



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #4: The Articles of Confederation— A First Try at Governing America

Teacher Notes

This lesson mirrors Lessons 2 and 3 in structure, pacing, and rigor. Students analyze how the structure of the national government under the Articles of Confederation affected its ability to govern effectively. Through close reading, vocabulary, text coding, directed note-taking, discussion, and writing, students examine why weaknesses in the Articles led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution. The lesson emphasizes constitutional reasoning rather than memorization of historical facts.

Materials:

Highlighters or pencils for text coding

Text: Handout 1: The Articles of Confederation: A First Try at Governing America

Handouts:

- Handout 2: Shaping Your Written Response
- Handout 3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Preparation:

Number paragraphs in the Lesson 4 reading text.

Review the vocabulary and the sovereignty clarification.

Prepare terms for the Linear Array: Government Enforcement Power activity.

Review the debate question and synthesis prompts.

Key Conceptual Clarification for Teachers:

Under the Articles of Confederation, states did not view themselves as parts of a single nation in the modern sense. Each state believed it was fully sovereign—closer to an independent country than a subdivision of a nation. The Articles stated that each state retained its “sovereignty, freedom, and independence,” delegating only limited powers to Congress. This belief explains why the national government lacked the authority to tax, enforce laws, regulate trade, or amend the Articles easily. Students do not need to memorize this language, but they should understand that this belief about state independence shaped every weakness they examine in this lesson.

Standards Alignment:

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard—**SS.5.CG.1.2**: Explain how and why the U.S. government was created by the U.S. Constitution. *Clarification 1*: Students will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

Reading/Writing: Students will read an explanatory historical text about the Articles of Confederation and analyze how government structure affects the ability to govern effectively. Through reading, text coding, discussion, and writing, students will:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.
- Cite textual evidence using paragraph numbers.
- Explain how weak enforcement power created national problems.
- Describe how the Constitution addressed these weaknesses.
- Produce a written response connecting historical events to civic principles.

Essential Question

Why did the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the creation of the U.S. Constitution?

Opening (15 minutes, Handout #2)

Review and Hook (5 minutes)

- **Recall**: Review the essential question from Lesson 3: “*What happens when governments ignore unalienable rights?*” Briefly revisit how students examined the Sedition Act of 1798 and identified consequences when liberty and citizen voice were restricted.
- **Connect**: Ask “*What happens when someone makes a rule at school or at home, but there is no way to enforce it?*” Allow a few student responses (rules being ignored, arguments, unfairness). Explain: “*Just like at school or home, rules only work if there is a way to make sure people follow them.*” Explain that today’s lesson explores what happened when America’s first national government had rules—but **not enough power to enforce them**—and why leaders believed a stronger government was necessary. Review and complete the PREDICT section of Handout 2.

Vocabulary Instruction (10 minutes)

Direct Instruction: Introduce key terms using context and student-friendly definitions connected to the Lesson 4 text (*The Articles of Confederation: A First Try at Governing America.*)

Teacher Clarification (Suggested Language): “Today, we think of a state as part of a country. Under the Articles of Confederation, states were closer to separate countries that chose to work together. Each state believed it was fully independent and only shared power if it wanted to.”

- **Confederation**: A group of states that join together but keep most of their own power.
- **Sovereignty**: The power to govern oneself.

- **Regulate:** To control or manage something to keep it fair.
- **Amend:** To change a law or rule in order to improve it.

Paragraph	Word	How it Will be Taught	Student-Friendly Definition
2	Confederation	Context – the text directly provides the definition: <i>A confederation is a group of states that join together but keep most of their own power, like a team where everyone wants to be the boss.</i>	A group working together but mostly independent.
2	Sovereignty	Context: The text provides the definition by setting it apart with dashes: <i>They wanted sovereignty—the power to control themselves—for each state.</i>	The power to rule yourself.
5	Regulate	Context: The text provides the definition by setting it apart with dashes: <i>Second, the Articles gave Congress no power to regulate—control—trade or taxes.</i>	To control or manage something.
6	Amend	Context: The text provides the definition by setting it apart with dashes: <i>To amend—change—the rules, all 13 states had to agree</i>	To change a rule or law.

Linear Array Activity: Government Enforcement Power

Continuum: WEAK ENFORCEMENT → STRONG ENFORCEMENT

Terms:

- Warning
- Reprimand
- Fine
- Confiscate
- Detain
- Arrest
- Imprison

Students work in pairs to place terms on the continuum from weak enforcement to strong enforcement and justify their reasoning.

Teacher Guidance: Explain that these actions represent increasing levels of government power. Tell students to pay attention, as they read, to which enforcement powers the national government did and did not have under the Articles of Confederation.

Reading and Text Coding (30 minutes)

Reading #1: Categorizing and Connecting (15 minutes)

Text Coding: Students read the text “*The Articles of Confederation: A First Try at Governing America*” and use three codes to mark sections:

- **S:** Strength of the Articles of Confederation
- **W:** Weakness of the Articles of Confederation
- **C:** Change made by the U.S. Constitution

Teacher Modeling: Model coding for paragraphs 1–3, marking:

- **S** where the Articles show strengths such as uniting the states or protecting state sovereignty, and
- **W** where the Articles show weaknesses such as when limits on national power appear.

Suggestion for teacher modeling: “Notice how often the text reminds us that states kept their independence. This belief, that each state was almost like its own country, explains many of the weaknesses we’re seeing.”

Independent Practice: Students continue coding the remaining paragraphs using **S / W / C**, citing paragraph numbers.

Reading #2: Directed Note-Taking (15 minutes, Handout #3)

Guiding Question: How did the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the creation of the U.S. Constitution?

Handout 3 Graphic Organizer: Students use their coded text to complete a chart showing how the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the creation of the U.S. Constitution.

Reminder for Students: Under the Articles of Confederation, states believed they were fully independent and only shared power if they chose to. This belief affected every weakness listed below. You will use this chart to support your debate and final written response.

Feature of the Articles	Evidence (Paragraph #)	Why This Was a Problem	How the Constitution Addressed It
Power to Tax			
Power to Enforce Laws			
Power to Regulate Trade			
Ability to Amend the Government			

Teacher Note: Why These Four Categories Were Chosen

These four weaknesses were selected because they are:

- Explicitly supported by the text.
- Developmentally appropriate for Grade 5.
- Directly connected **to the creation of the U.S. Constitution.**

Together, they represent the most important reasons the Articles of Confederation failed as a national government.

Other weaknesses (such as the lack of a president or a standing army) are intentionally not listed as categories because they either:

- Overlap with these four core weaknesses (especially enforcement and taxation), or
- Are more abstract and less evidence-rich for this grade level.

Providing clear categories allows students to focus on **analyzing evidence and making constitutional arguments**, rather than trying to invent organizational structures.

Extended Text Discussion (20 minutes, Handout #3)

Partner Share and Preparation (5 minutes)

- **Question:** “Which weakness of the Articles of Confederation was most instrumental in leading to the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, and why?”
- **Task (Handout #3):** Partners select one weakness and identify **two pieces of evidence** from the text (with paragraph numbers) showing why this weakness caused serious national problems and why it mattered more than the other weaknesses.

Whole-Class Discussion: The Foundation (15 minutes)

- **Focus:** Pairs present their arguments debating which weakness in the Articles of Confederation caused the most serious national problems and why it mattered more than the other weaknesses.
- **Teacher Facilitation:**
 - **Presentations:** Have groups argue for their chosen weakness, citing evidence.
 - **Teacher prompts:** “Which weakness prevented the government from acting at all?” “Which weakness affected the most people across states?” “Which weakness made fixing other problems impossible?”
 - **Synthesis:** Guide students to recognize that while the Articles had multiple weaknesses, **some were more central because they limited the government’s ability to function or improve itself.** Many of these weaknesses existed because states believed they were independent and did not want a strong national government. Leaders eventually realized that if each state acted like its own country, the nation could not survive.

Final Written Response and Closure (15 minutes)

Handout #2: Final Written Response (12 minutes)

Writing Prompt: How did the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the drafting of the U.S. Constitution?

Instructions:

Write a well-developed paragraph that:

- **Identifies** one major weakness of the Articles.
- **Explains** why it caused problems.
- Uses **at least TWO pieces of textual evidence** (with paragraph numbers).
- **Describes** how the Constitution addressed this weakness.
- **Explains** why a stronger national government was necessary.

Closure (3 minutes)

Turn-and-Talk:

“Why is it important for a government to have enough power to enforce its rules—but not so much power that it becomes unfair?”

Exit Ticket:

“Write one sentence explaining why the Articles of Confederation were an important first step, even though they did not work well.”

Resource—On This Day: The Articles of Confederation Are Approved (National Constitution Center)

Handout #1

The Articles of Confederation: A First Try at Governing America

Imagine building a treehouse with your friends, but you make the rules so loose that everyone argues, and the treehouse keeps falling apart. That's what happened with America's first set of rules, called the Articles of Confederation. After winning the American Revolution in 1783, the new United States needed a way to work together as a country. The Articles of Confederation, written in 1777 and approved in 1781, were the first plan to unite the 13 states. But like a wobbly treehouse, this plan had strengths—good points—and weaknesses—problems—that made it hard to keep the country strong. Let's explore what made the Articles special and why they didn't last, using new words like confederation, amend, and sovereignty to understand this important time in history.

A confederation is a group of states that join together but keep most of their own power, like a team where everyone wants to make their own decisions. After the Revolution, Americans were afraid of a strong central government because they had just fought against King George III's unfair rule. They wanted sovereignty—the power to control themselves—for each state. The Articles of Confederation created a government where states held most of the power, and the national government was weak on purpose. Let's look at the strengths that made this plan appealing and the weaknesses that caused trouble.

One strength of the Articles was that they united the states during a tough time. The Revolution was still going on when the Articles were written, and the states needed to work together to fight Britain. The Articles created a Congress, a group where each state got one vote to make decisions, like a big team meeting. Congress's role, however, was limited. One key role for Congress under the Articles of Confederation was foreign policy. It could declare war, make peace, and sign treaties with other countries. For example, in 1783, Congress approved the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolution and recognized American independence. This showed the states could act as one nation, giving citizens a sense of pride and unity.

Another strength was that the Articles was their firm protection of state sovereignty. Each state retained the authority to shape its own laws on matters such as taxation and commerce, preserving the hard-won sense of independence from any overbearing central power. The Articles also encouraged states to work together on things like mail delivery through a postal system. Plus, they set up a way to share new western lands fairly, with rules like the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which planned how new states could join the country. This gave citizens hope for growing a bigger, stronger America.

But the Articles had big weaknesses that caused problems. First, the national government was too weak because it had no executive—a leader like a president—to enforce laws. Congress could make rules, but it couldn't make states follow them. For example, if a state didn't want to pay taxes to the national government, Congress couldn't do anything about it. This meant the government often ran out of money, making it hard to pay soldiers or debts from the war. Second, the Articles gave Congress no power to regulate—control—trade or taxes. States acted like separate mini-countries, putting taxes on goods from other states. This caused arguments and hurt trade, making it hard for citizens to buy things like food or tools. For instance, a farmer in Virginia might pay extra to sell crops in New York, which wasn't fair.

Third, changing the Articles was nearly impossible. To amend—change—the rules, all 13 states had to agree. If even one state said no, nothing could change. This made it hard to fix problems, like when states argued over land or money. The Articles also didn't have a national court system to settle fights between states, so disputes dragged on, frustrating citizens.

A big example of these weaknesses was Shays' Rebellion in 1786–1787. Farmers in Massachusetts faced high taxes and foreclosure—losing their farms—because the state government needed money. The national Congress couldn't help because it had no power to raise money or stop the chaos. When farmers, led by Daniel Shays, rebelled, the national government couldn't step in. This scared leaders like George Washington, who saw that the Articles weren't keeping the country safe or fair.

The consequences of these weaknesses pushed leaders to act. In 1787, they met at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. They walked away with a new plan: the U.S. Constitution. Unlike the confederation of the Articles, the Constitution made a stronger national government with a president (executive), courts, and the power to tax and regulate trade. It balanced state sovereignty with national unity, so citizens could feel protected and free. The Constitution also made it easier to amend laws, needing only three-fourths of the states to agree.

For fifth graders like you, the Articles of Confederation teach an important lesson: a government needs to be strong enough to protect everyone's unalienable rights but not so strong it acts like a king. Today, you see the Constitution at work when you vote for class leaders (like popular sovereignty), feel safe at school, or see fair laws in your community. The Articles were a brave first try, but their weaknesses showed America needed a better plan to stay united and free. How will you use your voice as a citizen to keep our country strong?

Handout #2

Shaping Your Written Response

PREDICT—

In this lesson, you will learn that the Articles of Confederation created a very weak national government. States believed they were independent and wanted to keep most of their power. Because of this, the national government struggled to solve problems for the country.

Before writing, think:

If a national government cannot collect money, enforce laws, regulate trade, or fix its own rules, what kind of problems might that cause for a country?

Predict:

Which weakness of the Articles of Confederation do you think caused the *most serious problems* for the nation—and why?

Use the sentence frame to help you:

I predict that the most serious weakness was _____ because
_____.

Write your prediction below:

FINAL WRITTEN RESPONSE —

Writing Prompt

How did the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the drafting of the U.S. Constitution?

Instructions

Write a **well-developed paragraph** that:

- Identifies **ONE major weakness** of the Articles of Confederation (Power to tax, power to enforce laws, power to regulate trade, or ability to amend the government).
- Explains **why this weakness caused problems** for the nation.
- Uses **at least TWO pieces of evidence** from today's text (include paragraph numbers).
- Describes **how the U.S. Constitution addressed this weakness**.
- Explains **why a stronger national government was necessary**.

Handout #3

Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Directions: Use your coded text to complete this chart showing how the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation lead to the creation of the U.S. Constitution. Record evidence from each paragraph of the text to complete the chart.

Remember: Under the Articles of Confederation, states believed they were fully independent and only shared power if they chose to. This belief affected every weakness listed below. You will use this chart to support your debate and final written response.

Feature of the Articles	Evidence (Paragraph #)	Why This Was a Problem	How the Constitution Addressed It
Power to Tax			
Power to Enforce Laws			
Power to Regulate Trade			
Ability to Amend the Government			