Basically, the Constitution is the highest law in the United States. All other laws come from the Constitution in some way. The Constitution also provides the framework for the government of the United States. It creates things like the Presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. Each state has its own constitution that is the highest law for the state — but even then, the United States Constitution is higher.

Is any law more important than the Constitution?

What do most amendments do? How many are there?

When was it wrriten? Is it still around?

Why did the US need a constitution?

What was the key to getting the Constitution done?

The constitution was accepted, what word do they use to explain this?

Why create amendments?

What is the most common way to amend the constitution?

What did the original constitution lack?

Explain a Bill of Rights.

How many amendments make up our Bill or Rights?

Who wanted to end slavery?

Over time, some things have been added to the Constitution. Called "amendments," these add-ons list some of the rights of the people. By listing these rights, they are made special, and it is illegal for the government to violate those rights. As of 2006, there are 27 amendments to the Constitution. Not all of them involve rights, but many do. The first ten amendments, in particular, have the special name of the Bill of Rights.

**History**

To start, the Constitution is a document written by a group of men in 1787. Yes, it is over 200 years old. We actually have old copies of the document they created. The master copies are stored at the [National Archives](http://www.archives.gov/) in Washington D.C. In 2003, the Rotunda, where the Constitution is displayed, was rebuilt, and anyone can go and see the actual Constitution. We also have [pictures of the Constitution](http://www.usconstitution.net/constpix.html) on this site.

From May to September 1787, the men, known as the Framers, met in Philadelphia and discussed what should be in the Constitution. The United States was a brand new country at the time, and had a government that many felt was not as good as it could be. They were meeting to come up with a new way of running the country. Some of the people at this meeting, called the Convention, are famous to us today, including James Madison, Ben Franklin, and George Washington.

The men came from all over the country, which at the time was made up of only 13 states. The different states had different ideas of what the new government should do, and they had many debates and discussions to come up with a plan that everyone could agree with. It is said that the Constitution was born in compromise, because only by compromising could all the disagreements be resolved. Ben Franklin said the he was not sure if the plan was perfect, but that it was probably as perfect as it could be.

After the Convention ended, the Constitution had to be approved by the 13 states. The Constitution actually said that only nine states had to agree to the Constitution, but everyone wanted all of the states to agree. Two states, North Carolina and Rhode Island, took a long time to decide to agree to the Constitution, but in the end, they did. When the Constitution was accepted by these first nine states, we say that it was "ratified." New Hampshire was the ninth state to ratify.

**Amendments**

When the Constitution was written, the Framers knew their creation was not perfect. They knew that other people would have good ideas for the Constitution, that future generations would want to make changes. They wanted to make it possible to change the Constitution without needing to resort to revolution. They wanted to be sure that it wasn't too hard to make changes, but they also wanted to be sure that it wasn't too easy.

The Framers added an amendment process. An amendment to the Constitution is a change that can add to the Constitution or change an older part of it. An amendment can even overturn a previous amendment, as the 21st did to the 18th. There are a few methods to amend the Constitution, but the most common is to pass an amendment through the Congress, on a two-thirds vote. After that, the amendment goes to the states, and if three-quarters of the states pass the amendment, it is considered a part of the Constitution — it has been ratified.

One of the biggest reasons a lot of people opposed the original Constitution was because it lacked a bill of rights. A bill of rights is a list of rights that belong to the people that the government is not allowed to break. Some of these rights might sound familiar: the right of free speech, the right to practice your own religion, and the right to be silent if the police accuse you of a crime. The original Constitution had no bill of rights. Many of the Framers did not think it was necessary. But to get the Constitution to pass in some of the states, promises were made to add a bill of rights once the new government was up and running.

After the new government started to meet, Congress proposed the Bill of Rights. A list of twelve changes was sent to the states, and a few years later, in 1791, ten of those changes were accepted by enough of the states that they were added to the Constitution. These ten changes are called the "Bill of Rights."

Other changes to the Constitution are discussed below. The last change to the Constitution was made in 1992. The 27th Amendment is acutally one of the two left-over amendments from 1791. It is very unusual for an amdendment to take that long to be accepted, but it is possible. Some, like the 26th Amendment, are accepted very quickly, in just 100 days. Most, though, take a little over a year to be ratified.

**Slavery**

When the United States first created the Constitution, most of the black people in America were actually slaves. A slave is someone who is owned by someone else. Today, there are no legal slaves in America, but legal slavery was very common in 1787. As time went by, more and more people thought that slavery was wrong. Most of the people who wanted to end slavery, called abolitionists, were from the states in the north. Most of the people who wanted to keep slavery were from the states in the south. The Southern states wanted to keep slavery because a lot of their economy, how they made money and did business, was tied up with slaves. Slaves were worth money, and slaves picked their crops, like cotton and tobacco. Eventually the Civil War was fought to end Slavery.

One very positive thing emerged from the Civil War, though: the end of slavery. In the 13th Amendment, slavery was forever abolished in the Constitution. The 14th Amendment said that every person born in the United States was a full citizen of the United States, even if that person was a former slave. The 15th Amendment made sure that black people could vote. Many people felt that even if black people were not slaves, they were still inferior to white people, and for 100 years, some laws were passed to keep black people from being equal to whites. Though we still live with the legacy of slavery today, the election of President Barack Obama, in 2008, was one further step on the way to our fulfillment of the dream of equality.

Why did the South want slavery to remain legal?

Explain the 13, 14, and 15th amendment to the constitution.

Before the last 40 years, what did women do in the US?

What amendment gave women the right to vote?

Why can you say whatever you want about the president?

List three rights in the bill of rights mentioned in this paragraph/

What are the three branches?

What two houses make laws?

Explain Checks and Balances.

What does the judiciary do?

What is an appeal?

**Women**

At the beginning, we talked about the men who were the Framers. For most of the history of the United States, the most important people who have shaped the country have been men. This is not because women were not willing or able to be a part of the United States. Instead, because men held all the positions of power, from Presidents to members of Congress, right down to mayors and owners of companies. Women had very little chance to advance in life. Though many women today like being home all day taking care of the house and kids, until only very recently, this was the only option for a woman.

Since women had no role in government, politics, or society other than as homemakers and supporters for their husbands or fathers, most did not feel that they should have the ability to vote. For over 100 years after the Constitution was ratified, women had no way to vote. In some places, it was actually illegal for women to vote. In 1920, the 19th Amendment, which said that women could vote in all elections, was ratified.

**The Bill of Rights**

We already talked about why the Bill of Rights was passed: some people were afraid that the government, or the police, would be able to keep people from doing some very important things simply by passing laws against those things. For example, you can say whatever you want about the President — you can say that you don't like his hair, or you don't like his voice, or you don't like the war in Iraq, or you don't like his tax program. It seems natural to us to be able to criticize the President or a member of Congress or a mayor, over things they do that we don't like. But the only reason that is possible is because of the Right of Free Speech that the Bill of Rights guarantees.

The Bill of Rights protects a lot of other important freedoms. For example, you can hold any religious beliefs you want, and the government cannot force you to believe in something you don't. You cannot be forced to house soldiers in your home. The police cannot come into your home without a valid reason, and may not take your papers without permission from a judge. The police cannot force you testify against yourself in court; in fact, the police cannot force you to tell them anything at all (you may have heard of the "right to remain silent"). And the government cannot give you unusual punishments, such as twenty years in jail for speeding.

**How it all works**

The Constitution sets up three main branches of government. These are called the Legislative, the Executive, and the Judiciary. Each one has its own role in how the law is made and used.

The role of the Legislature is to make the law. The legislature is called the Congress, and is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each Representative comes from a district in one of the states. That person's job is to represent the people in that district. The people elect the Representative and have the right to tell him or her how they feel about issues. There are 435 Representatives. Bigger states have more Representatives and every state has at least one. The Senate is made up of 100 Senators, two from each state. Senators are elected by the people of the state and should represent the interests of all of the people. When the Congress wants to pass a law, both the House and the Senate must agree to the exact same law. If they cannot agree, then the law cannot pass.

The role of the Executive is mainly to make sure the law is carried out. The Executive is headed by the President, and includes the Vice President and the Secretaries of all the national departments, like the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Education. But before a bill becomes a law, it is sent to the President. The President has three choices. He can sign the bill, in which case it becomes a law. He can veto the bill, which then gets sent back to Congress, and which can then override the veto if two-thirds of both houses of Congress vote to do so. Or he can refuse to sign the bill, but not veto it; in this case, the bill will become law after ten days. This process is one example of the system of checks and balances in the United States government. The Congress must pass laws the President agrees with, but the President can't refuse to sign a law without taking a stand on it.

The last branch is the Judiciary. This includes all the federal courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court. States have their own court systems that fall underneath the national court system. The role of the Judiciary is to interpret the law.

The law might say, "It is illegal to break into someone's home." If someone is caught breaking into someone's home, the courts will ask several questions. First, can the government make this illegal? If it cannot, the law is called "unconstitutional" and the courts will say it is invalid. Next, the court will ask if the person is actually guilty of the crime. Usually, a jury will find someone guilty or not guilty, but sometimes just a judge makes this finding. A trial by jury is a constitutional right — it means that other people from your community will decide if you broke the law. Because juries, and courts, can make mistakes, people can "appeal" convictions, and there is a set of special courts set up to handle appeals. The last court of appeal is the Supreme Court. Whatever the Supreme Court says is the end, because there is no appeals court higher.