

Rapping the 27 Amendments to the Constitution

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I teach history and government at Mountain View High School in Stafford, Virginia. Early in the year, the students began to devise hand motions to help memorize the 27 amendments to the Constitution for government class. Three students in the school who are interested in hip hop music then suggested composing a rap song about the topic. Working with the text of the amendments would be not only educational, but cool, and the result would be a unique creation.

Inspiration

I invited these three students to stay after school and work in my classroom. They drafted lyrics, then revised and edited them so that the words matched a rap meter (See lyrics on page 343).¹ They spent about four hours working with a music studio program on a classroom computer that could record their voices over a rap percussive beat, then overlay various sounds and musical tones.² The students' skills—running this software, recording their vocal performance, and mixing the sounds so that the result was balanced and understandable—were awesome to observe. Finally, we posted an audiofile on the Internet at The Hip-Hop Classroom.³ At this website, teachers can describe projects and classroom activities and students can display their work. You can listen to our audiofile at www.hiphopclassroom.com by searching on “The Amendments.”

What made this project unique was that it wasn't a formal assignment, but rather something that the students and I were interested in doing. I love hip hop music and thought the project would be a great way for other hip hop enthusiasts to learn something through rapping. When we played the rap “[Putting]

Amendments to Memory” for the other students in the class, they were amazed at how well it sounded and how they could use it to memorize all 27 amendments.

A Small-Group Challenge

Although students found that reading or listening to the rap could be helpful, the most powerful mnemonic aid for students is probably the act of writing their own rap. Not everyone is a gifted poet, but any student can be asked to summarize several of the constitutional amendments in his or her own words. Here is a 50-minute classroom activity that challenges students to be creative while “engaging the amendments.”

Divide the class into small groups of three or four students each, and give each group a one-page handout that includes the text of all 27 amendments.⁴ Instruct each group to circle a unique set of four or five amendments, being sure to cover all 27 amendments. (For example, group A circles Amendments 1 through 5; group B circles Amendments 6 through 10; etc.)

Ask each group to write rap lyrics that summarize their assigned amendments. If you wish, play a basic beat softly in the

background, and ask students to match the tempo of their rap to that cadence.⁵ Allow the small groups 30 minutes to write their rap and then 5 minutes for one or more students in each group to rehearse reciting it. The last 10 or 15 minutes of the period can be devoted to performances, with each group presenting its work to the entire class.

Collect all of the rap lyrics and see if someone will volunteer to type them all, in numerical order, on a single sheet of paper. The next day, make copies and give each student his or her own lyric sheet—such as, “The Constitutional Amendments Rap” by Mr. Smith's 7th Period Government Class. Roosevelt High School, September 25, 2010.”

History and Current Events

As a variation on this activity, assign small groups (or individual students) to summarize the history of one amendment in a rap. For example, Amendment 19: Women's Suffrage was adopted in April 1920 after a century of struggle spurred by women such as Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Jeanette Rankin. The pro and con arguments of citizens living at the time can be brought into the spoken narrative, as well as notable events leading up to passage. Writing a rap about a historically relevant constitutional amendment can be a great summative activity at the end of a unit of study.

Raps can also touch upon the implications of an amendment for citizens today.

Invite students to address some of our nation's "big questions" in their raps.⁶ For example, to what extent do Amendments 15, 19, and 25 suggest a historical evolution toward full participation by all adults in American democracy? On the other hand, to what extent is the social commitment stated in these amendments still not fully realized in our own time?⁷

The Constitution, which includes all 27 amendments, should not represent just a few pages of fine print at the back of a textbook—it is a living document. Invite your students to bring the Constitution to life by creating their own rap. 🎤

Notes

1. Adam Knaresborough, Jaymarr Williams, Stephon Manuel, and Antoine White, "Amendments to Memory," Mountain View High School in Stafford, Virginia, June 3, 2009.
2. Sony Music Studio, Acid 2.0.
3. The Hip-Hop Classroom (hiphopclassroom.com) is the blog for Flocabulary, which is an independent publisher in Brooklyn "with ten products being used in over 10,000 schools across the globe." Read more at www.flocabulary.com/bios.html.
4. The text of the 27 amendments is available free at www.billofrightsinstitute.org. Click on "Free Resources" then on "Founding Documents."
5. iTunes and Flocabulary also have beats that students can use, in addition to Sony Music Studio.
6. Alan J. Singer, Maureen O. Murphy, and Maureen McCann Miletta, "Asking the BIG Questions: Teaching about the Great Irish Famine and World History," *Social Education* 65, no. 5 (September 2001).
7. For example, although African Americans are guaranteed the right to vote by Amendments 15, 25, and other federal laws, the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of voters in Florida in November 2000 "fell disproportionately on black Floridians." Robert E. Pierre, "Botched Name Purge Denied Some the Right to Vote," *Washington Post* (May 31, 2001), A01, www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A99749-2001May30.

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Amendments to Memory

Adam Knaresborough, Jaymarr Williams, Stephon Manuel, and Antoine White, Mountain View High School, Stafford, Virginia, June 3, 2009. All Rights Reserved.

You should be rememberin
The government you're livin' in.
Not cocky just confident, we know
One to twenty seven an'
It sounds like a lot, but really it's all
relevant.

From the Freedom of Speech,
To congressional pay,
And if the prez gets impeached,
We know who'll replace.

The hand motions and rhymes
make this so easy
Everybody's doin it, don't
feel so cheesy.
Go south on 95, we're 40
miles from D.C.
Twenty-seven amendments,
put to memory.

Amendment 1—the freedom of
Speech and religion.
Amendment 2—bear arms and
Guns we can own.
Amendment 3—can't quarter troops
In a home.
Amendment 4—can't search without
Probable cause,
And Amendment 5, plead the Fifth so
I don't
Break no laws

*I told you it's easy,
Rhymes and motions are the key.
We're 40 miles from D.C.
Putting amendments to memory.*

J-Real or Mi\$tro
Amendment 6—the right to a just and
Speedy trial.
7—the right to a jury, no denial.
Amendment 8—no punishment that's
unusual And cruel.
Amendment 9—individual liberties is
our fuel
And Amendment 10 gives powers
To the states to rule.

*I told you it's easy,
Rhymes and motions are the key.
We're 40 miles from D.C.
Putting amendments to memory.*

Amendment 11—can't sue another state
Amendment 12—the ballots we separ-
ate

The next three stem from Civil War
and equality:
13 deals with slavery abolishing.
14 is legal equality.
And 15 all men can vote
You know your boy mistro is no joke.

Amendment 16—deals with income tax.
Amendment 17—two senators the max.
Amendment 18 - made alcohol illegal.
And 19 made a woman's voice equal.

Amendment 20—sets the president's
start date
January twentieth, don't be late.
Amendment 21—repeals a previous one.
Amendment 22- presidential term limit
is two.

Amendment 23—we can now
vote in D.C.
Amendment 24—was designed to help
the poor

Amendment 25—deals with if
the vice dies
We appoint a new vice, all truth no lies.
It also mentions presidential succession
The goal of this track is to make an
impression.

Believe it or not, there's only two more:
Amendment 26—comes from the
Vietnam War.
Eighteen to vote, no matter rich or poor.
And number 27's congressional pay
J Real, Mi\$tro, tweezy, Coach K.

There you have 1 to 27 today
Live from Stafford, steady reppin' VA.

