



UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST AMENDMENT THROUGH *BARNETTE*

Lesson Plan for Grades 7-12

Teacher Resource: First Amendment Overview

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects several fundamental rights that are essential for a free and democratic society. These rights limit the government's power and ensure that individuals can express themselves, practice their beliefs, and participate in civic life.

Text of the First Amendment

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Five Core Freedoms Protected

1. Freedom of Religion
 - a. Establishment Clause: The government cannot establish an official religion or favor one religion over another.
 - b. Free Exercise Clause: Individuals are free to practice their religion—or choose not to—without government interference.
2. Freedom of Speech
 - a. Individuals can express opinions publicly without government censorship.
 - b. Includes spoken, written, symbolic (gestures, art), and some forms of protest.
 - c. Limitations: Speech that incites violence, threats, or lawbreaking may not be protected.
3. Freedom of the Press
 - a. The press can publish information, opinions, and news without government control.
 - b. Supports accountability and informed public discourse.
4. Freedom of Assembly
 - a. Citizens can gather peacefully for protests, meetings, or demonstrations.
 - b. Government cannot ban groups from meeting, as long as they remain nonviolent.
5. Right to Petition
 - a. Citizens can request changes or raise concerns to government officials without fear of punishment.
 - b. Includes letters, petitions, protests, and online communications.



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Why the First Amendment Matters

- Protects individual autonomy and conscience.
- Ensures minority voices are heard, even if unpopular.
- Provides a foundation for democracy, accountability, and civic engagement.
- Balances government authority and personal freedom, as emphasized by Justice Robert H. Jackson in *Barnette*.

Connection to *Barnette*

- The *Barnette* case specifically addressed freedom of speech and freedom of religion.
- Justice Jackson argued that the government cannot compel individuals to express beliefs or participate in rituals, even if intended to promote patriotism.
- Jackson emphasized that protecting minority rights strengthens democracy, a principle students can apply to current events.

Classroom Tips

- Use examples students can relate to: school rules, social media, protests, holidays.
- Highlight the difference between protected expression and illegal actions.
- Ask students to consider why even unpopular opinions deserve protection.