



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #8: Representative Government and the U.S. Constitution

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds directly on Lesson 7, where students analyzed Federalist and Anti-Federalist arguments during the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In Lesson 8, students shift from understanding arguments about whether to adopt the Constitution to explaining what kind of government the Founders created and why it requires active participation from citizens.

The focus of this lesson is Benjamin Franklin's statement:

"A republic, madam—if you can keep it."

Students interpret this statement and explain how it connects to a representative government. Students learn that:

- America is a republic with a representative government.
- Citizens elect leaders to make decisions for them.
- The system depends on informed and active citizens.
- Without participation, a representative government can weaken over time.

This lesson is organized into two phases. Phase 1 builds meaning through input and interpretation. Phase 2 builds argument through gathering evidence and using it to engage in writing. The lesson culminates in a structured essay response modeled directly on Franklin's quote and meaning. The essay is the primary assessment task.

Competition Note: For teachers participating in the FIREWORKS250 year 2 cohort, this essay is one of nine potential essays students may select for the Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition. Each lesson introduces a key Founding Father or revolutionary while integrating civics standards. Teachers will introduce these individuals to students with a biography and video before students write their essay.

Materials

- Highlighters or pencils for text coding
- Handout #1: What Is a Representative Government? Why Did America Choose It?
- Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer
- Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer
- Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Note: Students may use any notes from any handout (text coding, video notes, or graphic organizer) when writing their essay. These are not separate tasks but support tools for the final essay.

Preparation

- Number the paragraphs in the reading text.
- Review vocabulary: Representative Government, Republic, Direct Democracy, Factions
- Before class, locate and read Franklin’s biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- Load the Franklin video before class: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBN3Dioq1js>
- Prepare essay writing model. See sample paragraph in Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to Lesson 7 (Federalist and Anti-Federalist ratification debate).

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.1.3**: Discuss arguments for adopting a representative form of government. *Clarification:* Students explain what is meant by a representative government.

Essential Question

*What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said,
“A republic, madam—if you can keep it”?*

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students understand Franklin’s warning and what a republic is.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “What does it take for a government to continue working well over time? What could make a government fail?” Accept all reasonable responses.
- *Quick pair share:* Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions at the end of the lesson.

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- *Introduce and clarify the following terms:*
 - Representative Government: When citizens choose leaders to make decisions and laws for them.
 - Republic: A country where the people vote for representatives instead of voting on every law themselves.
 - Direct Democracy: Everyone votes on everything themselves.
 - Factions: Groups that push only their own interests which might hurt others.

Note: Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances appear in the reading text. Introduce these as supporting features of America’s republic that are important safeguards, not as separate system categories.

- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Why would a system where citizens choose leaders still need responsibility from those citizens?”
 - “America is a republic with a representative government where citizens elect leaders, but the system only works if citizens stay informed and engaged. Franklin’s warning is about exactly this, and these vocabulary terms will help us understand what he meant.”

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Now let’s move on to text coding. You will be making some decisions as you read the text.”
- *Students read:* What Is a Representative Government? Why Did America Choose It? (Handout #1)
- *Students use three codes to mark sections:*
 - R (Representative Government): Describes how representative government works or why the Founders chose it.
 - D (Direct Democracy): Describes how direct democracy works or why it has problems.
 - I (Important Information): Context or background that doesn’t fit R or D but matters for understanding Franklin’s warning.

Note: The “I” code is intentionally open. Students who disagree about whether a paragraph is R, D, or I are doing exactly the right kind of thinking. Use disagreements as discussion moments: “Why did you choose I instead of R? What makes you think so?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- *Think aloud:*
 - “This part explains that citizens choose leaders instead of voting on every law. That’s describing a representative government—I’ll code it R.”

- “I found a paragraph about the history of the Convention—interesting, important context, but not really describing either system—I’d code that I. Not everything fits R or D, and that’s okay.”
- Model identifying the key idea, explaining the code choice, honest uncertainty when a paragraph could be I.

Guided Practice—We Do (5 minutes)

- *Read the next paragraph together.*
 - “What is happening in this section?”
 - “Does it describe direct voting, elected leaders, or something else entirely?”
 - “What code—R, D, or I? Why?”
 - “Could this paragraph be coded more than one way?”
 - Celebrate productive disagreement. There is no single correct answer for every paragraph.

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What evidence supports your code?”
 - “How does this connect to representative government?”
 - “What does this paragraph tell you about why the Founders made this choice?”

Phase 2: Build Argument (Synthesis → Evidence → Writing)

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain Franklin’s meaning and write their essay.

Directed Note-Taking (15–20 minutes, Handout #3)

*Guiding Question: What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said,
“A republic, madam—if you can keep it”?*

- *Teacher prompt:* “Gather evidence from the text to explain Franklin’s meaning. You are not listing new ideas—you are finding evidence that explains what Franklin was warning citizens about. Also, begin to think about the kinds of things we can do to fulfill our responsibilities.” Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Responsibility	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about Franklin's warning
Paying attention		
Voting wisely		
Holding leaders accountable		
Protecting everyone's rights		

- **Teacher prompts:**
 - "What does this tell you about representative government?"
 - "How does this connect to Franklin's warning?"
 - "What responsibility is emphasized most?"
 - "What specific actions can we take to fulfill our responsibilities?"

Meet a Founding Father: Benjamin Franklin (10 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** "We just read about the kind of government the Founders created, and we've taken notes on the responsibilities we have to protect our republic. We see in the text that at the end of the Convention a woman called out to Benjamin Franklin and asked whether we had a monarchy or a republic. Franklin replied with an answer that is now famous – 'A republic, madam—if you can keep it.' We'll be explaining in our essays exactly what that meant."

"The video we'll watch in a moment provides some insight into just who Benjamin Franklin was as a man. He also emphasizes that the signing of the Declaration of Independence was just the first step for our nation. The crafting of the Constitution was the next one. Listen for what Franklin believes citizens must do to keep a republic working."

- **Read** Franklin's biography aloud to the class from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- **Show** Franklin's video to the class from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPzmuYxMROQ>

Note: The video does not directly explain representative government or the republic quote. Use the discussion after the video to bridge from Franklin's emotional message to the civic meaning students explored in the reading text.

- **Students complete Handout #4 while watching.**
- **Teacher prompts (after video):**
 - "What does Franklin mean when he says a republic is 'hard won and fragile'?"
 - "What responsibility does Franklin say belongs to future citizens?"
 - "What does Franklin's message make you want to find out more about?"

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “What does Franklin mean when he says a republic must be ‘kept’?”
- *Students discuss:*
 - What does “keep” mean?
 - Who does the keeping?
 - What happens if people stop participating?
 - Do you think Franklin is mainly warning about citizens—or about government itself?
- *Teacher prompt (after students talk):* “Franklin is emphasizing that a republic depends on citizens staying informed, responsible, and engaged.”

Debate: Ideas for Keeping a Republic (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display both Franklin quotes on the board, the debate question, and the four ideas for keeping a republic:

“I have often, in the course of the session, looked at that sun behind the President, without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now, at length, I have the happiness to know that it is a rising, and not a setting, sun.”

— Benjamin Franklin, upon signing the Constitution, September 17, 1787

“A republic, madam—if you can keep it.”

— Benjamin Franklin, outside Independence Hall, September 17, 1787

- *Teacher prompt:* “We just viewed and talked about a video that provided insight into Benjamin Franklin’s thinking about our republic. Signing the Declaration of Independence was a huge first step, and the crafting of the Constitution provided the framework of the new government. Franklin believed that new government was a success—he saw a rising sun. But he also warned it would only continue working if citizens took responsibility to keep it.”

“Today we are going to debate which idea for keeping a republic you believe matters most.”

Note: These are not separate systems or categories. They are different ways the text helps explain Franklin’s warning. Each idea comes from evidence in the text.

Ideas for Keeping a Republic:

Paying attention—staying informed to prevent factions from taking over

Voting wisely—choosing trusted leaders to act as representatives

Holding leaders accountable—using the power of the people to vote them out

Protecting rights—ensuring no group takes away the rights of others

The Debate Question

*Which idea best explains what he meant when he said,
“A republic—if you can keep it”?*

Debate Directions

Choose one idea and explain how it best supports Franklin’s warning. Be ready to support your choice with at least one piece of evidence from the text or video.

Structured Discussion

- Call on students who chose different ideas. *Prompts include:*
 - “What evidence from the text supports that?”
 - “Does anyone who chose a different idea want to respond?”
 - “What would Franklin say if he could see America today?”
 - “Have we fulfilled our responsibilities? Explain.”
- There is no single correct answer. The goal is for students to use evidence to defend a position—exactly the thinking the essay requires. Teachers may shorten discussion or combine steps depending on class time.

Primary Assessment Task (20–25 minutes, Handout #2)

Revolutionary Writers Essay: Benjamin Franklin

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 8 and also serves as one of nine potential student essays for the FIREWORKS250 Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition for students with teachers participating in cohort 2. Participating teachers should save all student essays. Students will select their best essay at the end of the year to submit for the competition.

- *Teacher prompt:* “Your essay should explain Franklin’s warning. The idea you chose in the debate should help support your explanation. Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was asked what kind of government the Founders had created. He replied, “A republic, madam—if you can keep it.”

What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said, “A republic, madam—if you can keep it”?

Explain your answer using details from the text and the video.

Students should write a paragraph that:

- states what Franklin meant (the Founders created a representative government)
- explains what a representative government is
- explains why citizen participation is necessary to keep it working

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

Franklin meant that...

A representative government...

This system only works if...

If citizens do not..., then...

Franklin's warning still matters today because...

Sample paragraph:

Benjamin Franklin meant that the Founders had created a representative government. In a representative government, the people vote for leaders to make the laws for them. Franklin said this new government was good, but it would only last if the people worked hard to keep it. He meant that citizens must vote and stay informed. If people stop doing these things, the representative government could get weak or unfair. Franklin was warning Americans to take care of their new government.

Closure (5 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** "Today we learned that Franklin believed a republic only survives if citizens actively participate. You debated which idea best explains his warning—and then you wrote about it."
- **Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:** "Which idea do you think matters most today? Has your thinking changed after writing your essay?"
- **Exit Ticket prompt:** "What is one idea for keeping a republic, and why does it matter?"

Handout #1

What Is a Representative Government? Why Did America Choose It?

Imagine your whole school trying to decide the lunch menu every single day. If every student had to vote on every single item, it would take forever, and the loudest kids might always win. That's what a pure democracy is like—everyone voting directly on every decision. In America, we do something different. Instead of having every citizen vote on every law, we choose trusted people to represent us. This is called a representative government, and it's the big idea behind why our country is a republic.

What does “representative government” mean?

It means the people stay in charge, but they pick trusted leaders—called representatives—to make laws and run the country for them. You still have power because you get to vote for those leaders. If they don't do a good job, you can vote them out next time. The leaders have to listen to the people they represent, just like a class president has to listen to the classmates who elected them.

Why did America's Founders choose this instead of letting everyone vote on everything (a direct or “pure” democracy)?

The Founders studied history and saw big problems with pure democracies in the past:

- Pure democracies can be chaotic. In ancient Athens (the most famous direct democracy), crowds sometimes got so excited or angry that they made quick, bad decisions. For example, they voted to put the great leader Socrates to death simply because a majority didn't like what he taught.
- Loud groups can bully quieter ones. The Founders worried that a simple majority could take away the rights of smaller groups. James Madison called this the danger of “factions”—when one group gets too powerful and tramples on everyone else's unalienable rights.
- Most people are busy living life. Farmers, shopkeepers, and parents don't have time to travel to the capital and debate every single law. A representative government lets regular people stay home with their families and still have their voice heard through someone they trust.

Who were some of the Founders who helped decide this?

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, 55 delegates from 12 of the 13 original colonies came together in Philadelphia. These key leaders worked together to shape America's representative government. George Washington presided over the meetings and helped keep everyone focused. James Madison, often called the “Father of the Constitution” brought many of the important ideas and took careful notes. Benjamin Franklin served as the wise older voice full of experience. Alexander Hamilton pushed for a strong national government. Roger Sherman helped solve major disagreements and proposed the Great Compromise.

They all agreed on one important point: America was already too big and growing too fast for everyone to vote on every law. They wanted a government that was strong enough to protect people's rights, but safe enough that neither king nor an angry mob could take those rights away.

How does representative government work with the three branches?

The Founders split the government into three separate branches so no single person or group could grab all the power. Here's how each branch works and how we choose the people in it:

- Legislative Branch – Congress (makes the laws). There are two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Representatives are elected every two years; bigger states get more seats because the number is based on population. Each state gets exactly two senators, elected every six years.
- Executive Branch – The President and helpers (carries out the laws). The president is chosen every four years, but not by direct popular vote. Instead, citizens vote for electors in the Electoral College—another important compromise. Those electors officially choose the president. The Founders wanted the president to be strong enough to lead the country but not chosen by a wild crowd on one exciting day.
- Judicial Branch – Supreme Court and other federal courts (explains the laws). Judges are picked by the president and approved by the Senate. Once chosen, they can serve for life as long as they remain fair. This means they don't have to worry about winning elections and can protect the Constitution even if it's unpopular.

Extra safety: Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances

The three branches are separate, but they watch each other. Congress can make laws, but the president can veto (reject) them. The president can suggest ideas, but only Congress can pass them into law. The courts can review a law and declare it unconstitutional, throwing it out if it violates the Constitution. Congress can impeach (remove from office) a president or judge who breaks the rules. This way, power stays balanced and nobody can act like a king.

A quick way to remember it

- Pure democracy = Everyone votes on everything. Possibly great for a small town, but risky for a big country.
- Representative government (in a republic) = You pick someone to vote for you, with built-in protections for everyone's rights. Representative government lets millions of people have a voice without everything turning into one giant, noisy argument. It keeps the power with "We the People"—just in a smarter, safer way.

There's a famous story that shows how seriously the Founders took this new plan. On the very last day of the Constitutional Convention in September 1787, the tired delegates finally finished the Constitution and walked out of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. A woman named Mrs. Elizabeth Powel was waiting outside. She called out to the oldest delegate, 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin, and asked, "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin turned to her and gave his famous answer: "A republic, madam—if you can keep it."

He knew the Constitution was only a piece of paper. Whether America would stay a republic depended on the people—on citizens like you—paying attention, voting wisely, holding leaders accountable, and protecting everyone's unalienable rights. Franklin was saying: "We've given you the tools for a government where the people rule through their chosen representatives... now it's your job to keep it working."

More than 230 years later, that job still belongs to us—to every fifth grader, every parent, and every citizen. When you learn about government, speak up for what's fair, or vote one day, you're helping keep the republic that Benjamin Franklin and the other Founders trusted us to protect.

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was asked what kind of government the Founders had created. He replied, "A republic, madam—if you can keep it."

What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said, "A republic, madam—if you can keep it"?

Explain your answer using details from the text and the video.

Remember: In our debate, you chose one of the ideas for keeping a republic. Use that idea to help support your essay explanation.

Step 1: Choose an Idea

Which idea do you think best explains his warning?

☐ Paying attention ☐ Voting wisely ☐ Holding leaders accountable ☐ Protecting rights

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

What did Franklin mean? Complete this sentence:

Franklin meant that _____

What is representative government?

A representative government is _____

Why does it need citizen participation?

This system only works if _____

What could happen if citizens stop participating?

If citizens do not _____, then _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Evidence from the video:

Step 4: Write Your Essay

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph.

[illegible]

Sentence Starters (Optional)

Franklin meant that...

A representative government...

This system only works if...

If citizens do not..., then...

Franklin's warning still matters today because...

Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

*Guiding Question: What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said,
“A republic, madam—if you can keep it”?*

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. The text names specific responsibilities citizens must fulfill. Find evidence for each one. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Responsibility	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about Franklin’s warning
Paying attention		
Voting wisely		
Holding leaders accountable		
Protecting everyone’s rights		

Think About It:

What is Franklin warning citizens about?

Which responsibility do you think matters most? Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Video: Benjamin Franklin — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBN3Dioq1js>

Directions: As you watch the video, listen carefully to what Benjamin Franklin says about the founding and his warning to future citizens. Answer the questions below. You will use these notes in your essay.

1. Franklin says the republic was “hard won and fragile.” What do you think he means by that?

2. Franklin says the future belongs to you. What responsibility is he giving to citizens?

3. Franklin describes what the Founders risked when they signed the Declaration of Independence. Why would someone take that kind of risk to create a new government?

4. After watching the video, what is your first impression of what Franklin meant when he said, “A republic, madam—if you can keep it”?
