

American Government The Bill of Rights: Part I

The Constitution of the United States was written in 1787. Yet, the government it created couldn't rule over people's lives until one more step was taken. Each state had to vote to **ratify**¹, or approve of it.

By 1789, eleven states had ratified the new government. Their votes were enough to put the Constitution into effect. Two states, however, refused to sign it— North Carolina and Rhode Island. Critics in these states objected that a Bill of Rights hadn't been included. They worried that without a Bill of Rights the government might eventually become too strong. It might be unjust and put people in jail without a reason. It might take away a person's ability to speak freely, or keep some books from being written. They wanted people's rights spelled out so the government could never take them away.

The "**founding**² fathers," who created the Constitution, knew the document would have to be flexible in order to survive over time. They knew they would have to allow **amendments**.³ In their first **session**⁴ of Congress in 1789, they agreed to add a bill of rights. James Madison led the way. Of the 15 amendments he suggested, 10 were eventually ratified by the states. They were made a permanent addition to the Constitution. These first 10 amendments are known as the *Bill of Rights*.

The *Bill of Rights* became law on December 15, 1791. Some rights, such as freedom of speech and the press, support democracy. Others, such as the right to a trial by jury, are important for **justice**.⁵ The ideas for these rights are very old. They date to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Without them, we wouldn't enjoy the freedom we do as a nation today.

¹ **ratify** – to agree to or approve of something

² **founding** – a person who is responsible for starting something

³ **amendment** – a change that is made to a law or a legal document

⁴ **session** – a formal meeting

⁵ **justice** – fair and impartial behavior or treatment

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. The word “critics” in paragraph two means
 - a. citizens
 - b. members of Congress
 - c. people who are unhappy with something
 - d. writers

2. The genre of this passage is
 - a. fairytale
 - b. fiction
 - c. historical fiction
 - d. nonfiction

3. Why did critics from North Carolina and Rhode Island want to write a Bill of Rights?
 - a. They wanted to protect individuals’ liberty
 - b. They wanted to take away power from state governments
 - c. They didn’t like the Constitution
 - d. They wanted to send it to the King of England

4. The freedom to tell people that you disagree with the President is an example of
 - a. freedom of the press
 - b. the right to bear arms or carry weapons
 - c. the freedom to think
 - d. the freedom of speech

5. The passage “The Bill of Rights: Part 1” is mostly about
 - a. Rights that people in different countries have all over the world
 - b. The founding fathers, and why they wrote a Bill of Rights in 1776
 - c. Early additions to the Constitution and why they were added
 - d. How bills become laws, and how laws become amendments

6. Imagine you could write a list of freedoms guaranteed under the Bill of Rights. Which ones would you include, and why?

7. Why did North Carolina and Rhode Island want a Bill of Rights added to the Constitution?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence.

_____ two states refused to agree to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights was added.

- a. After
- b. In spite of
- c. Before
- d. Meanwhile

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

In 1789, James Madison suggested 15 amendments to the Constitution.

Who? James Madison

When? _____

(did) What? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** justice: fairness in the way people are treated.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
