

Civility in the News

Subject: Civics, Social Studies

Grades: 5-8

Time: 40-60 minutes

Background: Using George Washington's *Rules of Civility* as guidelines for good citizenship and civil behavior, this lesson will help students apply historical sources to current local news, and understand how civility improves the functioning of a free society. This lesson also acquaints students with analytically reading newspaper articles, and helps them to be aware of potential bias.

SOL: This lesson will fulfill the following SOLs in Civics and Economics:

- 1a: analyzing and interpreting evidence from primary and secondary sources, including charts, graphs, and political cartoons
- 1d: determining the accuracy and validity of information by separating fact and opinion and recognizing bias
- 1e: constructing informed, evidence-based arguments from multiple sources
- 1f: determining multiple cause-and-effect relationships that impact political and economic events;
- 3c: describing the duties of citizenship, including obeying the laws, paying taxes, defending the nation, and serving in court
- 3d: examining the responsibilities of citizenship, including registering and voting, communicating with government officials, participating in political campaigns, keeping informed about current issues, and respecting differing opinions in a diverse society
- **3e:** evaluating how civic and social duties address community needs and serve the public good

Materials

- At least one local print newspaper per student. The teacher may wish to check for articles with inappropriate content.
 - If the local newspaper publishes online and the classroom has computer access, this may be an acceptable alternative
- List of questions/prompts (see procedure for examples, may be modified)
- Print or online version of George Washington's *Rules of Civility*

Procedure

1. Introduce or review George Washington's *Rules of Civility*. Have students browse the rules for a couple of minutes, then volunteer to read a few aloud. Explain when they were written and why. Questions for the class may include:
 - a. Why do you think George Washington wanted to write these rules down?
 - b. Which of these rules do we still follow today?
 - c. What happens if people don't follow those rules?
 - d. What is the difference between civic and civil?
2. Explain to the class their assignment: they will be given a newspaper from which they will choose an article that shows an example of civility in action. Examples may be positive (ie considerate or kind acts) or negative (ie minor crimes, gossip, not respecting authority). Remind students that any source they read may be biased. Provide analyzing techniques that will help students find a suitable article more quickly, such as browsing titles, pictures, and captions. If time, show and discuss an article for demonstration. Put the list of questions on the board, and tell students that whichever article they choose must fit at least three of the questions. Explain that students will write down a brief (1 paragraph) summary of their article and the answers to at least 3 questions, and share their article with the class.
3. Pass the newspapers out to the class, and supervise their work. Once students have completed the questions, facilitate their presentations. Ask clarifying questions, or repeat some of the questions on the board if students do not spend long enough on their presentation. Ask students:
 - a. How using civility helps society run more smoothly.
 - b. How they can show civility to each other at school and in their community.Students will submit their summaries and short answers as evaluation.

Evaluation

1. A student's work should
 - a. Accurately identify an article that demonstrates civility (or lack of civility) in the community and can answer at least three of the provided questions
 - b. Summarize the article in a clear and concise way
 - c. Accurately answer at least three questions in a way that shows evaluation of the article and its relation to civility
 - d. Be able to make a clear presentation to the class
2. Reflect on your teaching of this lesson. What went well, and what did not? How will students who did not do well at this lesson learn the lesson's objectives?

Appendix A: Example Questions

1. Who was civil/uncivil in this story, and how?
2. How might this article be biased?
3. What examples of good/bad citizenship do you notice? How might these actions be considered civil/uncivil, and why?
4. Which laws were kept/broken in this story? Why do you think those laws exist?
5. Which Rules of Civility did this story follow or break? Why do you think those Rules exist?

Appendix B: Additional Classroom Activities

1. George Washington's Tip of the Day/Week: Write a different Rule of Civility on the board every day or week throughout a unit on civics, or even the entire year. If there are limited class meetings, choosing the most applicable rules to modern society is best. Students could optionally be allowed to choose/write the rules on the board. If time, include a 2-5 minute conversation on the rule at the beginning of class.
2. Letter to the editor: Using the concepts learned from the "Civility in the News" lesson, have students write a "letter to the editor" about using civility in the current community, or what civility means to them. Students should write the essay as if they were writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. It should be brief, clear, and persuasive. If appropriate, encourage students to send their essays to a local newspaper for potential publication.