

*Citizenship in American
History and Government*

Unit 6

Chapter 1

You the People– Citizenship Skills

Lesson 1

The Preamble



Key Terms

beneficiaries
goals
Preamble
responsible parties

What You Will Learn to Do

- Examine the Preamble to the American Constitution

Linked Core Abilities

- Do your share as a good citizen in your school, community, country, and the world

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Classify the components of the Preamble to the United States Constitution
- Explain the goals of the Preamble
- Connect the principles of the Preamble to the United States Constitution to your personal values
- Define key words contained in this lesson

Introduction

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States establishes the purpose of the Constitution. It served as a “mission statement” for the framers of the Constitution. In this lesson, you analyze the Preamble to determine the **goals**, the **beneficiaries**, and the **responsible parties**.

Chapter 1

Key Note Term

goals—what one strives to achieve and attain

beneficiaries—those who benefit

responsible parties—those who take responsibility to ensure goals are met

Key Note Term

Preamble—the basic mission statement for the United States Constitution

The U.S. Constitution and the Preamble

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 produced the most enduring written Constitution ever created by human hands. Though the United States existed prior to the ratification of the Constitution, it was a nation held together by the threads of the Articles of Confederation, a sometimes contentious and often ineffectual national government. The men who attended the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, usually referred to as the Framers of the Constitution, created a document that was the result of dozens of compromises and shaped by the failures of the United States under the Articles as well as the failures of European governments of the time.

The entire Constitution was written by several committees, but the committee most responsible for the final form recognized today is the “Committee of Style and Arrangement.” This Committee was tasked with getting all of the articles and clauses into a logical order. On September 10, 1787, the Committee of Style set to work, and two days later, it presented its final draft. Heading the draft was the **Preamble**. Committee members included Alexander Hamilton, William Johnson, Rufus King, James Madison, and Gouverneur Morris. The actual text of the Preamble and of much of the rest of this final draft is usually attributed to Gouverneur Morris (see Figure 1.1.1).

The Preamble holds in its words the hopes and dreams of the delegates to the convention, a justification for what they had done. Its words are familiar to us today, but the words are not always easy to follow. The Preamble to the United States Constitution reads as follows:

Figure 1.1.1: Gouverneur Morris is credited with the final draft of the Preamble.

Courtesy of Hulton Archive/Getty Images.



We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States.

Taking a look at the different parts of the Preamble can help you understand this important start to our Constitution.

We the People of the United States

The Framers were an elite group, among the best and brightest America had to offer at the time. But they knew that they were trying to forge a nation composed not of elite, but of the common man. This first part of the Preamble speaks to the common man. It puts into writing the notion that the

people were creating this Constitution. It was not handed down by a god or by a king; it was created by the people.

In Order to Form a More Perfect Union

The Framers were dissatisfied with the United States under the Articles of Confederation, and were striving for something better. The Articles of Confederation had been a grand experiment that had worked well up to a point, but now, less than ten years into that experiment, cracks were showing. The new United States, under this new Constitution, would be more perfect. Not *perfect*, but more perfect.

Establish Justice

Injustice, unfairness of laws and in trade, was of great concern to the people of 1787. People looked forward to a nation with a level playing field, where courts were established with uniformity and where trade within and outside the borders of the country would be fair and unbiased.

Insure Domestic Tranquility

One of the events that caused the Convention to be held was the revolt of Massachusetts farmers known as Shays' Rebellion. The taking up of arms by war veterans revolting against the state government was a shock to the system. The keeping of the peace was on everyone's mind, and the maintenance of tranquility at home was a prime concern. The Framers hoped that the new powers given the federal government would prevent any such rebellions in the future.

Provide for the Common Defence

The new nation was fearful of attack from all sides, and no one state was really capable of fending off an attack from land or sea by itself. With a wary eye on Britain and Spain, and ever-watchful for Indian attack, no one could go it alone. They needed each other to survive in the harsh world of international politics of the 18th century.

Misspelled Words in the Constitution?

The Constitution was written in 1787 in the manner of the day—in other words, it was written by hand. According to the National Archives, the version we are most familiar with today was penned by Jacob Shallus, a clerk for the Pennsylvania State Assembly. In the document itself are several words which are misspelled. Far from the days of spell checkers and easy edits, these misspellings survive in the document today.

At that time, the American spelling of words was inconsistent at best, and several words are spelled in the British manner. These words are “defence,” “controul,” and “labour.” In America, we would today write these words as “defense,” “control,” and “labor.”

Most of the misspellings are in the original document, which was written hastily after the Convention concluded. Aside from one use of British spelling in the Bill of Rights, the amendments are all error-free. The authors of the latter amendments all had the benefit of a standardized American dictionary.

Promote the General Welfare

This, and the next part of the Preamble, is the culmination of everything that came before it—the whole point of having tranquility, justice, and defense was to promote the general welfare—to allow every state and every citizen of those states to benefit from what the government could provide. The framers looked forward to the expansion of land holdings, industry, and investment, and they knew that a strong national government would be the beginning of that.

NOTE

Welfare in today's context also means organized efforts on the part of public or private organizations to benefit the poor, or simply public assistance. This is not the meaning of the word as used in the Constitution.

And Secure the Blessings of Liberty to Ourselves and Our Posterity

Along with the general welfare, the Framers looked forward to the blessings of liberty—something for which they had all fought just a decade before. They wanted to create a nation that would resemble something of a paradise for liberty, as opposed to the tyranny of a monarchy, where citizens could look forward to being free rather than looking out for the interests of a king. And more than for themselves, they wanted to be sure that the future generations of Americans would enjoy the same.

Do Ordain and Establish this Constitution for the United States of America

The final clause of the Preamble is almost anti-climatic, but it is important for a few reasons—it finishes the “We, the people” thought, saying what we the people are actually doing; it gives a name for the document, and it restates the name of the nation adopting the Constitution. That the Constitution is “ordained” reminds us of the higher power involved here—not just of a single person or of a king, but of the people themselves. That it is “established” reminds us that it replaces that which came before—the United States under the Articles.

Components of the Preamble

Table 1.1.1 shows how the components of the Preamble can be broken down into three categories: the beneficiaries (those who benefit); the goals (what the Preamble sets out to do); and the responsible party (those who are responsible for attaining the goals).

Conclusion

The Preamble is the “mission statement” to the document known as the United States Constitution. It lays the framework for this ever-changing and growing

Table 1.1.1: Components of the Preamble

Beneficiary	Goals	Responsible Party
To ourselves and our posterity	promote the general welfare	We the people of the United States
	establish justice	
	provide for the common defense	
	in order to form a more perfect union	
	do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America	
	and secure the blessing of liberty	

roadmap for our democratic society. This lesson examined the various parts of the Preamble, and explained the beneficiaries of, the goals of, and the responsible parties for this document.

In the following lesson, you will learn about citizenship skills. You will learn the definition of the seven *You the People* citizenship skills, and will relate the seven *You the People* citizenship skills to the Preamble of the Constitution.

Lesson Review

1. Define what is meant by the beneficiaries, the goals, and the responsible parties regarding the Preamble.
2. Choose one component of the Preamble and discuss it.
3. Why was the Preamble written?
4. Who wrote the Preamble?