

FREEDOM
FORUM



The Five Freedom in Action

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof

LESSON PLAN: THE FIVE FREEDOMS IN ACTION

Lesson question:

What do the five freedoms of the First Amendment look like in action?

Lesson summary

In this lesson, students will explore the five freedoms of the First Amendment by first reading a brief introduction. Students will then explore images, definitions, cases and scenarios to gain a fuller understanding of the basic ideas behind the First Amendment and the limits it places on government action. Students will wrap up by creating their own scenarios demonstrating the five freedoms in action and by reflecting on the importance of these freedoms in their own lives.

Lesson objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify and define the five First Amendment freedoms
- Explore and analyze a U.S. Supreme Court case associated with each of the five freedoms
- Apply their understanding of the principles of the five freedoms to specific scenarios by:
 - Identifying if the limits on the freedom are being applied by a public or private entity
 - Determining if the action is protected by the First Amendment
 - If applicable, identifying the connected freedom
- Create their own scenarios demonstrating each of the five freedoms being exercised lawfully
- Reflect on the importance of the five freedoms in their own lives

Lesson materials

- Student handouts for introduction, activities 1-3 and wrap-up

Lesson sequence

1. Introduce students to the lesson question: “What do the five freedoms of the First Amendment look like in action?”
2. Play the video: [“The freedom to be. Brought to you by the First Amendment.”](#) Ask students to turn and talk. What did you see people doing in the video? How do you think it relates to the lesson question?
3. Distribute the **introduction handout**. Have students identify the five freedoms in the text of the First Amendment and then read the introduction.
4. Distribute the **handouts for Activity 1**. Have students examine the five photographs and connect them to the five freedoms. Have students read the freedom summaries and label them with the correct freedom. Students should revisit the photographs and find evidence within the image to support the connection. Students should write their ideas below the image. Images may

demonstrate more than one freedom, so encourage students to identify a piece of evidence to support their match.

5. Distribute the **handout for Activity 2**. Have students read the Supreme Court case summaries. Using the freedom summaries, identify the connected freedom. Then, identify one key idea from the case. Review the cases for key understanding.
6. Distribute the **Let's learn more! handout**. Review the reading with students to review some guidelines for First Amendment limits and prepare them for Activity 3.
7. Distribute the **handout for Activity 3**. Have students apply their learning, using the freedom summaries and Supreme Court cases to analyze the provided scenarios.
8. Distribute the **wrap-up activity**. Have students create their own scenarios. Then, have students reflect on the importance of the five freedoms.

Introduction: The Five Freedoms in Action

Lesson question:

What do the five freedoms of the First Amendment look like in action?

CAN YOU FIND THE FIVE FREEDOMS?

Circle the five freedoms in the text of the First Amendment and then list them here!



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

“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.”

Introduction to the five freedoms

The First Amendment defines five fundamental freedoms that are protected from government interference: religion, speech, press, assembly and petition. The First Amendment is part of the U.S. Constitution, the country’s highest law. It was added to the Constitution in 1791, along with nine additional amendments that make up the Bill of Rights. Everyone in the United States gets First Amendment protection. The First Amendment restricts the government's ability to limit the exercise of the five freedoms by people and by companies, nonprofits, businesses, associations and other organizations.



(Photo by Ted Soqui/SIPA USA)
(Sipa via AP Images)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

No government – federal, state or local – or governmental body – elected officials, public schools and services, etc. – can prevent people from or punish people for using their rights.

The First Amendment does not prevent private organizations and individuals (like businesses or parents) from making stricter rules about, for example, speech.

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms

DIRECTIONS:

1. Lay out the five freedoms images and preliminarily match the images to the freedoms.
2. Read the freedom summaries and label them with the correct freedom.
3. Using the freedom summaries, explore each image more closely to find evidence of the freedom.
4. In the box provided on the image, write down which freedom you connect to the image and circle, highlight or identify a piece of evidence in the image to support your answer. Explain your evidence.

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

“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.”

Five freedoms

Freedom of religion

Freedom of speech

Freedom of press

Freedom of assembly

Freedom of petition

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms



(AP Photo/Dima Gavrysh)

Summary: Boys line up as they leave a synagogue in New York, 2006.

Freedom:

Describe evidence:

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms



(AP Photo/Douglas Healey)

Summary: Students gather and talk in a high school classroom in Stratford, Connecticut, 2002.

Freedom:

Describe evidence:

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms



(AP Photo/ Ethan Swope)

Summary: A journalist reports near a crime scene in Stockton, California, 2025.

Freedom:

Describe evidence:

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms



(Photo by Matthew Rodier/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images)

Summary: A protester carrying a megaphone marches with a group through Manhattan, New York, 2025.

Freedom:

Describe evidence:

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms



(Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call via AP Images)

Summary: Demonstrators gather outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., 2025.

Freedom:

Describe evidence:

Activity 1: Defining and visualizing the five freedoms

DIRECTIONS:

1. Determine which freedom matches with the summary and then label it.
2. Use the summaries to find evidence of a freedom in each image. Explain below the image.

_____ People have the right to express their opinions without government censorship or punishment. This includes spoken words, written communication, symbolic gestures, art and more. This enables us to share ideas, challenge authority and advocate for change. But some forms of speech, like true threats or defamation, are not protected.

_____ People have the right to practice any religion or no religion at all. The government cannot establish a national religion (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”) or interfere with people’s religious practices (“or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”). Together, the establishment clause and free exercise clause protect personal beliefs from government interference.

_____ People can gather peacefully to protest, rally, march or organize. This includes both public demonstrations and private meetings. This ensures that we can unite for a common cause, advocate for change and express shared beliefs.

_____ The press has the right to gather and publish information and opinions without government control. This includes both traditional media (newspapers, TV) and people using modern platforms (blogs, social media). All people, not just professional journalists, have press freedom. This ensures that we have an informed public able to hold its government accountable.

_____ People can request changes or express grievances to the government without fear of punishment. This can be done through petitions, letters, lobbying or public comment. This freedom enables us to participate in government by holding those in power accountable and alerting them to the needs and concerns of the people. But petitioning the government is no guarantee it will respond or enact your suggestions.

Activity 2: Using Supreme Court cases to understand the five freedoms

DIRECTIONS: Read each of the case summaries. Determine which freedom is associated with each case. Write down one key idea from the case summary.

Freedom of

Engel v. Vitale (1962): The Supreme Court ruled that state-sponsored prayers in public schools violate the establishment clause. This case underscored the need for schools to remain neutral regarding religion. They can provide space for voluntary student prayer but cannot promote or require participation in religious activities.

Write down a key idea:

Freedom of

Brandenburg v. Ohio (1969): In this case, the court raised the bar for when the government can limit inflammatory speech, setting the current, very high standard. It said the speech must be “directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.” In other words, inflammatory speech loses First Amendment protection if the speaker intended to provoke or directly cause crime or violence, right here and now, and the speech is likely to produce such action. Under this standard, courts have held that vaguely threatening or hateful statements are protected when they don’t meet the Brandenburg test’s requirements.

Write down a key idea:

Freedom of

Edwards v. South Carolina (1963): In the early 1960s, young citizens exercised their free assembly rights to focus public attention on segregation. In Columbia, South Carolina, 187 African American students marched to the South Carolina Statehouse grounds, carrying signs with messages such as “Down with Segregation.” Although the demonstrators were peaceful, and no violence erupted from onlookers, the marchers were all convicted of breaching the peace. However, the Supreme Court reversed the convictions, finding that the “circumstances in this case reflect an exercise of these basic constitutional rights in their most pristine and classic form.” The court said that the government could not criminalize “the peaceful expression of unpopular views.”

Write down a key idea:

Freedom of

Near v. Minnesota (1931): A Minnesota law barred the publication of “malicious, scandalous, or defamatory” materials. Two journalists from a paper called *The Saturday Press* wrote several articles accusing a county prosecutor and other politicians of working with gangsters. The prosecutor sued. A judge issued an order preventing the paper from publishing future editions. The Supreme Court ruled for the paper and overturned the order, calling the full prohibition on publishing before it happens, known as a “prior restraint,” “the essence of censorship.” The court left the door open to prior restraint in “exceptional cases,” citing wartime and incitement to immediate violence as potential examples. The court has found in later cases that editing or censoring school-sponsored publications, like an official school newspaper, in public K-12 schools is an additional exception, when it is based on a legitimate educational concern.

Write down a key idea:

Freedom of

McDonald v. Smith (1985): In July 1981, Robert McDonald wrote two letters to President Ronald Reagan opposing the nomination of David Smith to be a U.S. attorney. Smith, the nominee, sued McDonald for libel, arguing McDonald's statements were false and defamatory — and that McDonald knew they were false. McDonald argued that because he was exercising his right to petition, he was immune from being sued for libel. The Supreme Court disagreed, ruling that while the right to petition is important, like all rights, it is not without limits. In short, statements made while petitioning the government do not get more protection than other forms of expression. Accordingly, a person can be sued for making libelous statements while exercising their right to petition.

Write down a key idea:

Let's learn more!

Lesson question:

What do the five freedoms of the First Amendment look like in action?

Can the five freedoms be limited by the government?

The five First Amendment freedoms are broadly protected by the Constitution, but government officials can limit people's religion, speech, press, assembly and petition rights in certain circumstances. Here are some basic ideas to guide your understanding of when government officials can limit the five freedoms. (Note: This list is not exhaustive.)

Basic guidelines for permissible limits on the five freedoms

- Some types of speech and press are not protected by the First Amendment, including defamation, true threats, intentionally inciting immediate violence and child pornography.
- Government officials have more power to limit speech, assembly and press when the law or regulation is content-neutral than when the law or regulation is content-based — and virtually no power to limit speech in a way that discriminates based on viewpoint.
- The government can set time, place and manner restrictions on peaceful assemblies to protect public safety and keep the peace.
- Government officials have some power to limit religious liberty when a law is neutral to religion and of general applicability.
- The government cannot engage in prior restraint on the press, meaning it can't censor the press or demand a right to review content before publication.
- Everyone has the right to petition government officials to advocate for their views, but government officials don't have to act on those requests.
- Students in K-12 public schools have the right to exercise the five freedoms, but they can have these rights limited more than many other groups. Schools can make rules to ensure student safety, avoid disruptions and make sure everyone can learn.

Activity 3: Do they have a First Amendment right?

DIRECTIONS: Use the First Amendment summaries and introduction reading to complete the following tasks:

1. In order to trigger a First Amendment violation, a government (or public) official must limit or restrict a person’s freedom. In the following scenarios, determine if a public official or a private actor is imposing the limits or restrictions on people’s actions. Circle the correct answer.
2. Then, if the action is protected by the First Amendment, circle “protected.” If the action is not protected – either because the limit is imposed by a private actor or it is a permissible limit imposed by a public official – circle “unprotected.”
3. If the action is protected, write down the associated freedom. If the action is unprotected, write “n/a.”

First Amendment scenario	Circle ONE	Circle ONE	Associated freedom
<p>Action: A peaceful protest is organized at a local park.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The police disagree with the protesters’ message and shut it down.</p>	<p>public</p> <p>or</p> <p>private</p>	<p>protected</p> <p>or</p> <p>unprotected</p>	assembly
<p>Action: An employee petitions his company to raise wages.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The boss ignores him.</p>	<p>public</p> <p>or</p> <p>private</p>	<p>protected</p> <p>or</p> <p>unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A reader writes a letter to the editor.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The newspaper does not print it.</p>	<p>public</p> <p>or</p> <p>private</p>	<p>protected</p> <p>or</p> <p>unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A local newspaper is planning a story that makes the mayor look immoral.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The mayor forbids the newspaper from publishing it.</p>	<p>public</p> <p>or</p> <p>private</p>	<p>protected</p> <p>or</p> <p>unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A person starts to share a controversial opinion at a city council meeting.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: A city councilor shuts off the person’s microphone and stops her from speaking.</p>	<p>public</p> <p>or</p> <p>private</p>	<p>protected</p> <p>or</p> <p>unprotected</p>	

<p>Action: A child uses foul language at home.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: Her mother punishes her by taking away her phone for a week.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A group of protesters block an interstate highway during rush hour.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: Police break up the protest and send protesters home.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A public school student prays alone during lunchtime.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The school principal punishes the student.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A student organization invites a speaker to campus.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The public university president doesn't agree with the speaker's ideas and cancels the event.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A woman writes "This town sucks! Do better!" on her speeding ticket invoice and sends it to the town with her payment.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: Police arrest the woman.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: A person on social media makes several angry and aggressive posts about someone and violates the community rules.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The social media platform suspends that person's account.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	
<p>Action: Public school students write an article about teen pregnancy for their school newspaper.</p> <p>Limit/restriction: The principal stops the publication of the article.</p>	<p>public or private</p>	<p>protected or unprotected</p>	

Wrap-up

Lesson question:

What do the five freedoms of the First Amendment look like in action?

DIRECTIONS: With the knowledge you've gained and the resources you have, create a scenario that demonstrates young people exercising each freedom. Then reflect on the five freedoms.

Freedom	Scenario
Freedom of religion	
Freedom of speech	
Freedom of press	
Freedom of assembly	
Freedom of petition	

Pick one of the five freedoms **you** value. _____

Why does it matter to you?

How would your life change if you didn't have this freedom?