

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.

Constitution was just the first step

America celebrates Constitution Day Tuesday, Sept. 17, the 232nd anniversary of the 1787 date when Congress signed the US Constitution. But their job wasn't finished. Many states asked that a Bill of Rights be added.

Think of the original Constitution as a road map to run the new nation's government. The Bill of Rights is a rule book setting basic rights that citizens fought the Revolutionary War to get. Congress passed these 10 amendments in 1789, and the last state needed ratified them Dec. 15, 1791.

The First is shorter than a tweet, but touches every aspect of daily life.

Key details:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion: That means government can't declare an official religion for our country. It can't tell you where or how to worship or if you should worship at all.

Or prohibiting the free exercise thereof: Congress can't interfere with religious expressions. While the majority of U.S. citizens are Christian, hundreds of others faiths are followed here. Almost all have different branches within their followers. Public schools and other agencies face a challenge deciding how to teach about religion and observe religious holidays.

Or abridging the freedom of speech,



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or of the press: Many nations tell citizens what they can or cannot say and tell newspapers, television, radio, and online services what news they can or cannot report. With very few exceptions, our government cannot do that unless speech endangers physical safety. A popular explanation is, "Free speech ends where your fist hits my nose."

Or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances: Hong Kong has long enjoyed similar freedoms, and citizens responded with huge demonstrations when they believed some rights were threatened.

After many weeks of turmoil, as this was being written, the government withdrew the proposal that had most upset the protestors. It hoped the sides could now meet to resolve other issues.

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Find: Choose, Citizen, Congress, Government, Grow, News, Nose, Protest, Religion, Right, Root, See, Speech, Vote, Warn, Worship.

Activity: Check for newspaper stories about citizens using First Amendment rights or government blocking citizens from using those rights. Send a letter to the editor about it. Which First Amendment rights are you using?