



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #9: The Bill of Rights and Individual Freedom

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds directly on Lesson 8, where students explored representative government and Benjamin Franklin’s warning that Americans would need to “keep” their republic through active citizenship. In Lesson 9, students examine another major debate from the founding era: whether the Constitution needed stronger protections for individual rights before Americans would fully trust the new government.

The focus of this lesson is the debate surrounding the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution.

Students learn that:

- Many Americans feared the new national government might become too powerful.
- Anti-Federalists demanded protections for individual rights.
- The Bill of Rights was added to limit government power and protect freedom.
- The rights protected in the Bill of Rights still matter today.

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 connected to Thomas Jefferson’s ideas about natural rights and limited government. 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: The Bill of Rights—America’s Promise to Protect Individual Liberties
- 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 paragraphs in the reading text.
- Review vocabulary: Bill of Rights, Natural Rights, Tyranny, Ratify, Anti-Federalists
- Before class, locate and read Jefferson’s biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- Load the Jefferson video before class: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPzmuYxMRO0>
- Prepare essay writing model. See sample paragraph in Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to: Lesson 7 (Federalists and Anti-Federalists) and Lesson 8 (Representative government and citizen responsibility).

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.1.4**: Describe the history, meaning, and significance of the Bill of Rights. *Clarification*: Students describe how concerns about individual rights led to the inclusion of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.

Essential Question

Why did many Americans believe the Constitution needed a Bill of Rights?

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students understand why many Americans worried about government power and why protections for individual rights were added to the Constitution.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “Should a government always have limits on its power? Why or why not?” Accept all reasonable responses.
- **Quick pair share:** Students briefly discuss. Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions at the end of the lesson.
 - Why might strong governments help people?
 - Why might strong governments worry people?

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- *Introduce and clarify the following terms:*
 - **Bill of Rights:** The first ten amendments to the Constitution that protect individual freedoms.
 - **Natural Rights:** Rights people are born with that government should protect, not take away.
 - **Tyranny:** Unfair or abusive government power.
 - **Ratify:** To officially approve.
 - **Anti-Federalists:** People who worried the Constitution gave too much power to the national government and demanded a bill of rights before they would support it.
- *Teacher prompt:*
 - “Many Americans supported the Constitution, but others worried the new government might become too powerful. The Bill of Rights was added to respond to those concerns. These vocabulary terms will help us understand why.”

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you read today, you will be identifying different kinds of information about the debate over the Bill of Rights.”
- *Students read:* The Bill of Rights — America’s Promise to Protect Individual Liberties (Handout #1)
- *Students use three codes to mark sections:*
 - B (Bill of Rights): Explains rights or protections added to the Constitution.
 - C (Concerns): Explains fears about government power or tyranny.
 - I (Important Information): Important background or context that does not clearly fit B or C.

Note: The “I” code is intentionally open. Students who disagree about coding are engaging in strong historical thinking. Use discussion prompts such as: “Why did you choose I instead of C?” “Could this paragraph fit more than one code?” “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- *Think aloud:*
 - “This section explains fears about government power, so I’ll code it C.”
 - “This paragraph explains a freedom protected in the Bill of Rights, so I’ll code it B.”
 - “This part explains background about the Constitutional Convention. It feels important, but not clearly B or C, so I’ll code it I.”
 - Model uncertainty and evidence-based reasoning.

Guided Practice—We Do (5 minutes)

- *Read the next paragraph together.* Celebrate productive disagreement. There is no single correct answer for every paragraph.
 - “What is this section mostly explaining?”
 - “Does it focus on protections, concerns, or background?”
 - “Could more than one answer make sense?”

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What evidence supports your code?”
 - “What worried Americans most?”
 - “How does this connect to the Bill of Rights?”

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

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain why many Americans believed protections for rights were necessary.

- *Teacher prompt:* “Now that we understand why many Americans demanded protections for rights, we are going to use evidence to explain it in writing.”

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

Guiding Question:

Why did many Americans believe the Constitution needed a Bill of Rights?

- *Teacher prompt:* “Gather evidence that explains why many Americans wanted stronger protections for individual rights. You are not listing random freedoms—you are explaining why people believed limits on government power were necessary.” Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Concern	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about why Americans demanded a Bill of Rights
Fear of government power		
Protecting freedom of speech and religion		
Preventing tyranny		
Protecting fair treatment under the law		

- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What concern appears most often in the text?”
 - “Why did some Americans distrust government power?”
 - “How do rights help protect people?”
 - “What limits did Americans want placed on government?”

Meet a Founding Father: Thomas Jefferson (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “We just read about why so many Americans demanded a Bill of Rights. Now we are going to meet one of our most important Founding Fathers—Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was not at the Constitutional Convention and was not directly involved in writing the Bill of Rights. But he wrote the Declaration of Independence, where he said that all people are born with natural rights that government must protect. As you listen to his biography and watch the video, think about what Jefferson believed about rights and government.”
- **Read** Jefferson’s biography aloud to the class from:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- **Show** Jefferson’s video to the class from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPzmuYxMRO0>

Note: The Jefferson video is not a direct explanation of the Bill of Rights. Its purpose is to introduce students to Jefferson as a person—his ideas about natural rights, liberty, and the role of government. Students will then make the inferential connection in their essay: given what Jefferson believed, would he have supported adding a Bill of Rights? Do not ask students to find Bill of Rights content in this video.

- *Students complete Handout #4 while watching.*
- *Teacher prompts (after video):*
 - “What did Jefferson believe about natural rights?”
 - “Why would someone with Jefferson’s beliefs want limits on government power?”
 - “Based on what you know about Jefferson, do you think he would have supported the Bill of Rights? Why?”

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Why would Americans who had just fought a revolution worry about government power?”
- *Students discuss:*
 - What kinds of rights did people want protected?
 - Why might people fear a government becoming too powerful?
 - Can a government protect freedom while still having power?
 - Why would some Americans refuse to support the Constitution without a Bill of Rights?

- *Teacher prompt (after students talk):* “Many Americans believed freedom could only survive if government power had clear limits.” Let this synthesis emerge from student responses rather than leading with it.

Debate: Why did Americans demand a Bill of Rights? (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display the debate question and the four concerns:

The Debate Question

Which concern best explains why many Americans demanded a Bill of Rights?

Concerns Americans had:

- Fear of government power
- Protecting freedom of speech and religion
- Preventing tyranny
- Protecting fair treatment under the law

Note: These are not separate systems or categories. They are different ways the text helps explain why Americans demanded a Bill of Rights. Each concern comes from evidence in the text.

Debate Directions

Choose one concern and explain how it best supports the argument for a Bill of Rights. Use 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 another concern connect to this one?”
 - “Why would these protections matter after the Revolution?”
 - “Do these protections still matter today?”
- 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.

Bridge to Essay

- *Teacher prompt:* “You just thought carefully about why Americans demanded protections for their rights. Now you are going to connect those ideas to Thomas Jefferson—a man who believed deeply in natural rights. Use what you know about Jefferson and what you learned from the text to write your essay.”

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

Revolutionary Writers Essay: Thomas Jefferson

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 9 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:* “We met Thomas Jefferson today and learned about his beliefs. Now use what you know about Jefferson and what you read in the text to explain your thinking.” “Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence.

*Do you think Thomas Jefferson would have supported adding a
Bill of Rights to the Constitution?*

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

Students should write a paragraph that:

- states a clear position (yes or no, with a reason).
- explains what Jefferson believed about natural rights.
- explains why many Americans wanted limits on government power.
- explains how those ideas connect to Jefferson’s position.

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

Jefferson believed that...

Many Americans worried that...

The Bill of Rights protects...

Without these protections...

Jefferson would likely support... because...

Sample paragraph:

Yes, I think Thomas Jefferson would have supported adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution. He wrote the Declaration of Independence and said all people have natural rights like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The text says many people were worried the Constitution gave the government too much power. Jefferson believed the government should not be allowed to take away people's freedoms. A Bill of Rights would protect those freedoms. That is why I think he would have supported it.

Closure (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today we learned that many Americans supported the Constitution but still wanted stronger protections for individual rights. You debated which concern mattered most—and then you connected those ideas to Thomas Jefferson.”
- *Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:* “Which protection in the Bill of Rights do you think matters most today? Why?”
- *Exit Ticket prompt:* “Why did Americans believe the Constitution needed a Bill of Rights?”

Handout #1

The Bill of Rights—America’s Promise to Protect Individual Liberties

In September 1787, the Constitutional Convention finished its work. Delegates sent the new United States Constitution to the states for approval. Many Americans were excited about the stronger government it created, but many others were deeply concerned.

George Mason, author of the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights, led the opposition. He and other Anti-Federalists (including Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee) refused to sign the Constitution in Philadelphia. They worried it had no clear list of rights the government could never take away. Mason warned that without written protections, even a republic could become tyrannical. He insisted that the “natural rights” of the people—rights to life, liberty, property, free speech, religious freedom, fair trials, and more—must be spelled out. His Virginia Declaration of Rights, which listed these freedoms plainly, had already become a model for several state constitutions. Mason felt so strongly that he declared he would rather cut off his hand than sign a Constitution that left these rights unprotected.

Delegates from several large states agreed with Mason. Virginia, Massachusetts, New York, said they would not ratify (officially approve) the Constitution unless a bill of rights was promised. To gain support for adoption of the new Constitution, Federalists such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton gave their word. Once the Constitution was ratified, they would ask Congress to add amendments protecting individual liberties.

The Constitution was ratified in 1788 after close votes in several states. In the very first session of Congress in 1789, James Madison kept the Federalists’ promise. He had become convinced by Mason and the state conventions that a bill of rights was needed. Madison studied more than 200 suggestions sent by the states. The heart of his proposals, however, came from George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights. Madison took Mason’s clear, powerful ideas and shaped them into twelve proposed amendments for the national Constitution. Ten of these were ratified by the states on December 15, 1791, and became the Bill of Rights.

Because George Mason first demanded explicit protection of natural rights and provided the model that Madison followed, some historians call George Mason the “Father of the Bill of Rights.” Madison, often called the “Father of the Constitution,” deserves great credit for drafting

and guiding the amendments through Congress. Madison himself said that many of the ideas came from Mason and the state declarations Mason had inspired.

The Ten Amendments and Their Historical Meaning

1. Freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition
2. Right to keep and bear arms
3. No forced quartering of soldiers in homes
4. Protection against unreasonable searches and seizures
5. Due process, no self-incrimination, no taking of property without just compensation
6. Speedy and public trial, right to a lawyer
7. Jury trial in civil cases
8. No excessive bail or cruel punishment
9. Rights not listed are still retained by the people
10. Powers not given to the national government remain with the states and the people

The Lasting Significance

The Bill of Rights completed the great compromise of the Founding era. George Mason's steadfast refusal to accept a constitution without written guarantees of natural rights led to the addition of these ten amendments. In doing so, he helped make sure the new national government—like Virginia's state government—would be clearly limited in what it could do to the people.

Today, when you speak freely, worship as you choose, feel safe in your home, or see a fair trial on the news, you are living under protections that George Mason first demanded and that James Madison helped place in the United States Constitution.

Because George Mason stood firm for natural rights in 1787, and because the people and states supported him, every American fifth grader today grows up with the freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights—freedoms written into our Constitution.

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence.

*Do you think Thomas Jefferson would have supported adding a
Bill of Rights to the Constitution?*

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

Remember: Use what you learned about Jefferson from his biography and the video, and what you read in the text about why Americans demanded a Bill of Rights.

Step 1: Take a Position

- ☐ Yes, Jefferson would have supported the Bill of Rights
☐ No, Jefferson would not have supported the Bill of Rights

My reason: _____

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

What did Jefferson believe about natural rights?

Jefferson believed that _____

Why did many Americans want limits on government power?

Many Americans worried that _____

How do Jefferson's ideas connect to the Bill of Rights?

Jefferson would likely _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Evidence from the video or Jefferson's biography:

Step 4: Write Your Essay

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph.

[illegible]

Sentence Starters (optional)

Jefferson believed that...

Many Americans worried that...

The Bill of Rights protects...

Without these protections...

Jefferson would likely support... because...

Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Guiding Question:

Why did many Americans believe the Constitution needed a Bill of Rights?

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. Find evidence for each concern Americans had about government power. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Concern	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about why Americans demanded a Bill of Rights.
Fear of government power		
Protecting freedom of speech and religion		
Preventing tyranny		
Protecting fair treatment under the law		

Think About It:

What is the most important reason Americans wanted a Bill of Rights?

Which concern do you think mattered most? Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Video: Thomas Jefferson—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPzmuYxMRO0>

Directions: Listen as your teacher reads Thomas Jefferson’s biography and as you watch the video. Jefferson was not at the Constitutional Convention and did not write the Bill of Rights, but his ideas about rights and government are very important. Answer the questions below.

1. What did Jefferson believe about natural rights? What does he say in the Declaration of Independence about the rights people are born with?

2. Jefferson believed the government should protect people’s rights. Why might someone with those beliefs worry about a government that had no written limits?

3. Jefferson said that all people have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” How do the protections in the Bill of Rights connect to those ideas?

4. Based on what you know about Jefferson, do you think he would have supported adding a Bill of Rights? Write your first thoughts here. (You will develop this further in your essay.)
