

Civic Literacy Activity

A Teacher's Planning Guide

Read • Annotate • Discuss

This guide walks instructors through building a structured civic literacy activity that pairs a primary source from America's founding documents with a current event from a center-rated news outlet. The goal is to move students from abstract understanding of constitutional concepts to concrete analysis of how those concepts operate in the world today.

The example activity in this guide uses **Federalism** as the model concept, with full text, vocabulary, annotation guidance, note-taking scaffolds, and discussion questions. A blank planning template and concept bank for nine additional topics follow.

Overview: What This Activity Does

This activity is built on a simple but powerful premise: constitutional concepts feel remote until students can see them working — or being tested — in real time. Pairing a founding document with a current event gives students a reason to read both carefully. The founding document anchors the concept historically and philosophically. The current event makes it concrete, urgent, and relevant.

A structured note-taking scaffold and layered discussion questions then move students from comprehension toward analysis and deliberation — the higher-order skills your learning objectives require.

The Three-Phase Structure

Phase	Student Action	Purpose
1 — Read	Read both texts actively	Build factual understanding of the concept from its constitutional origin and its contemporary application
2 — Annotate	Take Cornell Notes or Annotate	Develop active reading habits: identifying main ideas, generating questions, and writing summaries in their own words

3 — Discuss	Respond to discussion questions	Move from comprehension to analysis — discussing the concept in both its abstract (theoretical) and concrete (applied) forms
------------------------	---------------------------------	--

How to Build One Activity: Step-by-Step Planning Guide

Follow these six steps to construct a complete activity for any abstract government concept. The federalism example in the next section models each step in finished form.

Step 1

Identify the Concept and Write an Essential Question

Start with one of your course's core concepts and reframe it as an essential question — one that is genuinely arguable, resists a yes/no answer, and connects the founding era to the present. Good essential questions ask: How does [concept] protect both individual freedom and the common good? In what ways is [concept] still functioning as designed — and where is it being tested? When [concept] creates conflict between two legitimate interests, how should it be resolved?

Step 2

Select Your Primary Source

The primary source should be the most direct textual evidence of the concept as the Founders understood it. A focused 100–150 word passage is ideal. Students should be reading actual historical language, not a paraphrase. Prefer passages where the author is making an argument or expressing concern — argument-driven texts are richer for discussion. Include 2–3 sentences of historical context so students understand the political moment.

Step 3

Find Your Current Event

The current event should describe a real situation — a court case, legislative conflict, or policy dispute — that puts the concept into practice. The best pairings describe a genuine conflict or tension (not just a smooth application), have identifiable stakeholders on at least two sides, and are recent enough to feel current but settled enough to be accurately reported.

Source from outlets rated **Center** on the AllSides Media Bias Chart ([allsides.com](https://www.allsides.com)): Associated Press, Reuters, NPR, PBS NewsHour, The Hill, Christian Science Monitor, Axios, Brookings Institution.

Step 4

Build the Vocabulary Set

Select 4–6 terms that appear in both texts. Define them at a student-accessible level. Present vocabulary before reading — students should encounter words primed, not confused. Choose terms that are specific to government or constitutional law, where understanding the term actually changes how a student reads the passage.

Step 5

Write the Annotation Guide

Give students 3–5 specific annotation tasks for each text. Tasks should be actions, not questions: Underline the phrase that most directly defines [concept]. Circle any word that expresses concern about power. Star the idea you find

Step 6

most important. Bracket the sentence that connects to the primary source. Put a question mark next to anything you want to know more about.

Write the Discussion Questions

Write questions in three tiers: **Abstract** (the concept itself), **Concrete** (the current event), and **Synthesis** (connecting both texts). Use the stems below as a starting point and customize for your specific pairing.

Discussion question stems by tier:

Abstract: Why did the Founders consider [concept] essential? · What might government look like without it? · How does it protect both individuals and the nation?

Concrete: Who are the stakeholders and what does each side argue? · Is [concept] working as intended or being tested? · What should happen next, and why?

Synthesis: Which specific language from the founding document applies to this event? · If a Founder could read this article, what might their reaction be? Use evidence from the primary source.

Recommended Primary Sources by Concept

Concept	Recommended Primary Sources
Federalism	Tenth Amendment; Federalist No. 45 or 46 (Madison); Article I, Section 8
Popular Sovereignty	Declaration of Independence, 2nd paragraph; Federalist No. 39 (Madison); Constitution Preamble
Civil Liberties	First, Fourth, or Eighth Amendment; Federalist No. 84 (Hamilton)
Separation of Powers	Federalist No. 51 (Madison); Constitution Articles I–III (opening sections)
Checks & Balances	Federalist No. 51 (Madison); Article I, Section 7; Article II, Section 2
Rule of Law	Federalist No. 78 (Hamilton); Article VI (Supremacy Clause); Marbury v. Madison (1803) excerpt

Natural Rights	Declaration of Independence, 2nd paragraph; John Locke, Second Treatise; Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776)
Due Process	Fifth Amendment; Fourteenth Amendment, Section 1; Federalist No. 78 (Hamilton)
Republicanism	Federalist No. 10 (Madison); Federalist No. 39 (Madison); Constitution Article IV, Section 4
Limited Government	Article I, Sections 8–9; Federalist No. 51 (“If men were angels...”); Bill of Rights introduction

Worked Example: Federalism

The following pages show a complete, ready-to-use activity. You may distribute this directly to students, or use it as a model when building activities for other concepts.

Essential Question

How does the division of power between the national government and the states protect individual liberty — and what happens when those two levels of government disagree?

Concept Definition: Federalism

Federalism is the constitutional arrangement by which governmental power is divided between two relatively autonomous levels: the national (federal) government and the state governments. Each level has its own sphere of authority and can act directly on the people within its jurisdiction. This division was a deliberate design choice by the Framers, intended to prevent any single government from accumulating too much power, allow states to serve as “laboratories of democracy,” and protect individual liberty by ensuring citizens have recourse to multiple levels of government.

Federalism in the United States has evolved from the strict dual federalism of the nineteenth century through the cooperative federalism of the New Deal era to the ongoing debates of today over which level of government should control immigration enforcement, healthcare, education, and environmental policy.

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Federalism	A system of government in which power is constitutionally divided between a national government and state governments, each with its own authority
Reserved Powers	Powers not granted to the federal government and not prohibited to the states; reserved to the states or the people under the Tenth Amendment

Enumerated Powers	The specific powers explicitly granted to Congress in Article I, Section 8 (e.g., to coin money, raise armies, regulate interstate commerce)
Supremacy Clause	Article VI of the Constitution; establishes that the Constitution and federal law are “the supreme Law of the Land,” taking precedence over state laws when they conflict
Preemption	The legal doctrine by which federal law overrides state law in areas where Congress has legislated, derived from the Supremacy Clause
Concurrent Powers	Powers shared by both federal and state governments, such as the power to tax, build roads, and establish courts

Text 1: Primary Source

Document	Federalist No. 45 and the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution
Author / Year	James Madison (Federalist No. 45, 1788); Ratified by the States (Tenth Amendment, 1791)

Historical Context

By 1788, the proposed Constitution had set off a fierce national debate. Anti-Federalists feared that a powerful central government would gradually consume the authority of the states. James Madison, writing as “Publius” in the Federalist Papers, sought to reassure skeptics that the Constitution’s design preserved meaningful state authority. Three years later, as a further assurance, the Tenth Amendment was added as part of the Bill of Rights to explicitly reserve to the states all powers not delegated to the national government.

Excerpt: Federalist No. 45 (Madison, 1788)

“The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected. The powers reserved to the several States will extend to all the objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people, and the internal order, improvement, and prosperity of the State.”

— James Madison, Federalist No. 45, January 26, 1788

Excerpt: Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Ratified 1791)

“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

— U.S. Constitution, Amendment X

As you read the primary source, try to:

- Underline the phrase that most directly defines what belongs to the federal government and what belongs to the states
- Circle any word or phrase that expresses concern about the concentration of power
- Put a star next to the claim you find most persuasive — or most questionable
- Put a question mark next to anything you do not understand or want to know more about

Text 2: Current Event

Source	Associated Press (Center-rated, AllSides Media Bias Chart)
Topic	States vs. Federal Government: The Ongoing Conflict Over Immigration Enforcement Authority
How to Find It	Search AP News (apnews.com) for: <i>“Texas immigration enforcement” OR “state immigration law federal preemption” OR “SB4 Supreme Court.”</i> Filter to 2024–2025. Or search NPR (npr.org) for: <i>“federalism immigration enforcement states.”</i>

Background for the Teacher: What This Situation Illustrates

In recent years, several states — most prominently Texas — have passed laws asserting state authority to enforce immigration law and to detain or remove individuals who are in the country without legal status. The federal government has consistently argued that immigration enforcement is a federal responsibility, and that state laws in this area are preempted by federal law under the Supremacy Clause. Courts have been asked to decide whether states have reserved power authority to act in this area or whether federal law controls entirely.

This dispute is a direct and current illustration of Madison’s claim in Federalist No. 45: that the lines between federal and state authority are both constitutionally defined and continuously contested.

Connection to the Primary Source:

Madison wrote in 1788 that the powers of the states “will extend to all the objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people.” States arguing for immigration enforcement authority contend that border security and public safety fall within this reserved power. The federal government counters that foreign relations and the regulation of who may enter the country are precisely the “external objects” Madison identified as federal responsibilities. The debate is, in a real sense, an argument about which clause of that single Federalist passage applies.

As you read the current event article, try to:

- Bracket the sentence that most directly connects to a phrase in the primary source
- Underline the specific law, court ruling, or government action at the center of the dispute
- Put a double underline under the name of each stakeholder mentioned (federal government, state government, affected individuals, courts)
- In the margin, write whether each stakeholder’s position reflects a federalism argument — and if so, which kind

Note-Taking Scaffold: Cornell Notes or [Annotating Guide](#)

Instructor note: Cornell Notes work best when the cue column is filled in before or during reading, the notes column is completed during or immediately after, and the summary is written from memory. This sequence reinforces genuine comprehension rather than copying.

Cues & Questions <i>Fill in before or during reading</i>	Main Notes <i>Fill in during or after reading</i>
Guiding questions: <i>What is federalism?</i> <i>Where does it come from?</i> <i>What problem was it meant to solve?</i> <i>Who holds what power?</i> <i>How is it being tested today?</i> <i>Why does it matter?</i> Your cues / key terms:	From the primary source: <i>Main argument:</i> <i>Key evidence or language:</i> From the current event: <i>What is the situation?</i> <i>What is each side arguing?</i> <i>What does this have to do with federalism?</i>

Summary — Write from memory, in your own words:

In 3–4 sentences, explain: What is federalism? What do the two texts tell you about how it works? How does the current event connect to what the Founders wrote?

Discussion Questions

These questions move students progressively from conceptual understanding to evidence-based analysis. Use for full-class Socratic discussion, small group deliberation, individual written preparation, or Socratic seminar. Ask students to write a one-sentence answer before discussion begins.

Part A

Abstract — The Concept Itself

These questions explore federalism as an idea, without reference to any specific current event. Students engage with the concept on its own terms, using the primary source as their main evidence.

1. In your own words, why did Madison believe it was necessary to divide power between the national government and the states? What was he afraid would happen if one level held all the power?
2. Madison argues that the powers of the states are “numerous and indefinite” while federal powers are “few and defined.” Do you think this description is still accurate today? Explain.
3. What might American government look like if there were no federalism — if all power were held either by the national government alone or by the states alone? What would be gained? What would be lost?

Part B

Concrete — The Current Event

These questions focus on the news article. Students must use evidence from the text to support their answers.

1. **Stakeholders:** Who are the key stakeholders in the situation described in the article? List at least three and briefly describe what each wants.
2. **Legal argument:** Which level of government — federal or state — do you think has the stronger argument in this dispute, based on what you know about federalism? What evidence from the article or the Constitution supports your answer?
3. **Representation:** Who, if anyone, do you think is most affected by this conflict — and are they represented in the debate? Explain.

Part C

Synthesis — Connecting Both Texts

The highest-order questions. Students must hold both texts in mind simultaneously and construct an argument that moves between the founding era and the present.

1. **Textual connection:** Find a specific phrase from the primary source that is directly relevant to the current event. Quote the phrase, then explain in 2–3 sentences exactly how it applies to the current situation.

2. **Functioning as designed?** Madison believed the constitutional design of federalism would prevent dangerous concentrations of power and protect liberty. Based on the current event, do you think federalism is working as he intended? What evidence supports your conclusion?
3. **Founders' reaction:** If James Madison could read the article today, what do you think his reaction would be? Use at least one specific quote from the primary source in your answer.

Teacher Facilitation Notes

Option	Sequencing Approaches
Standard	Whole-class reading → independent note-taking → small-group discussion → class-wide synthesis
Jigsaw	Split class into primary source groups and current event groups; each becomes the “expert” and teaches the other
Flipped	Both texts assigned as homework with the note-taking scaffold; class time used entirely for discussion
Timed Practice	Use as an AP-style timed exercise: 15 min reading & annotation; 20 min writing a short argument

Student Need	Differentiation Strategy
Support	Pre-annotate one copy of each text with teacher highlights; provide sentence frames for each discussion question
Advanced	Add a third text (dissenting court opinion, policy brief, or Brookings analysis) and require a third perspective in the synthesis response
ELL	Provide the vocabulary table in advance; allow glossary use during reading; pair with a language partner for annotation

Assessment suggestions:

- Exit ticket: “In one sentence, explain how the current event illustrates federalism — and cite one phrase from the primary source.”
- Short written argument: “Using both texts as evidence, argue whether federalism is functioning as Madison intended in this situation.” (3–5 paragraphs)

- Discussion grade: structured rubric scoring use of evidence, engagement with others' ideas, and connection between abstract and concrete

Blank Planning Template

Use the following template when building an activity for any concept. Complete each section before finalizing the student-facing materials.

Field	Your Planning Notes
Concept	
Essential Question	
Concept Definition(2–3 sentences)	
Primary Source Document	
Author / Year	
Excerpt(100–150 words)	
Historical Context(2–3 sentences)	
Current Event Source & Outlet	
Headline / Topic	
Connection to Primary Source(2 sentences)	
Vocabulary Terms (4–6)	

Primary SourceAnnotation Tasks (3–5)	
Current EventAnnotation Tasks (3–5)	
Abstract Discussion Qs (2–3)	
Concrete Discussion Qs (2–3)	
Synthesis Discussion Qs (2)	

Concept Bank: Source Pairings for Additional Activities

The table below provides recommended primary source pairings and current event themes for nine additional concepts. For each, a suggested essential question frame is also included. Revisit your current event pairings each semester — the founding documents do not change; the current events do.

Concept	Recommended Primary Sources	Current Event Themes to Search	Essential Question Frame
Popular Sovereignty	Declaration of Independence, 2nd paragraph Federalist No. 39 (Madison) Constitution Preamble	Voter access legislation Gerrymandering court cases Ballot initiatives overturned by legislatures	When the will of the people and decisions of elected officials conflict, which should prevail?
Separation of Powers	Federalist No. 51 (Madison) Constitution Articles I, II, III (opening sections)	Executive orders challenged in court Congressional subpoenas of executive officials Presidential impoundment of funds	Is the boundary between the three branches clear enough to prevent one from becoming too powerful?
Checks & Balances	Federalist No. 51 (Madison) Article I, Section 7 (veto) Article II, Section 2 (appointments)	Senate confirmation disputes Presidential veto overrides Judicial review of federal statutes	Can each branch of government effectively limit the others, or have those checks weakened over time?
Civil Liberties	First, Fourth, or Eighth Amendment Federalist No. 84 (Hamilton)	Social media & free speech Search & surveillance technology Bail reform & pretrial detention	Where is the line between the government's interest in public safety and an individual's constitutional freedoms?

Natural Rights	Declaration of Independence, 2nd paragraph John Locke, Second Treatise Ch. 2 Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776)	Healthcare / housing policy debates Criminal justice reform Bodily autonomy in medical decisions	Do people have rights the government did not grant — and if so, who decides what those rights are?
Rule of Law	Federalist No. 78 (Hamilton) Article VI (Supremacy Clause) Marbury v. Madison (1803) excerpt	Refusal to comply with court orders Sanctuary city policies Contempt of Congress proceedings	What happens when a powerful person or institution refuses to follow the law — and what mechanisms exist to hold them accountable?
Due Process	Fifth Amendment Fourteenth Amendment, Section 1 Federalist No. 78 (Hamilton)	Deportation without hearings Asset forfeiture without conviction Student disciplinary proceedings	Is the government required to follow fair procedures even when dealing with people suspected of wrongdoing?
Republicanism	Federalist No. 10 (Madison) Federalist No. 39 (Madison) Article IV, Section 4	Money in elections / representation Term limits debates Electoral College reform	Does the U.S. system of representative government actually translate the will of the people into policy?
Limited Government	Article I, Sections 8–9 Federalist No. 51 (“If men were angels...”) Bill of Rights, Madison’s introduction	Executive emergency power declarations Scope of federal regulatory authority Congressional delegation to agencies	How do we make government powerful enough to govern effectively while keeping it limited enough not to threaten liberty?

A note on keeping pairings current:

The specific articles you select will matter as much as any other element of this activity. Revisit your current event pairings each semester. A concept that felt distant last year may have a perfect illustrative case this year, and a pairing that felt urgent two years ago may now feel dated. The founding documents do not change. The current events do. Keeping the current event current is what keeps the activity alive.