

Suppressing the Press?

Censorship and the Alien & Sedition Acts

Theme: Equality

Duration: 1–2 Class Sessions

Interdisciplinary Subject: Social Studies

Grade Level: 6-8

Lesson Overview: In this lesson, students will explore freedom of the press as they examine sources related to government censorship of the press. After reviewing the First Amendment and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, they will further analyze the Sedition Act and explore its relevance today. Then students will examine a political cartoon to discuss the relevance of the freedom over time. Finally, they will design and create their own poster promoting freedom of the press today.

Overarching Essential Question

- How can we work for equality and respect for all?

Lesson Essential Questions

- Why is freedom of the press important for political equality?
- What are the consequences of a censored press?

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define *sedition* and *censorship* in context.
- Evaluate the use of government censorship of the press in the Sedition Act of 1798.
- Create a visual message to explain freedom of the press today.

Civic Knowledge

- Foundations of the American political system.
- Purposes, values, and principles of American democracy established by the Constitution.

Civic Skills

- Identifying and describing information and arguments.
- Working with others.
- Clearly articulating ideas and interests.

Civic Dispositions

- Respecting individual worth and human dignity.
- Promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy.

Materials Needed

- Teacher's Guide: Suppressing the Press? Censorship and the Sedition Act of 1798
- [Slide Presentation](#)
- [Handout A – Briefing on the Sedition Act of 1798](#)
- [Handout B – Sedition Act \(excerpt\)](#)
- [Handout C – Exit Slip 3-2-1](#)
- Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool ([online version](#) or [PDF](#))
- [Optional: Scaffolded Analysis Tool for Books and Other Printed Texts](#) (one for every other student)
- [Optional: Scaffolded Analysis Tool for Analyzing Political Cartoons](#) (one for every other student)

Library of Congress Resources

Students may need access to the online bibliographic information. Links to handouts are included in the Teacher's Guide below.

Primary Source Analysis Tool: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/>

Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Political Cartoons:

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Political_Cartoons.pdf

Primary Sources:

- An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes Against the United States ("Sedition Act"): <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=719>
- Peter Green. [Benjamin Franklin under arrest, ca. 1970–1977]: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009616836/>

Additional Resource(s):

- An image of the First Amendment excerpted from <https://www.congress.gov/content/conan/pdf/GPO-CONAN-2017-10-2.pdf>.

Standards

C3 Indicators:

D2.Civ.8.6-8. Analyze ideas and principles contained in the founding documents of the United States, and explain how they influence the social and political system.

D2.His.13.6-8. Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Teacher's Guide

I. Introduction

- A. Ask students: *Where do you find out about what's happening in your community and the world? Where do you get your news?* Students may respond that they get their news from television, Internet news sites, or even the school newspaper.
1. Explain that the sources they have mentioned are examples of what we call *the press*, a word which originally meant news that was printed on paper using a printing press.
- B. Project **Slide 1**, which shows the First Amendment.
1. Ask students to note freedom of the press and then ask them: *What does "freedom of the press" mean?* Accept reasonable responses. Look for answers that highlight that people need access to information to make wise decisions in voting, forming political opinions, and even deciding how to spend their money or where they might donate money.
 2. Ask students: *What if the government shut down the news sources you just mentioned? What would happen?* Accept reasonable responses. Explain that when government shuts down the press, it is called censorship. Not too long after the First Amendment was ratified in 1791, the government began to censor the press. That's what this lesson is about.

II. Lesson Tasks

- A. Organize students into pairs. [Distribute Handout A – Briefing on the Sedition Act of 1798](#) to each student.
- B. Have the class read Handout A. When they're done, students may ask questions about what they have read.
1. Explain that students may use Handout A to help them understand the text of the Sedition Act that they are about to read.
- C. Distribute a source analysis tool to each student. You can choose to use the **Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool** or the [Scaffolded Analysis Tool for Books & Other Printed Texts](#) depending on your students' needs. Also, distribute [Handout B – The Sedition Act](#) to each student. Students read Handout B and complete the analysis questions on their analysis tool handouts.

For the OBSERVE section of their handouts, you might help get them started by asking them:

- Describe what you see.
- What do you notice first?
- Describe anything about this text that looks strange or unfamiliar.
- What other details can you see?

For the REFLECT section of their handouts, you might help get them started by asking them:

- What was the purpose of this text?
- Who created it?
- Who do you think was its audience?
- What can you learn from examining this?

For the QUESTION section of their handouts, you might help get them started by asking them:

- What do you wonder about... Who? What? Where? When? How?
 1. Have students discuss their primary-source analysis answers in their pairs.
 2. Check for understanding that students understand:
 - what the Sedition Act prohibited (speech and print that criticized the president or Congress, but not the vice president),
 - what the punishment was for violating the Sedition Act (a fine of up to \$2,000 and up to two years in prison), and
 - what the defense was for the accused under the Act (the burden would shift to the defendant to prove that what he published was true).

D. Project **Slide 2**, which shows “Benjamin Franklin under arrest ca. 1770-1777.” Distribute the **Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool** or the [Scaffolded Analysis Tool for Analyzing Political Cartoons](#) to each student, depending on your students’ needs.

1. Have students examine the image and discuss and jot down their answers to each the following OBSERVE questions on the analysis tool:
 - Describe what you see.
 - What do you notice first?
 - What people and objects are shown?
 - What other details can you see?
2. Project **Slide 3**, which shows the same image with bibliographic information. Read the information to students on the slide. Have students examine the image again and discuss the REFLECT and QUESTION sections on their analysis tool. Have each student jot down their answers to each of the REFLECT and QUESTION questions in the appropriate boxes on the analysis tool. As students examine the primary source, you might help get them started by asking them:
 - What’s happening in this cartoon? (REFLECT)
 - What issue do you think this cartoon is about? (REFLECT)
 - What do you think the cartoonist’s opinion on this issue is? (REFLECT)
 - What methods does the cartoonist use to persuade the audience? (REFLECT)
 - What do you wonder about... Who? What? Where? When? How? (QUESTION)

3. Once students have completed the analysis, explain that Ben Franklin became famous as a newspaper printer before the American Revolution. Check for understanding that students understand the use of Benjamin Franklin as a symbol for press freedom.
- E. Project **Slide 4**, which shows instructions for the activity. To assess students' learning about freedom of the press, have the pairs of students create their own poster demonstrating their knowledge of freedom of the press today (or showing the dangers of too much censorship).
1. They should draw on their discussion of the First Amendment, the Sedition Act, the two images they've seen in the lesson, and their everyday experience of the press (linking back to the first question of the introduction).
 2. When students are done, have several pairs present their posters to the class, each explaining:
 - a) images or symbols in the poster, and
 - b) the message about freedom of the press on the poster.

III. Closure

- A. Distribute [Handout C – Exit Slip 3-2-1](#) as an assessment for the lesson.
1. Have students complete the exit slip and return it to you.
- B. To debrief the lesson, ask students:
- Why is freedom of the press important to political equality?
 - What are the consequences of a censored press?
 - Should the government ever be allowed to curb or limit freedom of the press? Why or why not?

This lesson is part of a larger initiative, Citizen U, which aims to integrate civic learning across the curriculum for students in grades 2-12. For more lessons like it, in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies, or to learn more about related creative, community, and professional development opportunities, please visit our [Citizen U website](#)...