

Political Cartoons and the First Amendment

Purpose:

In this lesson student groups examine political cartoons and identify current controversies related to First Amendment expression. The class is divided into focus groups and assigned a specific task to complete, using student-selected cartoons. In their presentation to the rest of the class, they will demonstrate specific knowledge about First Amendment expression. At the end of the lesson, students create their own cartoon, using cartooning techniques.

Procedure:

1. Prior to presenting this lesson, collect political cartoons that represent First Amendment issues. Look for cartoons in newspapers and newsmagazines. There are also a number of web sites where political cartoons can be found such as cagle.com, msnbc.msn.com, time.com, politicalcartoons.com, politicalhumor.about.com and others.
2. Divide the class into groups of four students each. Distribute a set of cartoons to each group. Working in their groups, students should identify (1) the First Amendment right depicted in each cartoon; (2) the issue or controversy represented in the cartoon; and (3) the opinion of the cartoonist on the First Amendment issue. Conduct a brief class discussion to check student understanding of the rights included in the First Amendment and their background knowledge about the various controversies represented on the task cards.
3. Assign each group one of the activities described on the task cards at the end of the lesson. For a class of 30 students, two groups per activity should provide for even distribution of the group assignments. Allow students about 20 minutes to complete their activity. Explain that at the end of the activity, groups will select specific cartoons to use in a presentation in which they will share their First Amendment expertise by "teaching" the rest of the class.
4. Allow approximately five minutes per group for the presentations.
5. To close the lesson, have students examine the cartoons again to select several examples that demonstrate how cartoonists use the techniques of exaggeration, symbolism and simplicity to illustrate their ideas. Students should develop their own cartoon about the First Amendment. Explain to students that their cartoons should

- Illustrate a First Amendment controversy that is more current than those provided in this lesson.
- Demonstrate their knowledge of the First Amendment.
- Make use of the special techniques of a cartoonist.

Enrichment/Extension:

Encourage students to supplement their political cartoons by creating songs, stories, posters, and other media about First Amendment issues. Arrange for these works to be displayed in the school hall or at a special First Amendment Seminar organized by your class.

Task 1

The Benefits of the First Amendment

Consider the benefits of the First Amendment as you analyze the cartoons. (Remember, the benefits include the marketplace of ideas, enrichment of society, providing a safety valve, protection on minority rights, and a check on government.) What benefit is the focus of each cartoon? What is the connection between this benefit and the cartoonist's view?

After you have analyzed the cartoons select one cartoon to depict each benefit of the First Amendment. Plan a five-minute presentation to the class that will

- Prove that you have completed your task by teaching your special focus on the First Amendment to the rest of the class.
- Engage the audience by asking questions and guiding your classmates in learning about your focus on the First Amendment.
- Use transparencies of the cartoons you selected.

Task 2

Technology and the First Amendment

Many of the cartoons present First Amendment controversies that were not possible in 1791 when the Bill of Rights was ratified. Select cartoons that best illustrate the impact of increasing technology on First Amendment rights. Prepare to explain the relevance of the First Amendment to advances in technology.

After you have selected the best cartoons to illustrate the impact of technology on the First Amendment, plan a five-minute presentation to the class that will

- Prove that you have completed your task by teaching your special focus on the First Amendment to the rest of the class.
- Engage the audience by asking questions and guiding your classmates in learning about your focus on the First Amendment.
- Use transparencies of the cartoons you selected.

Task 3

Young People, Public Schools, and the First Amendment

Many First Amendment controversies have taken place in public schools. Other controversies deal with protecting young people from harmful material. Analyze the cartoons, identifying those that deal with the school as a special setting or the protection of young people. Choose several cartoons that demonstrate the significance of the First Amendment in the lives of young people, including their lives at school.

When you have selected these cartoons, plan a five-minute presentation that will

- Prove that you have completed your task by teaching your special focus on the First Amendment to the rest of the class.
- Engage the audience by asking questions and guiding your classmates in learning about your focus on the First Amendment.
- Use transparencies of the cartoons you selected.

Task 4

Limits to First Amendment Expression

Our First Amendment rights are not absolute. The Supreme Court has established some tests to help decide when free expression rights can be limited. (Remember, these tests include clear and present danger; fighting words; libel and slander; obscenity; conflict with other legitimate social or governmental interests; and inappropriate time, place, and manner.) Analyze the cartoons to determine which ones deal with limits on freedom of expression. Decide which test would apply in the examples dealt with in the cartoons and discuss what you think the cartoonist's view of this limitation is.

Select several cartoons that focus on current controversies regarding limits on free expression. Plan a five-minute presentation to the class that will

- Prove that you have completed your task by teaching your special focus on the First Amendment to the rest of the class.
- Engage the audience by asking questions and guiding your classmates in learning about your focus on the First Amendment.
- Use transparencies of the cartoons you selected.