

Founding Documents: The Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution

Students will:

- Understand the historical context and significance of the Magna Carta's creation
- Read short selections from the document and express the ideas it contains in their own words
- *Assessment:* Identify at least three differences between the governments of England in 1215 and the United States in the 21st century
- *Assessment:* Match four ideas originally found in the Magna Carta with parallel passages from the founding documents of the United States

Time Requirement:

45-60 minutes

Supplies:

Quote Comparisons: the Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution worksheets (one per student, included)

Guided Discussion:

1. Hand out *England, 1215* worksheet (included) and have students read on their own. Allow time for questions about unfamiliar ideas or terminology.
2. Reiterate that the Magna Carta was a significant document because it placed limits on the power of the king or ruler.
3. What documents limit the power of our government leaders? Consider not only national-level documents, but also state constitutions, etc. Explain that many of the ideas in the Magna Carta were repeated more than 550 years later in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and state constitutions.

Classroom Activity:

1. Hand out *Quote Comparison* activity (included) and have students match quotes from the Magna Carta to significant founding documents in the United States. Give students time to complete, then review the correct answers. Unfamiliar terminology is clarified on the worksheet, but students (particularly younger students) may need additional guidance and explanation.
2. Note that most of the rights outlined in the Magna Carta only applied to the landholding nobility, a small percentage of England's total population. Other rights are extended to "freemen," but this still left out a significant portion of the population. Who would be left out? Consider the American founding documents. Who (at least initially) was not included?
3. Pretend that they have gone back in time and are living at the passage of either the Magna Carta or the U.S. Constitution.

Extension Activities:

- Have students pretend they have traveled back in time and are living at the passage of either the Magna Carta or the U.S. Constitution. Ask them to write a “letter to the editor” explaining what they do and/or do not like about the document in question. Are they generally in favor of it or not?
- Choose either the U.S. Constitution or the Magna Carta to study. Divide the class into two groups, one in favor of the document, the other opposed. Have students research why people, at the time, may have been for or against it. Consider the points of view of those who are in power, and those who are (or who are not) included. Have students campaign and stage a debate, then vote. Were any minds changed?

Missouri Grade Level Expectations (GLEs):

Communication Arts - Reading

1. Develop and apply skills and strategies to the reading process
3. Develop and apply skills and strategies to comprehend, analyze and evaluate nonfiction from a variety of culture and times

Communication Arts - Writing

1. Apply a writing process in composing text
2. Compose well-developed text (optional; for older students)

Communication Arts – Listening and Speaking

1. Develop and apply effective listening skills and strategies

Social Studies

1. Knowledge of the principles expressed in documents shaping constitutional democracy in the United States
2. Knowledge of principles and processes of governance systems
- 3b. Knowledge of continuity and change in the history of the world
6. Knowledge of relationships of the individual and groups to institutions and cultural traditions

Quote Comparisons: the Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution

England, 1215

Under the reign of King John, England is faced with high taxes, a series of unsuccessful wars, and religious conflict with the Pope. Unhappy with the state of the country, a group of wealthy noblemen called **barons** rebel against the king. The king and barons battle throughout the first half of the year to determine who will gain the upper hand. Finally, in June 1215, after six months of fighting, the victorious nobles force King John to sign an agreement that will eventually become known as the Magna Carta, or “Great Charter” in Latin.

The new document addresses many complaints that the barons have with the king. Before this time, the king was thought to hold absolute power; however, the Magna Carta puts limits on royal power and lists the rights of the barons and of all free men.

If you think this story sounds familiar, it probably is. Over 550 years later, a group of American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain when they felt King George III was infringing on their rights. In fact, many of the ideas in the founding documents of American government—the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and state constitutions—were directly inspired by the principles laid out in the Magna Carta.

Below are four quotes from the U.S. Constitution that are directly related to parts of the Magna Carta. On the table on the next page, match the quotes from the U.S. Constitution with the quotes from the Magna Carta. In the middle column, write each quote from the Magna Carta in your own words. A glossary is provided to help with unfamiliar terms.

Quotes from the U.S. Constitution

Article 1, Section 8: “The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises , to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States...”	Article 2, Section 3: “The Trial of all Crimes, except in Cases of Impeachment, shall be by Jury.”
Amendment 5: “...nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation .”	Amendment 6: “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right...to be confronted with the witnesses against him...”

Quote from the Magna Carta	What does it mean?	Related Quote from the U.S. Constitution
12. "No scutage nor aid ...shall be imposed on our kingdom, unless by common counsel of our kingdom..."		
28. "No constable or other bailiff ...shall take corn or other provisions from anyone without immediately tendering money ..."		
38. "...no official shall place a man on trial upon his own unsupported statement, without producing credible witnesses to the truth of it."		
39. "No freemen shall be taken or imprisoned...or exiled or in any way destroyed...except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land."		

Glossary

Aid: tax

Compensation: repayment

Counsel: agreement

Credible: trustworthy or reliable

"Duties, Imposts and Excises": types of taxes

Freemen: men who are not slaves or serfs

Scutage: a type of tax

Tendering: paying [the owner]