, religious issues, etc.); speech (speaker addressing an audience, letters to the editor, columnists, etc.); press (editorials, stories about press conferences, interviews, etc.); assembly (stories of meetings,

demonstrations, parades, etc.); petition (articles dealing with citizens protesting governmental policy, with citizens criticizing government officials, with people organizing in opposition to those in authority, etc.). Summarize in a sentence or two the nature of each example. Discuss why the press covers these types of stories.

3. Invite the editor of your local paper to talk to the class about how the newspaper uses the protection of the First Amendment to access and disseminate information. What are the current First Amendment issues that concern the editor? How does the newspaper work to protect the five freedoms?

### **III. The Boundaries of Freedom**

#### **Activities**

1. Draw a chart illustrating one or all of the nine categories of speech not protected by the First Amendment. The chart may include a definition, an example (without actually engaging in the prohibited speech), and anecdotal information (such as relevant court case or interesting facts) for each category.
2. Search a newspaper or magazine for illustrations, pictures, and other graphics that in some way can be used to help convey each of the nine categories of unprotected speech. Display the clippings on a poster board.
3. Invite the advertising editor of your local newspaper to address the class on the topic of deceptive or misleading ads.

### **IV. Understanding the FIRST AMENDMENT**

#### **Activities**

1. Search the newspaper for stories that include a court's interpretation of the law. What was the issue at hand, and how did the court rule?
2. Invite a local lawyer or judge to discuss First Amendment law and the rationale behind court decisions.
3. Most court cases that involve an interpretation of the law have issues that pose a dilemma. A "dilemma" is generally defined as a serious problem where a choice has to be made between two or more bad alternatives. Search the newspaper for an example of a dilemma. How would you go about resolving the particular dilemma you found?

### **V. Ethics and the FIRST AMENDMENT**

#### **Activities**

Examine the ethical issues that follow and engage in the suggested activity.

ISSUE #1: Should front page stories reflect what people "should read" or what people "want to read"?

ACTIVITY: Students are provided with a list of 10 headlines representing stories from the morning newspaper. Students select five headlines for front page placement and rate each of the five in priority for appearing on page 1. Students meet in small groups to compare lists and strive for consensus on which

five headlines should appear on page 1. Have someone from each group present rationale for choices. Hold class discussion on the ethics of placing stories in the paper. Sample questions:

1. What responsibility does an editor have to emphasize “important” informational stories on front page?
2. What responsibilities does the editor have to satisfy business interests of the paper by putting “sensational” stories on page 1 to help “sell” the paper?
3. Is there a proper balance the editor can achieve between emphasizing what the reader “should read” and what the reader “wants to read”? After the discussion, distribute the newspaper and let students compare their placement of headlines with placement that editors actually assigned. As a follow-up, students could develop five rules of ethics regarding story placement in the paper.

**ISSUE #2:** When does interpretative reporting become editorializing?

**ACTIVITY:** In your newspaper, find an interpretative news story. Is the story labeled as “analysis” or “interpretative”? List the indisputable facts in the story. List the information based primarily on the reporter’s interpretation of the facts. Finally, list any information you feel is based upon the reporter’s personal opinion without any factual evidence to support the validity of the opinion. Meet in small groups to discuss such questions as:

- 1) Is there truly a need for “interpretative” reporting?
- 2) How does interpretative reporting differ from editorializing?
- 3) Does interpretative reporting confuse the reader as to what is actually fact and what is opinion? Cite examples from your readings.

**ISSUE #3:** Should subliminal ads be allowed in a newspaper?

**ACTIVITY:** Subliminal advertising is advertising that delivers an influential message but beneath the conscious level of a reader’s perception. Find in your newspaper possible examples of subliminal advertising. Discuss in small group work:

- 1) Is there a danger to consumers in subliminal advertising?
- 2) Why do advertisers occasionally resort to this type of ad?
- 3) How widespread is it?
- 4) How much time do you consciously devote to trying to understand why a particular ad may be appealing to you?
- 5) Is subliminal advertising ethically fair, or is it something that causes a significant disadvantage to the consumer? What would be the disadvantage?

**ISSUE #4:** Should pretrial publicity, including photographs, be printed in the newspaper?

**ACTIVITY:** Some countries, such as Great Britain, put significant limitations on the amount of pretrial publicity that is allowed. Check your newspaper. Identify all the stories about people being charged with a crime; identify all the stories about trials currently in session; and identify stories of trial results or follow-ups. How many stories have accompanying pictures? How does pretrial publicity affect jury selection? Is such bad publicity fair to a person who is later cleared or found innocent? What is the need for pretrial publicity?

**ACTIVITY #5:** Examine different codes of ethics for professional organizations and then develop a code of ethics for yourself or for students and/or teachers at your school. This may be done in small groups.

## **VI. Free Speech in the Schools**

### **Activities**

1. Compare and contrast a student newspaper with a professional newspaper. List the major similarities and differences. What conclusions do you reach as a result of your study? This may be done as a group activity.
2. Make a list showing restrictions reporters for a student newspaper have under the Hazelwood case that professional reporters for a commercial newspaper do not have. Discuss the significance of the different restrictions.
3. Invite the school librarian to class. Discuss the issue of banned or challenged books. What is the school policy if a book is challenged? What is any school history regarding banned or challenged books? Who selects materials for the library? How do students have input? Create a chart or poster that reflects what you learned.