

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.