



Constitution Week Essay Contest Overview – Revision Date 7-7-2013

Constitution Week, September 17-23: A Brief History

The tradition of celebrating the Constitution was started many years ago by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In 1955, the Daughters petitioned Congress to set aside September 17-23 annually to be dedicated for the observance of Constitution Week. The resolution was later adopted by the U.S. Congress and signed into Public Law #915 on August 2, 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The aims of the celebration are to (1) emphasize citizens' responsibilities for protecting and defending the Constitution, preserving it for posterity; (2) inform the people that the Constitution is the basis for America's great heritage and the foundation for our way of life; and (3) encourage the study of the historical events which led to the framing of the Constitution in September 1787. <http://www.dar.org/natsociety/content.cfm?ID=760>

On December 8, 2004, the consolidated Appropriations Bill was signed and became **Public Law 108-477. In that bill was the following amendment:**

Sect.111 (b) Each educational institution that receives Federal funds for a fiscal year shall hold an educational program on the United States Constitution on September 17 of such year for the students served by the educational institution.

This mandate provides an excellent opportunity for concerned citizens to assist their local schools provide meaningful educational programs for our students during Constitution Week. There are many ways to assist. Keep in mind that Constitution Week falls at a very beginning of the school year, and generally, study of the U.S. Constitution does not come until much later in the semester, so it will be necessarily be “out of context.” September is sometimes a hectic time in the school year, so keep instructions simple and clear for both teachers and students. Below is one suggestion.

Plan a Constitution Week Essay Contest (Grades 7-12)

Project Summary:

This is a **win-win for everyone**: Cash prizes for best **student** essays; an award to the resident **school** of the grand prize essay winner, and an award to the **teachers** of the first prize essay winners in each division (middle school and high school). **We all win**



when students are challenged to think critically about our U.S. Constitution and our founding principles, and when schools proudly display our founding documents publicly.

Define Who is Eligible: Grade level, those attending specific schools or living in a certain area. You can start with a single school, school district, county, or more.

Cash Prizes for Students: Grand Prize for best overall essay; First, Second, and Third Prize for each grade level Middle School grades 7-8 and High School grades 9-12. The cash prize amounts will be determined by your group and supporters. You may want to encourage more participation by issuing a challenge that the cash prizes will be doubled if x number of essays are submitted from participating schools. Encourage competition between schools.

Award for Winning School Office: **The resident school of the student who wins the Grand Prize will receive a framed copy** of Constitution, Declaration of Independence, or Bill of Rights. They are approximately 18” x 27” with a small additional plaque commemorating the 226th Anniversary of Constitution, and Grand Prize winner’s name and name of school. **These are to be displayed in the school’s main office.**

Footnote: The school that won it last year already has their sights on a copy of the “Bill of Rights” for this year.



This is the on-line store where you can purchase the above framed prints “Make your Best Offer” [Graphix Integrated](#)

Awards for Teachers of First Place Entries: We gave a copy of Heritage Guide to the U.S. Constitution. There are many other options. That’s just an example.



How Essays will be Submitted: Essays will be submitted via email and establish a reasonable deadline. Set up a dedicated email address (gmail or yahoo) to handle the contest. Use this for all correspondence, entries, etc.

Judging Entries: Judges, retired teachers and other volunteers, will evaluate either High School or Middle School essays. As essays are received via email, they will be forward to an appropriate grade level judge (3-5 essays at a time). We'll try to keep it as even as possible and not overwhelm anyone.

Judges will have a copy of the student handout for their particular level. It includes the topic and a rubric on the back. This will serve as a guide for you. Beyond that, **You are the JUDGE.**

My suggestion is that as you receive the essays, **print them out, start one pile and keep the best one on top.** That way, you are comparing each essay to the best one received so far.

If by chance you personally know the person whose essay you receive, please let me know, and I will reassign that essay to another judge.

If things move along as planned, we can meet for lunch, compare the best of the best, and make the final selections. This will give us time to notify students, schools, the newspaper, etc. prior to the Awards Presentation.

Plan an Awards Reception at the end of Constitution Week (Sept 17-23) We held a "Celebrate Our Constitution" Tri-tip dinner with a Constitution Speaker. We issued complimentary tickets to student winners and their families. Funds raised will go toward our Constitution Week Contest for 2013.

Essay Topics should be appropriate to grade level. Try to create a topic that will challenge their thinking about the U.S. Constitution, not just something they can look up on the internet and copy and paste. The attached entry forms have the topics we used in 2012. Use or replace them as you choose.

Start Early (February–March: (April and May schools are STAR Testing and then school is OUT)

With tentative plans in hand, **enlist support of community** organizations, local businesses, etc. Support can come in the form of pledged funds for cash awards, publicity, moral support, etc.



Present Proposal to School Board or Boards for their input and support, and ask for a contact person at the district level, most likely an Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. Meet with that person as soon as possible to review plans, establish best ways to make it a success. Get the names and contact information for school principals, social studies department chairs.

Meet with School Principals to set up a meeting with Social Studies Department Chair or entire department. A brief person to person presentation will go a long way to gain teacher support. **Without teacher support---nothing happens.**

All Materials should be in the teachers' hands at the beginning of the new school year. The sooner the better! Last year we printed enough entry forms for every student. That is very expensive, and we found that it was unnecessary if the principal and a few teachers in the school were supportive of the project. Plan to deliver enough hard copies of student handouts, posters, and teacher instructions for the social studies/English staff and administration. These will serve as visual reminders. Make sure that the Principal and department heads receive a .pdf file of all necessary forms so they can print out additional copies or get them to students via computer. Save the trees.

Feel Free to use “live files” below that you can customize with your own information, dates, etc. Highlighted areas need to be replaced with your information.

- Constitution Week Essay Contest Poster
- Teacher Instructions Constitution Week Essay Contest
- High School Constitution Week Essay Contest Handouts (legal size paper)
- Jr. High Constitution Week Essay Contest Handouts (legal size paper)
- Constitution Awards Dinner Program Sample