



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #16: Constitutional Republic

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds upon previous lessons examining how citizens participate in government and how the Constitution has expanded civic participation over time. In Lesson 15, students learned how voting rights expanded through constitutional amendments and legislation, allowing more Americans to participate in the democratic process. In Lesson 16, students examine what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic and how the Constitution structures and limits government power.

The focus of this lesson is to help students understand what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. Students examine the difference between a pure democracy and a republic, why the Founders chose a republic, and how the Constitution limits government power through the rule of law, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Students also consider how citizens participate in and help preserve the constitutional republic through civic duties and responsibilities.

Students learn that:

- A constitutional republic is a government where citizens elect representatives, but power is limited by a written constitution.
- A pure democracy is a government where everyone votes directly on laws and decisions.
- The Founders chose a republic because they believed elected representatives could consider different interests and help protect liberty.
- The Constitution is the supreme law and places limits on government power.
- Separation of powers divides government responsibilities among different branches.
- Checks and balances allow the branches of government to limit one another.
- The rule of law means that everyone, including government leaders, must follow the law.
- Citizens play an important role in keeping the constitutional republic strong by fulfilling civic duties and responsibilities.
- A constitutional republic depends on citizens remaining active, responsible, and committed to the rule of law.

This lesson is organized into two phases. Phase 1 builds meaning through vocabulary, reading, and text coding. Phase 2 builds argument through gathering evidence and using it to engage in discussion and

writing. The lesson culminates in a structured Revolutionary Writers essay centered on how John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic.

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 It Means for the United States to Be a Constitutional Republic
- 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: Constitutional republic, Pure democracy, Rule of law, Checks and balances, Civic duty
- Before class, locate and read the biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum for John Hancock: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- Load the John Hancock video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT5t6gaitdA>.
- Prepare the essay writing model. See sample paragraphs in the Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to previous lessons examining forms of political participation during the colonial period.

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.2.4** Evaluate the importance of civic duties and responsibilities to the preservation of the United States' constitutional republic. *Clarification:* Students will explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic.

Essential Question

What does it mean for the United States to be a constitutional republic?

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students understand what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic, with an emphasis on how the Constitution establishes a government in which citizens elect representatives while limiting government power and protecting individual rights.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** "What does it mean to be part of a government where the people have a voice?"
Accept all reasonable responses. Record responses where all students can see them.
- **Quick pair share:** Students briefly discuss. Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions later during the lesson.
 - What are some ways people can have a voice in government? (possible responses below)
 - * Voting
 - * Electing leaders
 - * Contacting elected officials
 - * Serving on juries
 - * Staying informed
 - Why might a government need rules that limit its power? (possible responses below)
 - * To keep one person from having too much power
 - * To protect people's rights
 - * To make sure leaders follow the law
 - * To keep government fair

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- **Introduce and clarify the following terms:**
 - **Constitutional Republic:** A government where citizens elect representatives, but power is limited by a written constitution.
 - **Pure Democracy:** A government where everyone votes directly on laws instead of choosing representatives to make laws.
 - **Rule of Law:** The idea that everyone, even government leaders, must follow the same laws.
 - **Checks and Balances:** Ways government branches limit each other to stay fair.
 - **Civic Duty:** Something citizens are required to do, such as obeying laws or serving on juries.
- **Teacher prompts:**
 - "What is the difference between a pure democracy and a republic?"
 - "Why might a government need a written constitution?"
 - "Why is it important for government leaders to follow the law?"
 - "How can citizens help keep a constitutional republic strong?"

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “As you read, use the text codes to identify important ideas about what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. Some sections may receive more than one code. For example, a paragraph might explain both how the Constitution limits government power and how those limits protect citizens.”
- **Students read:** What It Means for the United States to Be a Constitutional Republic (Handout #1)
- **Students use four codes to mark sections:**
 - CR (Constitutional Republic): Describes what a constitutional republic is or how citizens participate through elected representatives.
 - PR (Pure Democracy and Republic): Describes the difference between a pure democracy and a republic or explains why the Founders chose a republic.
 - CL (Constitutional Limits): Describes how the Constitution limits government power through the rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances, or individual rights.
 - D (Civic Duties and Responsibilities): Describes what citizens are required or expected to do to help keep the constitutional republic strong.

Note: Use discussion prompts such as: “Why did you choose CR instead of PR?” “Could this paragraph fit more than one code?” “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- **Think aloud:**
 - “This section explains that citizens choose representatives to make laws, but those representatives must follow the Constitution. I would code that CR.”
 - “This section compares a pure democracy with a republic and explains why the Founders chose representatives. I would code that PR.”
 - “This section explains how the Constitution limits government power through checks and balances. I would code that CL.”
 - “This section explains what citizens are expected to do, such as voting, staying informed, and obeying laws. I would code that D.”
 - Model uncertainty and evidence-based reasoning. Some sections may receive more than one code. Encourage students to explain and defend their thinking.

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?”
 - “Is this describing a constitutional republic, the difference between a pure democracy and a republic, constitutional limits, or civic duties and responsibilities?”
 - “Could more than one code make sense?”
 - “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “How does this section help explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic?”
 - “Why did the Founders choose a republic instead of a pure democracy?”
 - “What does this section explain about how the Constitution limits government power?”
 - “What does this section say about the role of citizens?”
 - “What evidence supports your code?”
 - “Could more than one code apply? Why?”

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

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic, with an emphasis on how the Constitution structures and limits government power and how citizens participate in and help preserve the republic.

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you review the text today, pay attention to what makes the United States a constitutional republic. Notice how the author explains the role of citizens, the Constitution, and the structure of government. Think about which ideas are most important to understanding how our constitutional republic works.”

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

Guiding Question:

What evidence does the author provide to explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic?

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you are gathering evidence to explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. Think carefully about the different ideas the author uses to explain how our government works and how the Constitution limits government power.” Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this evidence shows
Constitutional Protections		
Representative Government		
Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances		
Civic Duties and Responsibilities		

- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Which category contains the strongest evidence about what makes the United States a constitutional republic?”
 - “Which category helped you understand the role of the Constitution most clearly?”
 - “Why is it important for government power to be limited?”
 - “Which category best explains how citizens help keep the constitutional republic strong?”

Meet a Founding Father: John Hancock (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today’s text explained what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic and how the Constitution structures and limits government power. Now we are going to meet John Hancock, one of the leaders who helped America begin forming a new government. As you listen and watch, think about how John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic and why his actions were important to the founding of the United States.”
- **Read** the John Hancock biography aloud to the class from:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- **Show** the John Hancock video to the class from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT5t6gaitdA>

Note: The biography and video introduce students to John Hancock and his role in the founding of the United States. The text remains the primary source for understanding what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic.

- *Students complete Handout #4 while watching.*
- *Teacher prompts (after video and biography):*
 - “How did John Hancock participate in the founding of the United States?”
 - “How did John Hancock help America begin to form a constitutional republic?”
 - “Why do you think John Hancock believed the colonies needed to become independent?”
 - “How do John Hancock’s actions connect to what you learned about constitutional republics?”

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “Which feature of a constitutional republic do you think is most important?”
- **Students discuss:**
 - Constitutional Protections
 - Representative Government
 - Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances
 - Civic Duties and Responsibilities
- **Teacher prompt (after students talk):** “The text explained that the United States is a constitutional republic because citizens choose representatives, but government power is limited by the Constitution. Based on what you have read, which feature do you think is most important to making the United States a constitutional republic?” Let this synthesis emerge from student responses rather than leading with it. Remind students that there may be more than one reasonable answer. Encourage them to support their position with evidence from the reading and John Hancock biography and video.

Debate: Which feature is most important to making the United States a constitutional republic? (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display the debate question and the position statements:

The Debate Question

Which feature is most important to making the United States a constitutional republic?

Position statements:

- Position A: Constitutional protections are the most important feature of a constitutional republic.
- Position B: Representative government is the most important feature of a constitutional republic.
- Position C: Separation of powers and checks and balances are the most important features of a constitutional republic.
- Position D: Civic duties and responsibilities are the most important feature of a constitutional republic.

Note: The Directed Note-Taking categories provide evidence students may use to support any position.

Debate Directions

Choose one position and explain why you believe it best reflects the author's message. Support your position with evidence from the text, the John Hancock biography, or the video.

Structured Discussion

- Call on students who chose different positions.

Prompts include:

- “What evidence supports your position?”
- “Does another group disagree?”
- “Could more than one feature be important? Why or why not?”
- “How did the evidence from the text influence your thinking?”
- “How did John Hancock’s actions influence your thinking?”
- “Which evidence was most convincing to you? Why?”
- 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:** “Today you learned what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. You examined how the Constitution protects rights, how citizens choose representatives, how government power is divided and limited, and how citizens help keep the republic strong. You also learned about John Hancock and his role in helping America begin to form a new government. Now your essay asks you to explain how John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic. Use evidence from today’s text, biography, and video to explain your thinking.”

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

Revolutionary Writers Essay: John Hancock and the Constitutional Republic

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 16 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:** “You have learned what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. Today’s reading explained how the Constitution limits government power, protects individual rights, and creates a system of representative government. You also learned about John Hancock and his role in helping America begin to form a new government. How did John Hancock help America begin to form a constitutional republic? Explain your answer using evidence from the text, biography, and video. Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

How did John Hancock help America begin to form a constitutional republic?

Students should write a paragraph that:

- states how John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic.
- explains why his actions were important.
- uses evidence from the text, biography, and video.
- explains how John Hancock's actions connect to the formation of a constitutional republic.

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic by...

One way John Hancock helped was...

The text explains...

The biography or video explains...

This evidence shows...

John Hancock's actions were important because...

This helped America form a constitutional republic because...

This evidence supports my thinking because...

Sample paragraph:

John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic by supporting independence and helping the colonies establish a new government. The text explains that a constitutional republic is a government where citizens choose representatives, but those representatives must follow the Constitution. John Hancock helped lead the movement for independence and served as president of the Continental Congress. His leadership helped the colonies begin creating a government based on the idea that people should have a voice in their government. His actions were important because America needed leaders who could help establish a new system of government after breaking away from British rule.

Closure (5 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** "Today we learned what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic. We focused on how the Constitution protects individual rights, limits government power, and creates a system in which citizens choose representatives."
- **Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:** "Which feature of a constitutional republic do you think is most important, and why?"
- **Exit Ticket prompt:** "What is one thing that makes the United States a constitutional republic, and why is it important?"

Handout #1

What It Means for the United States to Be a Constitutional Republic

The United States is a constitutional republic—a government where the people choose representatives to make laws, but those representatives must follow a written set of rules called the Constitution. The Constitution limits government power, protects individual rights, and makes sure no one person or group can take over. This system is different from a pure democracy (where everyone votes on every law) and different from a monarchy (where a king or queen has all the power). The Founders created it this way on purpose because they believed a strong but limited government, run by the people, was the best way to protect liberty.

Why the Founders Chose a Constitutional Republic

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia because the first government (under the Articles of Confederation) was too weak. It couldn't collect taxes, keep order, or protect citizens' rights. Leaders like George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin knew America needed a stronger government—but they were terrified of creating another king or letting angry crowds make all the decisions.

They studied history and saw problems with pure democracies. In ancient Athens, crowds sometimes made quick, unfair choices that hurt small groups or innocent people. The Founders worried that a simple majority could vote to take away the rights of minorities. James Madison called these dangerous groups “factions” and said a big country like America would have many factions (farmers vs. merchants, big states vs. small states, rich vs. poor). In a pure democracy, the biggest faction could win every time and act like a tyrant.

So they chose a republic—a government where citizens elect representatives who make laws for them. Representatives can think carefully, hear different sides, and balance competing interests. But they didn't stop there. They made it constitutional by writing the Constitution as the supreme law. It created three branches (Congress to make laws, the president to carry them out, courts to check both), gave each branch ways to limit the others (checks and balances), and later added the Bill of Rights to protect freedoms like speech, religion, and fair trials.

The Founders believed ordinary citizens—not kings, not mobs—should hold the power, but only if they were responsible and informed. They knew the Constitution was just words on paper. Keeping the republic strong would depend on citizens doing their part.

How We See It Today

We live in this constitutional republic every day. At the federal (national) level, we vote for leaders to represent us in Washington, D.C. These include senators, representatives (congresspeople), and the president.

At the same time, the Constitution places clear limits on what these leaders can do. Congress can pass laws. The president can veto laws passed by Congress. Courts can strike down laws that are unconstitutional. The system of checks and balances between branches of government continues to function. The Constitutional structure and the Bill of Rights safeguard freedoms for every citizen, even when the majority might want to impose its will on everyone else. This careful balance keeps our government fair, prevents any single person or group from gaining too much power, and ensures that the republic remains accountable to the people.

Why Civic Duties and Responsibilities Matter So Much

Being a citizen in a Constitutional Republic means that you have civic duties and responsibilities. The power of the government is partly in your hands, and you play an important role in keeping the republic strong.

The Founders trusted that citizens would fulfill certain duties and responsibilities. Duties are things the government can require, such as obeying laws or serving on juries. Responsibilities are things good citizens choose to do, such as voting or staying informed. When citizens do these things, the republic stays strong. If too many people ignore them, the system can become weak, unfair, or even fall apart. Examples include:

- Obeying laws keeps society safe and fair so the government doesn't have to use force.
- Paying taxes funds schools, roads, police, and defense so the country can function.
- Serving on juries lets ordinary citizens decide justice fairly.
- Voting chooses representatives and holds leaders accountable.
- Staying informed helps citizens make smart choices and spot problems early.
- Respecting others' rights keeps the system fair and prevents division.

The Founders knew a constitutional republic only works if "We the People" stay active, responsible, and committed to the rule of law. That's why they designed a system that could fix itself through elections and amendments—but only if citizens do their part. It's lasted because generations of citizens have done their duties and responsibilities. Now it's your turn to learn, participate, and help keep the constitutional republic strong for the future! What will you do to help?

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

How did John Hancock help America begin to form a constitutional republic?

Remember: Use what you learned about constitutional republics and John Hancock from the text, biography, and video.

Step 1: Choose Your Feature

Which feature of a constitutional republic might you use to explain how John Hancock helped America begin to form one?

- ☐ Constitutional protections
- ☐ Representative government
- ☐ Separation of powers and checks and balances
- ☐ Civic duties and responsibilities

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

Which feature did you choose?

I chose _____

How does your chosen feature help explain John Hancock's role? _____

What is one reason John Hancock's actions were important? _____

How did the reading about constitutional republics support your thinking?

My decision was influenced by _____

How did John Hancock's ideas or actions from the biography or video influence your thinking?

My decision was influenced by _____

Why do you think your choice is the best one?

I think that my choice is the best one because _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic by...

I chose _____ because...

One way John Hancock helped was...

The text explains...

The biography or video explains...

The evidence shows...

John Hancock's actions were important because...

This helped America begin to form a constitutional republic because...

My chosen feature helps explain Hancock's role because...

Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Guiding Question:

What evidence does the author provide to explain what it means for the United States to be a constitutional republic?

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. Find evidence for each category that shows what makes the United States a constitutional republic. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this evidence shows
Constitutional Protections		
Representative Government		
Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances		
Civic Duties and Responsibilities		

Think About It:

Which category do you think contained the strongest evidence? Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Video: John Hancock <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT5t6gaitdA>

Directions: Your teacher will read the biography of John Hancock and show a short video about his life. As you listen and watch, think about how John Hancock helped America begin to form a constitutional republic. Record important ideas from the biography and video. Then answer the questions below.

John Hancock

1. How did John Hancock participate in the founding of the United States?

2. How did John Hancock help America begin to form a constitutional republic?

3. Why do you think John Hancock believed the colonies needed to become independent?

4. What did John Hancock do that helped the colonies move toward independence and self-government?

Make the Connection

5. How do John Hancock's actions connect to what you learned about constitutional republics in today's reading?

6. How did John Hancock's actions help shape the new government of the United States? Explain your thinking.
