

Teacher’s Guide: The Three Branches of Government

Recommended Grade Level: 5-8

(also applicable to grades 9-12 for students requiring significant support in learning)

Suggested Time: One class period, plus additional time to complete a writing assignment

Social Studies Objectives	Key Literacy Strategies	Key Vocabulary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine the roles and responsibilities of the three branches of the U.S. government, including the system of checks and balances among those branches Explore how the institutions and practices of government created during the American Revolution were revised in 1787 with the drafting of the U.S. Constitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Categorizing Basic Facts and Ideas (screen 4, writing assignment 2) Making Inferences (screen 1, writing assignment 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> aristocracy cabinet members commerce delegates Fourth Amendment impeach/impeached inception (version B reading only) interstate commerce judiciary justices policy testimony (version B reading only) unconstitutional veto

Overview

The Three Branches of Government is a student-directed learning experience. However, while students are expected to work through the activities on their own, teachers should be available to students to keep the activity on track, organize groupings, facilitate discussions, answer questions, and ensure that all learning goals are met.

The following is a summary of the activity screens:

Introduction: Students learn that they will look at how power is divided and shared within the U.S. government.

Screen 1: Students read a short text and watch a video about how John Adams first made the case for the three branches of government when he drafted the Massachusetts Constitution. They then write down why they think he felt this was important.

Screen 2: Students read a short text about some of the specific powers and responsibilities of each branch of the government.

- Screen 3:* Students read a short text about the system of checks and balances among the three branches of government.
- Screen 4:* Students use a Flash Interactive activity to categorize information from the video and texts about the responsibilities of and system of checks and balances among the three branches of government.
- Screen 5:* Students print out and read an essay that further explores how the U.S. government is structured. Then they select and complete a writing assignment about the topic.

The following notes include suggestions for how you might enhance the learning experience of students by providing additional context for the content presented and by troubleshooting technology. The notes have been written to correspond with the flow of the activity.

Before the Activity

- Before students begin, provide an overview of the activity. Suggest a timeline for completing the different parts of the activity, mention the different types of media they will encounter, and identify what they will have to do to demonstrate learning. For example, in addition to the final writing assignment, communicate to students which Notes entries (“Write It Down” sections) you’ll want them to turn in as assignments. You may want to provide an outline of this information on a chart, chalkboard, or whiteboard, or as a hand-out.
- There are two reading selections offered for this activity. Both readings address the same general content. However, version A is designed to be more accessible to students who have difficulty reading and comprehending grade-level text, and to students in younger grades. Version B is more challenging and appropriate for students who are comfortable reading at grade level. Determine if students should select version A or B of the final reading and writing assignment. You may wish to have all students read the same essay, or assign different essays depending on the range of students’ reading skills. You may also allow students to self-select the essay they would prefer reading.
- Determine if students will be working individually or in pairs on the activity. Some students may be able to work independently with little or no support. Students who are less familiar with the subject area or who struggle with literacy skills may benefit from working with another student. An effective way to do this is to pair a stronger student with a less able reader. You can also have students work individually on certain tasks and in pairs on others, depending on their experience and needs. If students will be working in pairs on any portion of the activity, let them know if they will be expected to type in their notes individually or as a group.

- Go through each screen of the activity, including the Flash Interactive activity, so that you can experience what students will be doing.
- Provide instruction on key vocabulary if you think students will need this preview (vocabulary words are defined in the activity).
- Arrange computers with Internet access so students can work individually or in pairs.

The Activity

Introduction

This screen introduces students to the idea that power is divided and shared within the U.S. government. Note that this activity includes a significant number of vocabulary terms that may be new to students, but that are important for them to understand in order to discuss and write about the topic. Encourage students to look up definitions and discuss them with partners, as needed.

The Introduction is an important part of this activity. Have students read it so that they will understand what they will be learning. It may also be beneficial to read the Introduction aloud to the class to make sure all students understand the purpose and content of the activity.

1. Dividing the Power: Watch This!

After students read the short text and watch the video, they will write down their ideas about why John Adams felt it was important to divide power in the government among the three branches. Encourage them to think about the type of government that the states were replacing. Who held the power before the Revolution? Why might Americans not want to recreate the same system of government?

2. Separation of Powers

This screen provides students with information about some of the powers and responsibilities of each branch of government. Encourage student pairs to compare the responsibilities of each branch. For example, each branch is in some way responsible for the nation's laws. How are these responsibilities different? How might the branches have to work together to accomplish their goals?

3. Checks and Balances

This screen provides students with information about the system of checks and balances that keeps any one branch of government from taking too much control. This information is probably new for many students. Encourage student pairs to discuss some of the examples and reflect on why they think the checks and balances were set up in this way.

4. Try This!

In this interactive activity, students sort the responsibilities of government that they've just read about into a pie chart according to which branch has that power. Then they draw connections between the responsibilities to show how checks and balances limit this power. (Complete instructions for how to do this appear in the Flash Interactive activity.)

This is a prewriting exercise that should help students with their final writing assignment. There are 16 items provided (including the examples). Encourage students to write down additional responsibilities on the blank labels and place them in the appropriate place.

The activity provides students with an opportunity to organize and connect the information that they've received so far. Remind students to print their activity notes when they have finished. Also, let them know that they will have a chance to go back and revise the chart later in the activity.

Answer Key:

Executive

- Proposes spending plan for the federal government (example)
- Enforces laws and makes regulations to help implement laws
- Has power of veto over a bill
- Serves as the commander in chief of the armed forces
- Makes treaties with other nations

Legislative

- Controls federal taxes and spending (example)
- Writes, debates, and passes bills or laws
- Has power to declare war on other countries
- Is able to impeach an official
- Regulates interstate and foreign commerce
- Approves budget

Judicial

- Can declare executive actions unconstitutional (example)
- Decides arguments about the meaning of laws
- Decides if a law or government action violates the Constitution
- Makes the decision in disputes among branches of the federal government

Example of a connection:

- "Proposes spending plan for the federal government" (executive) and "Controls federal taxes and spending" (legislative): All federal spending suggested by the president's plan has to be authorized by Congress per the Constitution.

5. Read and Write About It!

Students will now print out their notes and read an essay about how the three branches of the U.S. government are structured. Make sure students know whether to select version A or B of the essay. You can choose to have students read the PDF online or print it out and read the hard copy. Let students know whether they will be expected to turn in their notes, including the revised chart from the interactive activity on screen 4, as part of the assignment.

When students have completed the reading, they should select one of the writing assignments to complete. Their finished paper should be one to two pages in length and reflect students' learning from the activity and the PDF reading. Students can also look for additional information in the provided Web sites or in other online or print resources that you make available to them. Remind them that knowing the author or source of a Web site is important for evaluating the validity of the content. Ask students to list the source information at the end of their paper.

Suggested Follow-Up Activities

Sharing Student Work

It may be motivational, and a further learning opportunity, for your students to post their final essays so that their classmates, peers, and/or parents can see them, as well. This may also provide an opportunity for students to comment on and discuss each other's essays.

If you do not already have access to such an online writing community, Writing Matters provides free classroom publishing tools that allow you and your students to create and publish your own online eZine. More information and a free sign-up are available at the Writing Matters Web site™ (<http://www.writingmatters.org>).

Reflection and Self-Assessment

After students have turned in their writing assignments, you can choose to have them assess their learning. Convene students as a whole class or in small groups to discuss the following questions.

- What did you learn?
- What was surprising?
- What questions do you still have?
- What was the easiest for you to understand and do?
- What was the most difficult?