

The Preamble to the Constitution: A Close Reading Lesson

<p>the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.</p>	<p>insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.</p>
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1. Examine the opening three words of the Preamble the Constitution: “We the People.” Now compare that phrase with the long opening sentence of the Articles of Confederation. Apart from the length, what differences do you notice?

2. List the six goals of Preamble and find similar statements in the opening sections of the Articles.

Preamble	Opening of Articles of Confederation
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3. “To Form a More Perfect Union” is the first goal of the Constitution. Why do you think this goal comes first? What does it imply about the Union under the Articles?	
4. The Preamble’s second goal is to “Establish Justice.” How does that term differ from a similar term like “fairness”? Why do you think that choose “Justice” over “fairness”? What could it mean to “establish” Justice? This goal is not mentioned in the Articles. Why do you think it was so prominently stated in the Preamble?	
5. The third goal is “To Insure Domestic Tranquility.” In 1786, a year before the Constitution was written, there was an uprising of debtors led by Daniel Shays against the Massachusetts government. The framers may have had Shays Rebellion in mind when they inserted this phrase. If that is so, what might this phrase mean?	
6. The remaining three goals are to “provide for the Common Defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Can you find similar goals stated in the Articles? Are there any significant changes?	

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7. According to the Preamble, “We the People...do ordain and establish this Constitution.” What gives the People this right to establish government?

In order to answer this question, you have to look at the Declaration Independence, specifically the second paragraph: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

8. What statement in the above paragraph answers this question? Explain.

9. Why do you think the framers used the present tense of the verb “do” in the phrase “do ordain and establish” rather than “did”? What difference does it make?

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10. Reading the second paragraph of the Declaration as a statement of commonly held principles, what other connections do you see between these principles and the Preamble as a whole?

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11. In what ways is the Preamble an improvement in both form and content over the opening sentences of the Articles of Confederation?

**[Opening of the Articles of Confederation](#) (first three articles), [Preamble to the Constitution](#), and the second paragraph of the [Declaration of Independence](#) can all be accessed at “[Our Documents](#)” on the [National Archives site](#).*