DocketED

August Edition: The Federal Judiciary – Structure & Function

The judiciary is one of the most misunderstood branches—but also one of the most fascinating. With the right activities, students can see the courts not as distant institutions but as dynamic guardians of constitutional democracy.

Each month, we offer new ways to approach teaching the federal judiciary system, from landmark Supreme Court cases to the roles of the lower courts.

Understanding the Structure of the Federal Judiciary

Objective: Students will explore the organization of the federal court system, including the Supreme Court, Courts of Appeals, and District Courts.

Introduction: Begin with a diagram of the federal judiciary.

Report Out: Assign students to small groups, each covering one part of the judiciary. They will present on how their assigned court operates, its role, and the types of cases it hears.

Discussion Question: Why is it important to have different levels of courts, and how does this system help ensure justice is served?

Landmark Supreme Court Cases: Judicial Review & Its Impact

Objective: Students will analyze the Supreme Court case that shaped the power of judicial review: *Marbury v. Madison.*

Case Study: Students will compare *Marbury v. Madison* to a relevant school issue. Click here to view the lesson plan. The accompanying PowerPoint can be accessed here.

Reflection: Afterward, discuss how this case established judicial review and how it continues to influence contemporary law.

Discussion Question: How might the interpretation of the Constitution evolve over time due to decisions made by the judiciary?

Find more *Marbury v. Madison* resources below:
Bill of Rights Institute *Marbury v. Madison* DBQ
Marbury v. Madison by Gordon Lloyd, Ph.D.
Bill of Rights Institute Question on Split Decisions
"The Marbury Mystery: Why Did William Marbury Sue in the Supreme Court?" by Susan Low Bloch

Teaching Tips for Engaging Students with the Federal Judiciary

AP Government Practice FRQ

Checks and balances are a central value of American government. Choose one of branch of the federal government and present an argument for how the powers your choice exerts over the other two branches are of fundamental importance in safeguarding against tyranny.

In your essay, you must:

A) Articulate a defensible claim or thesis that responds to the prompt and establishes a line of reasoning.

B) Support your claim with at least TWO pieces of accurate and relevant information.
At least ONE piece of evidence must be from the list below:
The United States Constitution
The Articles of Confederation
Marbury v. Madison (1803)
The second piece of evidence must be from a different source on the list above OR from your knowledge of the three branches of the federal government.

C) Use reasoning to explain why your evidence supports your claim/thesis.

D) Respond to an opposing or alternative perspective using refutation, concession, or rebuttal.

Flipped Classroom:
Have students watch a video or read a case summary at home, and then use class time for in-depth discussion, group activities, or debates. This approach allows students to engage with complex material in a hands-on way and ensures more active participation during class.

When discussing a case, ask students:
What value is protected here?
Whose rights are at stake?
What would be the consequences of ruling the other way?
These prompts create deeper constitutional reasoning.

Fun Fact of the Month
Federal judges rarely use gavels. Sorry cartoons — the average judge bangs the gavel about as often as a cat consents to a bath.

Looking Ahead
Next month, we will dive into the process of Article III nominations, how federal judges are confirmed, and the political dynamics at play in selecting federal judges. Stay tuned for additional teaching resources, case studies, and classroom activities.

Until next time, keep inspiring the next generation of civic-minded leaders!