

SOCIAL STUDIES GRADE 8 CULMINATING ACTIVITY

TIMEFRAME: This activity can take between two and three weeks to complete and builds on the knowledge that students have acquired by completing their study of the grade eight curriculum units.

OBJECTIVES: This activity addresses many content standards and content focus statements from all four units in the grade 8 program and every social studies content standard area. Additionally, the activity provides for authentic application of numerous social studies skills as well as MSDE reading and writing standards.

MATERIALS

Preparation for Simulated Congressional Hearings

- Student Textbooks: *We the People, Level II*
- Student copies of “The Simulated Congressional Hearing,” “How do we pick our teams,” and “Unit Team Roles,” “What do I need to know...,” “Sample Research Guide,” and “Research Websites.”
- Five-six copies of each unit of the “Students’ Unit Questions” per class
- Five-six copies of each unit of the Sample Follow-up Questions” per class
- Folders, one per student

Simulated Congressional Hearings

- One set per class of “Timekeeper Signs”
- Student copies of “Scoring Rubric”
- Certificates of achievement, one per student
- Optional: Student copies of SCH Evaluation, student SSL Assignment, Student Reflection

Simulated Congressional Hearings—Judges’ Materials

- Folders, one per judge to contain judges’ handouts
- Copies of “Simulated Congressional Hearing Group Rubric,” one per judge for each student group
- Three copies of “Judges’ Unit and Follow Up Questions” (provided in teacher’s manual)
- Copies of “Judges’ Instructions” (in teacher’s manual) and “Judges’ Instructions in Brief”, one per judge.
- Pencils and blank paper for judges’ notes

POSSIBLE ONLINE RESOURCES

- <http://www.civiced.org/index.php> - “The Center for Civic Education” - This is the web site of the organization that publishes *We the People* textbooks and administers nationwide simulated congressional hearings at elementary, middle, and high-school levels. It contains information for both teachers and parents to help with SCH preparations.
- <http://www.thecapitol.net/CustomPrograms/testify2agenda.html> - “Testifying Before Congressional Committees” - This web site is a resource for teachers. It offers background information about how to prepare and effectively testify at a real congressional hearing.

CONTENT BACKGROUND

A simulated congressional hearing (SCH) is the culminating activity for *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* curriculum. It is a performance-based assessment in which students demonstrate their understanding of the United States Constitution, Bill of Rights and American history. Each student group is assigned one of the six units contained in the *We the People* text. (See Teacher Resource 4 for suggestions and variations of how to divide students into groups.)

During the SCH, student groups assume the role of constitutional experts. First, the group members read a four-minute prepared speech before a simulated congressional committee, usually adults from the community or government. (See Organizational Resources 2&3 as well as below for how to contact judges and whom to invite) Following the prepared statements, students respond to six minutes of follow-up questions posed by the committee. The purpose of the follow-up questions is to give students the opportunity to demonstrate the depth of their understanding of the Constitution, Bill of Rights and American history and to allow students time to clarify issues they may have raised in their prepared speeches.

CULMINATING ACTIVITY PREPARATION FOR TEACHERS

Divide the class into six heterogeneous groups. Assign each group one of the six units from the *We the People* text. Each student will become an expert of the content of his/her assigned unit. Consider holding the SCH as a team-wide or school-wide event.

Invite school system, community members and government officials to participate as judges for the event. Eighteen simulated congressional committee members (judges), three for each unit group of students, are ideal but not always practical. If conducting the SCH as a classroom activity, minimally, six judges are needed to listen to and evaluate the presentations from all six groups. If conducting the SCH as a team-wide event, Eighteen judges are ideal so that a different committee evaluates each student group. People who serve as judges are usually recruited from the community. The panel of judges may include, but should not be limited to, the following:

- Your county social studies coordinator and specialists
- Your social studies resource teacher
- Central Office administrators
- Professors from local colleges or universities
- Members of Congress or staffers from your congressional representative's local office
- Members of state legislatures or staffers
- Local government officials
- Leaders of community groups or service organizations
- PTSA members and officers
- Booster club members and officers
- Lawyers
- Middle or high school social studies teachers.
- College Students
- Parents
- BOE Members

Support for planning and preparation for a team-wide SCH is available from the Maryland Department of Education, Office of Social Studies, <http://www.msde.state.md.us/>, Maryland's We the People, <http://www.marylandciviceducation.org/>, and your Center for Civic Education District Coordinator <http://www.civiced.org>.

STEP ONE: ENGAGING THE STUDENTS

Time frame: 2-3 days

MOTIVATION

Explain the simulated congressional hearing (SCH) and the six units. Explain to students the purposes and procedures of a congressional hearing. Distribute *We the People* textbooks and direct students' attention to the Table of Contents. Point out the six units of the textbook. Have students read the title of each unit and the questions under each. Explain that each student group will become experts on one of the six units for the SCH. Tell students that each lesson they see listed in the table of contents will help them locate the information they will need for this activity. Distribute "Instructions for Students." (Student Resource 1)

PROCEDURE

- 1. Assemble students into six heterogeneous groups.** Assign each student group one of the six units. (See teacher Resource 4) for ideas on how to assign groups. The more democratic you can make the procedures from the beginning, the more of a buy-in the students will have. Review expectations for group work procedures and behaviors.
- 2. If captains are picking groups, distribute and introduce "How do we pick our teams" (Student Resource).** Review the group member roles. Assign roles or have group captains work with their groups to determine a role for each group member.
- 3. Review the steps of the simulated Hearing preparation to ensure students understand how groups will prepare for the hearing.**
- 4. Distribute the appropriate "Student's Unit Questions" (Teacher Resource) to each student group.** Give each student a copy of his/her group's assigned unit questions. Allow time for student groups to read and discuss the assigned questions. *
- 5. Have groups begin preparing for the SCH by reviewing their unit questions as a team.** Captains can lead a group discussion of what they already know (consider doing a KWL chart with each group) and direct groups to the pages in the text that correspond with their unit. Have students use their textbooks to discuss and record answers to each of the assigned unit questions. Provide additional resources as necessary.
- 6. Students write the rough draft to their speech question.** Each student will write a rough draft answer to their unit question. Since there are usually three parts to the prompt, guide students to use the *We the People...* text and write at least three paragraphs in response to the questions. Tell them the more thorough their rough drafts are, the easier it is to create their final speech.

* As you will note, there are three questions for each unit. As a team of teachers, decide which specific question the students will answer in their speech. They do not answer all three in their speech. At the high school level, students actually write three different speeches, which they present at different rounds of competition. At the middle school level, this model can be followed or as a modification, students need only prepare one speech. The remaining questions can serve to help students check their understanding of the entire unit.

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS:

- Observe students' participation in their groups during the SCH preparation.
- Grade all students' rough drafts of their speeches

STEP TWO: DIVIDING UP THE WORK

Time Frame: 3-5 days

MOTIVATION

Have students read their rough drafts to each other in their groups. Captains can direct this within their groups. Students should listen for common ideas the group mentioned, misconceptions that need to be clarified, and varying writing styles the group wants to take advantage of. After they have all read their rough drafts out loud, students should mark on their drafts parts of their speech that the team liked. Now it is time to divide up roles.

PROCEDURE

- 1. Review with the students or have the captains review the various team roles with their teams.** These are the role student will take on during this next phase of preparation. They include:
 - a. Head Writer:** Responsible for taking the rough drafts of the speech and compiling them into the next version of the speech. Refine the language, combine ideas, make sure all parts of the question are answered, and identify where some outside research is needed for speech.
 - b. Historian:** Finds historical examples including Supreme Court Cases to support the questions in the speech. Making sure the group as a whole understands the historical context of the unit and speech. Uses Student Resource 5 to organize and submit work.
 - c. Current Events Guru:** Collects news articles relevant to the speech and unit topic. Finds current event information including Supreme Court Cases, new laws, community events and other current events that will help support arguments made in the speech and in follow-up questions. Uses Student Resource 5 to organize and submit work.
 - d. Constitutional Scholar:** Finds the Constitutional applications for the speech and other parts of the unit. Needs to be able to mention different articles in the Constitution such as Article II for the powers of the president. Uses Student Resource 5 to organize and submit work.
 - e. Copy Editor:** Takes the Head Writer's draft of the speech and incorporates the research from the other team members into the speech. Edits the speech for grammar and wording.
- 2. Establish due dates and check points during this process.** Teachers will want to establish an earlier due date for the Head writer, then a later due date for the Historian, Current Events Guru and Constitutional Scholar. The Copy editor should have the last due date. Students can be expected to find at least three pieces of outside research each to put into their speech. This part of the process is very fluid with students doing different tasks at different times. Let them put the pressure on each other and you will find they will do more for their peers than they do for you. 😊
- 3. When students finish their particular task, they can help other members of the team, find more research for other parts of their unit, or begin answering follow-up questions.** Once the speech is underway, follow-up question preparation can begin. See the next step for more details. But if teachers are worried about keeping students on task, assign them the other speech questions to answer and check their knowledge of the whole unit.

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS:

- ❑ Observe students' participation in their groups during the SCH preparation.
- ❑ Grade writer's drafts of the speech, research from the Constitutional Scholar, Historian, and Current Events Guru, and the editor's version of the speech.

PART THREE: PUTTING THE PRESENTATION TOGETHER

Time Frame: 3-5 Days

MOTIVATION

Ask the editor to provide enough copies of the speech for the whole group and one for you. Now the students will read their speech out loud while you time it. Signal the 4-minute mark. Most groups' speeches will be too long. This is okay, and good! For the first time, they have done more work than necessary! At this point students will start talking about what they need to take out, change, edit, add in, etc. Hand out the **Judges' score sheet**, which the students should use as their rubric to continue to improve the speech and guide their research and preparation.

PROCEDURE

1. Once again, students will divide up roles for the next step in the process.

a. Editing the speech

b. Researching and answering practice Follow-up questions

Usually, the head writer may take over the next round of edits, but different groups may choose otherwise. All other students in the group will begin answering follow-up questions in order to extend their expertise of their unit.

- 2. Have students answer the practice follow-up questions by using the *We the People...* text.** After the questions are answered students assume their previous roles and find outside research to address 3-5 of the follow-up questions. This step in the process helps them come up with examples when the judges ask them questions.
- 3. Students will share their progress.** At a midpoint, the editor needs to share the next version of the speech with the team. Often the editor will then turn over the editing responsibilities to another group member and begin researching the practice follow-up questions. Likewise, all other students need to share the research and answers they generated for the follow-up questions. The process of editing the speech, timing it in their groups, sharing research and quizzing each other on practice follow-ups should continue throughout this time frame.
- 4. Establish due dates for the edited version of the speech as well as answers and research for practice follow-up questions.** While the students have taken major responsibility for their work at this point, the teacher provides valuable feedback on content, style and wording of the speech while continuing to direct students to different sources and examples they may include in their speech or follow-up responses.

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS:

- Observe students' participation in their groups during the SCH preparation.
- Grade Answers to practice follow-up Questions
- Grade outside research to practice follow-up questions
- Grade editor's version of speech

PART FOUR: PRACTICING FOR THE SIMULATED HEARING

Time Frame: 2-3 days

MOTIVATION

Ask the editor to provide enough copies of the speech for the group and one for you. Give students time to divide up the speech into the parts they will read during their presentation. Review the timing of the presentations with them using the PROCEDURES FOR TIMER'S.

PROCEDURES

- 1. Have groups practice for the SCH.** Allow groups adequate time to practice for the hearings. Recommend that students use timers when practicing to ensure that their prepared speeches are no longer than *four minutes*. Remind students they need to be prepared to respond to *six minutes* of follow-up questions. Group practice sessions should include rehearsal of:
 - Student introductions
 - Four-minute prepared speech
 - Six minutes of follow-up questions and responses.
- 2. There are a variety of ways to organize this practice time.**
 - a. Groups can practice individually. Consider recruiting adults such as parent volunteers, instructional assistants, special education teachers, and administrators to serve as coaches when student groups practice.
 - b. Pair groups with each other and have them present to one another. One group presents while the other group times and asks follow-up questions. Three groups then present concurrently.
 - c. Set aside time for two or three groups to present to the whole class each day. Have different groups in the class take turns asking follow-up questions and timing. The whole class provides oral and written feedback.
- 3. As groups practice, they may realize their speech needs more editing or they need to practice their follow-up responses more.** This is okay. Let students decide for themselves how to get their last preparations done. Offer your room before and after school. Encourage email, getting together outside of class or at lunch. If possible, provide more than 1 round of practices.
- 4. Prepare the students for the actual day of the hearing.**
 - a. Review with them the school schedule (if it will be different due to the hearings), where they will testify, who will be in the room with them, who some of the judges are, the awards program, etc. If you have created a program for your Simulated Congressional Hearing, you can share this with the students at this time.
 - b. Have students make name tents for themselves or their groups' members.
 - c. Discuss dress code. Formal business attire. This is a serious event. Dress to impress. No spaghetti straps, no tummies showing, no shorts, sweats, jeans or t-shirts. Students may groan, especially the boys, but they will all do it. Refer students to "Simulated Hearing "FAQ" for guidelines on how to dress.
 - d. Answer any questions students may have and reassure them that they are ready, you are proud of them, and they will be great!

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS:

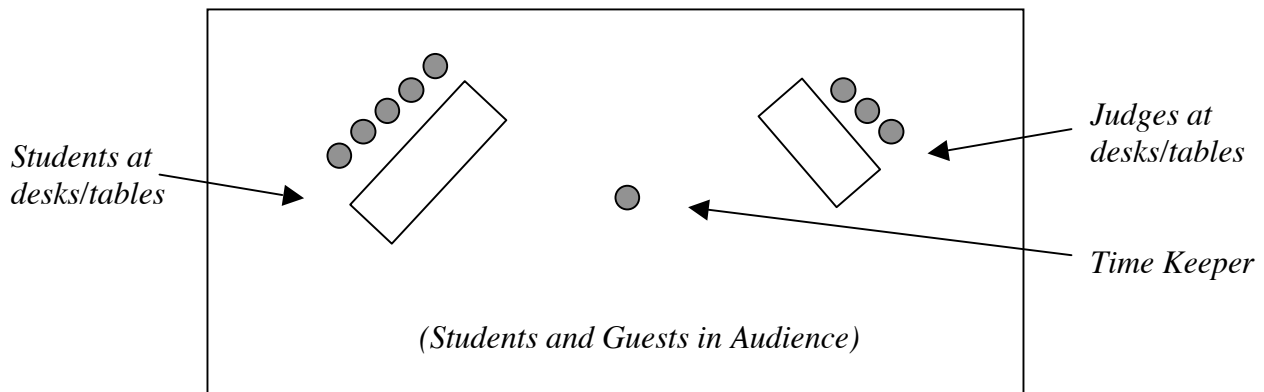
- Observe students' participation in their groups during the SCH preparation.
- Score students on a practice round using the judges' scoring rubric.

PART FIVE: HOLDING THE SIMULATED HEARING

Time Frame: 1/2-1 DAY

PREPARATION

Arrange the classroom for the SCH. Create a panel table where student groups will sit and a committee table where the simulated committee (judges) will sit. Arrange the tables and chairs in a “V” shape, if possible, at the front of the room as shown in the diagram below. Each group of students should be seated opposite the judges’ table when it is their turn to present their unit. If needed, provide microphones for both the panel of judges and the students. Set up a chair for the timekeeper (teacher or parent) in a location that can be seen by both the students and the judges. Arrange an area of the room with seating for students waiting their turn to present and guest observers. (Note: If you have invited parents to attend, you will also need to make sure you have enough seating in the audience. Consider moving unused desks and/or tables to another location to create adequate space for the audience.) Consider engaging students in the audience in each hearing by having them use the “SCH Group Rubric” or other such feedback form to give feedback to student groups that are presenting.



PROCEDURES:

- 1. Train your judges.** Use the Judges’ resources included in this guide plus the Judges Training Video, which can be provided to you by your district coordinator to train your judges, timers and other volunteers including other teachers. These directions and the video will introduce the procedures of the hearings, how to score, on what criteria to judge the students, and how to provide feedback. Training the judges is integral to the success of the Congressional Hearings. Consider having coffee and light refreshments for the judges’ training first thing in the morning while students prepare in their classes. Sample schedules are available to help you decide how best to coordinate the day.
- 2. Hold the simulated congressional hearing, making it as authentic as possible.** Follow these steps to facilitate each “round” of the hearings:
 - Welcome guests and introduce any dignitaries that may be in the audience.
 - Direct everyone in the room to stand when the judges arrive by stating, “All rise.”
 - Allow judges to introduce themselves and their professions.
 - Allow students in the presenting group to deliver their prepared introductions. A name tent should be in front of each student so the judges can address students by name.
 - Allow the chairperson of the judges’ panel to read aloud the assigned unit questions.
 - Allow four minutes for the student group members to deliver their prepared oral statement in response to the assigned unit questions. Hold up the “One Minute” sign to signal students and judges that three minutes have expired. Hold up the “Times Up” sign when four minutes have expired. Students must request additional time. Judges may allow minimal additional time for a student to complete his/her statement or thought.

- Allow six minutes for judges to pose follow up questions and listen to students responses. Hold up the “One Minute” sign to signal students and judges that five minutes have expired. Hold up the “Times Up” sign when six minutes have expired.
- Invite the judges to offer brief oral feedback to the students on their group’s performance.
- Direct everyone in the room to stand when the judges leave by stating, “All rise as the judges leave.”
- At the conclusion of each “round,” direct the student panel members to return to the audience. Cue the next student group to take their places and await the next committee of judges.
- During the time in between each round, consider allowing students in the audience to quickly exchange or turn in the positive feedback recorded on their “SCH Group Score” (Teacher Resource 3). Or, consider having students keep their recorded feedback until the debriefing discussion after all of the hearings have taken place.

DEBRIEFING

Debrief the activity with a class discussion focused on the content and process of the SCH. Use these questions to facilitate a debriefing of the experience:

- What did you enjoy most about the SCH?
- How did the SCH help you learn more about our government and Constitution of the United States than simply reading the information in the textbook?
- How did the SCH help you learn more about yourself?
- What do you think you learned from this experience that will help you in the future?

You can also have students complete a written survey of their experiences immediately after the hearings as well.

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS:

- ❑ Observe students’ participation during the SCH.
- ❑ Have each student conduct an individual self-assessment using the **SCH Reflection** or other such writing prompt.
- ❑ Students can turn in a portfolio with their work from the hearing preparation along with a narrative explaining their various roles and contributions, what they learned from the preparation, and what they learned from the whole experience.
- ❑ Consider the judges’ formal evaluations of each group.
- ❑ Administer all or part of the 50-question “We the People...” test which comes with your teachers’ guide and class set of texts. You can break the questions out by unit if desired.

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Hold a ceremony and announce the winners. Your district and state coordinators have many recommendations and options for prizes, awards, and ways to structure the actual competition. For example: Unit winners and overall class winners, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places, Levels of excellence depending on scores such as “Excellent” and “Superior.” Etc. Maryland’s *We the People* and the Center for Civic Education have resources available for prizes as well as certificates for the students. Use the contact information at the beginning of the guide.

2. Present all students with certificates of achievement. The Center for Civic Education has these available.

3. Thank the Judges! One way to ensure the community will continue to support this event is to have the students write thank you notes to the judges. The judges really get a kick out of hearing from the students and will remember this when they RSVP for future Congressional Hearings. Be sure to proof read the letters before sending them. See the Thank You Letter Prompt, Teacher Resource 6 for suggestions.