

Substitute Guide: Principles of the U.S. Constitution

Grade: 8 **Subject:** Social Studies (U.S. History to Reconstruction) **Time:** ~45 min core + ~15 min extension
Social Studies

Learning goal (plain language)

Students learn the **five core principles of the U.S. Constitution** — popular sovereignty, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism — and practice recognizing each one in an example. They read two short summaries, study a diagram of the three branches, do **source analysis** (creator, date, type) on a short public-domain line from the Preamble, and finish by writing a short evidence-based explanation of which principle a scenario best shows. **You do not need a civics or history background to run this.** Everything students need is printed in their packet, and the separate answer key gives you every answer.

Standards alignment

Framework: 19 TAC §113.20 (Grade 8 Social Studies, U.S. History to 1877).

- **Primary — 8.15 (government/principles):** identifying the principles of the U.S. Constitution, including popular sovereignty, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism.
- **Skills — 8.29 (social studies skills):** analyzing a primary/secondary source by identifying its creator, date, and type, and using evidence to support a claim.

Provisional — pending educator verification against the current official TAC source.

(Standards are paraphrased here, not quoted, and this is **not** a claim of TEKS alignment. Please confirm the codes and wording against your official source. Prompts are kept non-partisan and in historical context.)

Setup Before class (5 min)

- Count and hand out one **student packet** per student.
- Confirm each student has a **pencil**. No calculators, computers, or textbooks are needed.
- Write the date on the board and remind students to fill in the name line.
- Keep the **answer key** with you — it is a separate file and is **not** in the student packet.

Materials What's needed

- Printed student packet (4–6 pages) per student.
- Pencil per student.
- This guide and the separate answer key (teacher only).
- No technology, no calculator, no textbooks, no safety hazards.

Timing Suggested pacing (~45–60 min)

Segment	Time	What students do
Start — Observe a source	5 min	Q1–Q2 warm-up on the Preamble excerpt
Build — Read the sources	5–10 min	Read Source A, Source B, word bank, branches diagram; Q3
Apply — Analyze the sources	20–25 min	Q4–Q8 (principle match, source analysis, why-the-framers, fact/interpretation/opinion, evaluate a claim)
Explain — CER	5–10 min	Q9 claim/evidence/reasoning on a scenario
Close — ACE	5 min	Articulate / Connect / Extend
Continue — early finishers	optional ~15 min	"Remove a check and predict"

Script Read aloud to start

"Today's assignment is a paper civics investigation called *Principles of the U.S. Constitution*. You will work by yourself with just a pencil — no computers or textbooks. First read the two short summaries and study the diagram of the three branches of government. Then answer the questions in order; if one is tricky, skip it and come back. Write in complete sentences where it asks you to explain. Everything you need is printed in the packet — you do not need to know any outside facts. Keep your answers non-partisan: describe how the system is designed to work, not which side you favor. You may quietly read the passages aloud to yourself. Put your name, class period, and date at the top now. You have about 45 minutes; raise your hand if you need help understanding a word."

Support When students ask for help

- **You may read any part aloud** to a student or the class.
- If they are stuck matching a principle to an example (Q4), point them to **Source A** and the **diagram** — each principle is described there.
- For "fact / interpretation / opinion" (Q7), point to the **Word Bank** definitions; an "opinion" usually ranks or prefers, an "interpretation" says "probably" or "because."
- Encourage the printed **sentence stems** for the CER (Q9) and ACE sections.
- Do **not** give answers; prompt with "What does Source A say that principle means?" or "Is that about the three *branches* or about the *nation and the states*?"
- It is fine if a student cannot finish the optional early-finisher task.

Access Accommodations & language support

- **Read-aloud** of any passage or question is allowed for all students.
- Point students to the **sentence stems** and the **Word Bank**. A quick glossary for reference: **principle** = a basic guiding rule; **branch** = one of the three parts of government; **popular sovereignty** = power comes from the people; **federalism** = power shared between nation and states; **veto** = the President rejecting a bill; **override** = Congress passing it anyway with a large vote.
- Extended time is fine; the core can stop after Q9 if time runs short.
- Students may answer in phrases if writing full sentences is a barrier, as long as the idea is clear.
- The packet is grayscale-safe — it prints and reads clearly in black and white.

Tools Allowed & not allowed

Allowed: pencil, the printed packet, quiet self-read-aloud. **Not needed / not allowed:** calculator (no math required), phones, computers, textbooks or outside sources (everything needed is in the packet).

Collect at the end: Collect every packet, whether finished or not, with names on them. Stack them for the teacher. Note on a sticky how far most students got and any questions that caused confusion. Answer key: The **answer key is a separate file** (answerkey.html) and is for the teacher only. Please do not hand it to students.

Teacher follow-up (for the returning teacher)

Watch for the common mix-up between **separation of powers** (three branches) and **federalism** (nation vs. states), and between **separation of powers** and **checks and balances** (a separate job vs. the power to limit another branch) — Q4 and Q8 target both. Also watch for students marking a reasoned "probably...because" statement about the framers' motives as a plain fact in Q7. A quick next-day sort of a few statements into fact / interpretation / opinion, plus a review of the veto/override example, would reinforce this well. The CER (Q9) responses show who can name a specific check and tie it to "one branch limiting another."

G08_SOC_Constitution_01 — Principles of the U.S. Constitution Substitute Guide

Principles of the U.S. Constitution

Grade: 8 **Subject:** Social Studies (U.S. History to Reconstruction) **Time:** ~45 min core + ~15 min extension
Work mode: Independent · pencil only Social Studies

Start Here

This is a **paper civics investigation**. You will read short summaries written for this packet, study a diagram of how the U.S. government is organized, and answer questions using a pencil. You do **not** need a computer, a textbook, or the internet — **everything you need is printed in this packet**. Work by yourself and do your best thinking. Write in complete sentences where you are asked to explain. If a question is hard, skip it, keep going, and come back. Reading the passages aloud quietly to yourself is allowed and encouraged. Keep your answers non-partisan — describe how the system is *designed to work*, not which side you favor.

Start Observe a Source 5 min

A **principle** is a basic rule or idea that guides how something is built. Warm up before you read.

1 Read this short public-domain excerpt, then answer below.

Public-domain excerpt — the opening of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (1787): "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union ... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Type: primary source, public domain · Creator: the framers at the Constitutional Convention · Date: 1787 · Only the first and last phrases are shown; the middle is left out (...).

Notice: Write **one thing you notice** about who the excerpt says the government comes from.

Predict: Based only on the words "We the People," **predict one idea** the framers thought was important.

2 Why do you think the framers might have wanted to divide the government's power among different groups instead of giving it all to one person? Give **one reason** in your own words.

Build Read the Sources 5–10 min

Source A — The five core principles (written for this packet)

When the framers wrote the U.S. Constitution in 1787, they built it on a small set of guiding ideas. Five of these principles appear again and again:

Popular sovereignty means the government's power comes from the people. Voters choose the leaders, and leaders are supposed to answer to the public. The Preamble begins "We the People" to signal this idea.

Limited government means the government may only do what the Constitution allows. Rulers are not above the law; the written rules apply to officials too.

Separation of powers means the work of government is split among three branches: the **legislative** branch (Congress) makes laws, the **executive** branch (the President) carries out laws, and the **judicial** branch (the

courts) interprets laws and settles disputes.

Checks and balances means each branch can limit the other two, so no single branch grows too strong. For example, Congress can pass a bill, the President can veto it, and Congress can override that veto with a large enough vote.

Federalism means power is shared between the **national** (federal) government and the **state** governments. Some powers belong to the nation, some belong to the states, and some are shared.

Type: original explanatory summary · Focus: U.S. constitutional principles, 1787

Source B — A design note (written for this packet)

This is an **original summary**, not a real quotation. It restates a common idea historians use to describe the framers' goal:

"The framers had lived under a distant king and had also seen a national government too weak to work. They wanted a middle path: a government strong enough to act, but tied down by written rules so that no one person or single branch could seize control."

Type: original summary of a historical viewpoint · Creator: not a real person · Focus: the framers' intent, about 1787 · Not a genuine primary quotation.

Word Bank

principle

a basic rule or idea that guides how something is built or run.

popular sovereignty

the idea that the government's power comes from the people.

limited government

the idea that government may only do what the law allows.

separation of powers

splitting government work among three branches.

checks and balances

each branch can limit the others so none grows too strong.

federalism

power shared between the national government and the states.

branch

one of the three parts of government: legislative, executive, judicial.

fact

a statement that can be checked and shown true or false.

interpretation

an explanation of what evidence means; reasoned from facts.

opinion

a personal belief or preference; not proven by evidence.

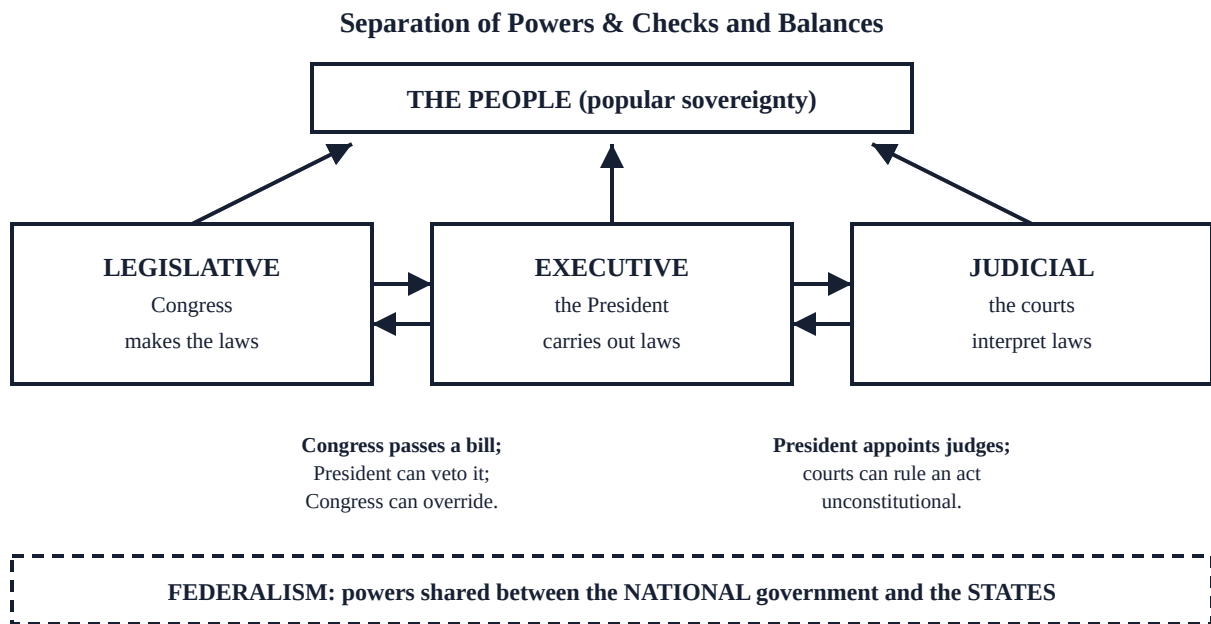


Figure 1. The three branches of the U.S. government and how they check one another, with the people above (popular sovereignty) and a federalism band below. The boxes, arrows, and labels are black on white so the diagram reads clearly in grayscale.

3Using the diagram, write the job of each branch in a few words. Legislative: _____ .
Executive: _____ . Judicial: _____ .

Apply Analyze the Sources 20–25 min

4**Match the principle to the example.** Write the letter of the best example next to each principle. Use Source A and the diagram. Each is used once.

Principle	Letter	Example
Popular sovereignty	_____	A) The President can veto a bill, and Congress can override the veto.
Limited government	_____	B) Voters elect the members of Congress.
Separation of powers	_____	C) Some powers belong to the nation and some to the states.
Checks and balances	_____	D) Officials must follow the written rules of the Constitution.
Federalism	_____	E) Congress makes laws, the President carries them out, the courts interpret them.

5**Source analysis.** Look back at the **Preamble excerpt** in Question 1 and fill in what you can tell about it.

Creator: _____

Date: _____

Type of source (primary or secondary? public domain?): _____

What it shows: Name one principle from Source A that the words "We the People" help show, and explain in one sentence.

6**Why did the framers include this?** Use Source B and the diagram. In 2–3 sentences, explain **why the framers built in checks and balances** — what problem were they trying to prevent, and how does one branch

checking another help?

7Fact, interpretation, or opinion? Write **F** (fact you can check in the sources), **I** (interpretation reasoned from facts), or **O** (opinion / personal belief).

____ a) The Constitution divides the national government into three branches.

____ b) The framers probably included checks and balances because they feared one branch gaining too much power.

____ c) The judicial branch is the most important branch of all.

____ d) Under federalism, power is shared between the national government and the states.

8Evaluate a claim using the sources. A student claims: "*Separation of powers and federalism are just two names for the same thing.*" Do the sources support this claim?

- Yes — both mean splitting power among the three branches.
- No — **separation of powers** divides power among three **branches**, while **federalism** divides power between the **nation and the states**.
- The sources never mention federalism.

Explain your choice using one detail from Source A or the diagram:

Explain Claim–Evidence–Reasoning 5–10 min

Question 9. Read this scenario, then answer.

Scenario (written for this packet): "Congress passes a new law. The President disagrees and refuses to sign it, sending it back. Congress then votes again, and this time enough members vote for it that it becomes law anyway."

Which single principle does this scenario best illustrate, and how does the evidence support that? Write a **claim** that names one principle, give **two pieces of evidence** from the scenario, Source A, or the diagram, then explain your reasoning.

Sentence stems you may use: "This scenario best illustrates _____ because..." · "One piece of evidence is... (from the scenario / Source A / the diagram)." · "A second piece of evidence is..." · "This shows the principle because..."

Claim

Evidence (two pieces)

Reasoning

Close ACE Wrap-Up 5 min

Articulate

In your own words, explain what **checks and balances** means, as if teaching a friend.

Connect

Point to one arrow or box in the diagram, or one line in a source, that shows one branch limiting another. Name it.

Extend

Name one everyday group (a team, club, or family) where power is divided so no one person decides everything, and give one reason that helps.

Continue Early Finisher optional • ~15 min

If you finish early (no new materials needed):

Remove a check and predict. On the back of this page, imagine the Constitution had **no** way for Congress to override a presidential veto. Using only the sources and the diagram, **predict two ways** the balance of power might change. For each prediction, name the **check you removed** and the **effect you expect** on how the branches work together.

Turn in: Hand in this whole packet with your name, class period, and date filled in. Make sure questions 1–9 and the ACE box are answered. The early-finisher prediction is optional but turn it in too if you did it.

G08_SOC_Constitution_01 — Principles of the U.S. Constitution Student Packet



TEACHER ANSWER KEY FOLLOWS

Do not copy the pages after this divider for students.

Answer Key: Principles of the U.S. Constitution

Grade: 8 **Subject:** Social Studies (U.S. History to Reconstruction) **For teacher use only** Social Studies

How to use this key

Answers are grouped by section and question number. Many items are open-ended; accept any response that shows correct reasoning even if the wording differs. Notes flag where more than one answer is defensible and list common misconceptions to watch for. Everything students need is in the packet, so answers should draw on the sources and diagram only. Estimated grading time: ~5–7 min per packet.

Start Observe a Source grade for effort · ~2 min

1 Notice + predict from the Preamble excerpt.

Full credit for any reasonable notice + prediction. **Notice** examples: "It says the government comes from 'the People,'" "the people set up the Constitution." **Predict** examples: "the framers valued the people's power / self-government," "they wanted a government based on the people, not a king." Accept any on-topic prediction — this is a warm-up graded for effort.

2 Why divide power among groups instead of one person.

Accept any reasonable idea in the student's own words: to stop one person from having too much power, to prevent a king/tyrant, to make sure decisions are checked, to protect the people's rights. More than one answer is defensible.

Build Read the Sources ~1 min

3 Job of each branch (from the diagram).

Legislative = Congress, **makes the laws**.

Executive = the President, **carries out / enforces the laws**.

Judicial = the courts, **interpret the laws / settle disputes**. Accept close paraphrases (e.g., "writes laws," "runs the laws," "decides what laws mean").

Apply Analyze the Sources ~2–3 min

4 Match principle to example.

Popular sovereignty = **B** (voters elect members of Congress).

Limited government = **D** (officials must follow the written rules).

Separation of powers = **E** (Congress makes, President carries out, courts interpret).

Checks and balances = **A** (veto and override).

Federalism = **C** (powers split between nation and states).

Note: A (veto/override) and E (three separate jobs) are the pair most often swapped — see misconceptions. E describes the *separate* jobs; A describes one branch *limiting* another.

5 Source analysis of the Preamble excerpt.

Creator: the framers / delegates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention (accept "the writers of the Constitution").

Date: 1787.

Type of source: a **primary source** that is **public domain** (the actual text of the Constitution). Full credit if the student identifies it as primary.

What it shows: popular sovereignty — "We the People" signals that the government's power comes from the people. Accept a clear one-sentence explanation to that effect.

6 Why the framers included checks and balances (short written).

Model: "The framers had lived under a distant king and had seen a national government too weak to work, so they feared power concentrating in one place (Source B). Checks and balances let each branch limit the others — for example, the President can veto a bill but Congress can override it — so no single branch can seize control." Award credit for naming the **problem** (fear of one branch/person gaining too much power) **and** how a check helps. See rubric below.

7 Fact (F) / Interpretation (I) / Opinion (O).

a) **F** — checkable in Source A / diagram (three branches).

b) **I** — reasoned conclusion using "probably ... because" about the framers' motive.

c) **O** — a personal belief ("most important branch"); cannot be proven.

d) **F** — checkable in Source A (federalism = shared national/state power).

Fact = checkable; interpretation = reasoned from facts (often "because/probably"); opinion = personal belief/ranking.

8 Evaluate the claim "separation of powers and federalism are the same thing."

Correct: B (No). Separation of powers divides power among the three *branches* (legislative, executive, judicial); federalism divides power between the *national government and the states* (Source A; diagram's dashed federalism band). Reject A (they are not the same) and C (the sources do mention federalism). Explanation must cite one such detail.

Explain CER (Q9) ~1–2 min

9 Which principle does the veto/override scenario best illustrate?

Model answer. Claim: The scenario best illustrates **checks and balances**. Evidence: (1) From the scenario: the President refuses to sign the bill (a veto), which is one branch limiting another. (2) From Source A / the diagram: "Congress can override that veto with a large enough vote," so the legislative branch checks the executive right back. Reasoning: Because each branch can limit the other, no single branch controls the outcome alone — that mutual limiting is exactly what checks and balances means.

Defensible alternates: a student who names **separation of powers** as the principle can earn partial-to-full credit *only if* they clearly explain that the branches are limiting each other (not merely doing separate jobs); the veto-and-override interaction is the strongest fit for checks and balances. Reject "popular sovereignty," "limited government," or "federalism" as the best fit here.

CER scoring rubric (3 points)

Score	Claim	Evidence	Reasoning
3	Names checks and balances (or separation of powers with a limiting explanation) as the principle.	Two accurate, relevant pieces from the scenario, Source A, and/or the diagram.	Correctly links the veto + override to one branch limiting another and explains why that fits the principle.

Score	Claim	Evidence	Reasoning
2	Principle named, mostly clear.	One solid piece, or two with a minor error.	Some correct linkage but incomplete or a small misconception.
1	Vague or partly correct principle.	Evidence weak, off-topic, or not from the packet.	Little or flawed reasoning; no clear "branch limits branch" link.
0	No/incorrect principle.	No evidence.	No reasoning.

Close ACE ~1 min

ACE Articulate / Connect / Extend.

Articulate: accept any accurate plain-language definition (e.g., "checks and balances means each branch can limit the other two so none gets too powerful").

Connect: the cited arrow/box/line must actually show one branch limiting another — e.g., the veto/override arrows between Legislative and Executive, or "courts can rule an act unconstitutional."

Extend: any reasonable everyday example where power is divided (a team with a captain and coach, a club with officers, a family sharing decisions) with a sensible reason. More than one answer is defensible; grade the reason, not the choice.

Watch Common misconceptions

- **Branches vs. levels of government.** The three *branches* (legislative, executive, judicial) are part of **separation of powers**. The split between the *national government and the states* is **federalism** — a different idea. Do not confuse "branches" (horizontal) with "levels" (vertical).
- **"Checks and balances" = "separation of powers."** They are related but not identical. **Separation of powers** = giving each branch a *different job*. **Checks and balances** = each branch being able to *limit* the others. Q4 (A vs. E) and Q8 target this.
- **Treating Source B as a real quote.** Source B is an **original summary** of a historical viewpoint, not a genuine primary quotation — the packet says so directly. The Preamble excerpt in Q1 is a genuine public-domain primary source.
- **Fact vs. interpretation (Q7).** A "probably ... because" statement about motive is usually an interpretation, not a plain fact. A ranking ("most important branch") is an opinion.
- **Popular sovereignty.** Some students read "We the People" as just a greeting; it signals that authority comes *from* the people (Q5).

Teacher follow-up based on likely errors

If many students confuse separation of powers with federalism (Q4, Q8), do a 5-minute "branches or levels?" sort using a few statements. If Q7 reveals fact/interpretation/opinion confusion, re-anchor with the Word Bank definitions and a few quick examples. If CER (Q9) evidence is thin, model naming a specific check (veto, override, judicial review) aloud and tying it to "one branch limiting another." Reinforcing the difference between having a *separate job* and being able to *limit* another branch is the highest-value idea to revisit.