

The Bill of Rights: The First 10 Amendments

When we want to add or change laws we create amendments to the Constitution. Any amendment must be approved by two-thirds of Congress—the senators and representatives sent to Washington, D.C., to vote for each state. An amendment must then be approved by three-fourths of all the states (thirty-eight states). The Constitution has only been amended twenty-seven times in the last two hundred years!

The first ten amendments were put into effect in 1791, and are known as the Bill of Rights.

Amendment #1:

Guarantees freedom of religion, speech, and the press. Because our forefathers were *persecuted*—harassed, beaten up, and held back—for their beliefs under King George III of England, they wanted to ensure that we would be free to speak our minds. This is a controversial amendment that is often debated. Should people be allowed to say *anything* they want, even if it hurts others' feelings or isn't completely true? Our forebears said, "Yes."

Amendment #2:

Guarantees the right of the people to have firearms, or weapons for war. Of course, there are many laws that regulate the way that people can *use* firearms.

Amendment #3:

Guarantees that soldiers cannot force their way into your home for a stay. Sometimes, during wartime, traveling soldiers would need emergency hideouts and battle posts. This amendment guarantees that they can't just kick down your door! They need your permission to come in!

Amendment #4:

Protects citizens against being searched or having their property searched or taken away by the government without a good reason.

Amendment #5:

Protects the rights of people on trial for crimes. When people say "I take the fifth!" that means that they are exercising their Fifth Amendment privilege to remain silent in court. This way they don't risk saying something that could land them in jail.

Amendment #6:

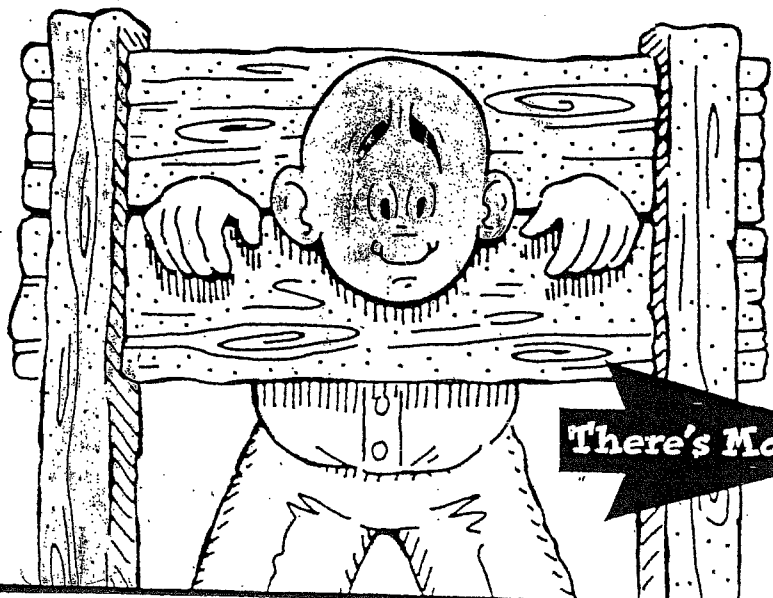
Guarantees people accused of crimes the right to a speedy public trial by jury. You can't just hold a suspect and wait a few years to prosecute them. They might be innocent.

Amendment #7:

Guarantees people the right to a trial by jury for cases that aren't criminal.

Amendment #8:

Prohibits cruel and unusual punishments. This does not include homework!



There's More

Amendment #9:

States that specific rights listed in the Constitution do not take away rights that may not be listed. In other words, the Constitution is part of our law, not higher than it.

Amendment #10:

Establishes that powers not granted specifically to the federal government are reserved either for state governments or the people. In a country as large as ours, the federal government can only take care of large problems that affect a majority of the people. Amendment #10 states that if the federal government isn't able to take care of certain local problems, you have the right to gather democratically and take care of them yourselves!

Here are some other important amendments
we've made to our Constitution:

1865 — Amendment #13:

Abolished slavery in the United States.

1870 — Amendment #15:

Guarantees that no person, regardless of race or color,
can be denied the right to vote.

1920 — Amendment #19:

Grants women the right to vote.

1951 — Amendment #22:

Limits the president to two four-year terms of office.

1971 — Amendment #26:

Lowers the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen.

As you can see, many people had to fight long, hard
battles to get truly fair and equal rights. Women didn't
have the right to vote until 1920! Even today,
many groups struggle for fair treatment in school,
at work, and in the community.

