

Guidelines for Conducting a Simulated Congressional Hearing in the Classroom

The simulated hearing represents an exciting way for students to show their understanding of historical information and constitutional principles related to the American government and the rights of conscience and expression that influence our daily lives. The process of explaining what they have learned in a congressional hearing provides a purpose to their research, hones student skills in presentation, and enhances their interest in civic participation. The scoring process provides a great assessment tool for teachers.

Remember also, the Center for Civic Education has done extensive research on the long-term outcomes of the program for students. Not only are their test scores higher but they found that students who participate in the Congressional Hearing process are far more likely than others in their age group to vote and to participate in other ways in civic activities.

Below are the steps to preparing for and setting up a hearing in your classroom.

1. Research Process:

Set up teams:

Divide the class into four groups (five for high school), distributing good readers into each group. Very large classes can have two groups doing the same lesson. Appoint a team leader to facilitate the process of assigning the questions and organizing the presentation.

Assign each group one of the chapters or lessons:

High School: Lessons 2, 3, 27, 28, and 29

Middle School: Lessons 2, 3, 23, and 24

Elementary School: Lessons 2, 4, 17, and 18

Preview the Lesson/Chapter:

Key vocabulary and a summary of the ideas they are targeted to learn appear on the first page of the lesson. Students review and discuss this first. Since the books cover generally the same ideas, teachers may want to provide English Learners or struggling readers a copy of the book designed for the grade span below theirs.

Each Member or Pair Reads and Discusses Responses to One Question:

Working in their groups, students read and discuss their lesson/chapter. Each pair of students (3 in some teams) then thinks about and looks for the answers to one of the four questions provided related in the Hearing Questions sheet for their lesson/chapter. Provide an opportunity for the students to share out in their groups so that they can get input and clarification from others.

Write Up Responses to Questions:

Individually, students write up a multi-paragraph response to the specific question to which they have been assigned. This should be turned into the teacher for a grade and feedback.

With the teacher feedback in hand, the teams for each question meet to develop a three-four minute presentation on the question. All the student responses should relate the sub-question to the bold-faced question. Students should divide up the presentation notes so that each one has a part.

2. Preparing Judges before the hearing:

Forming Judge's Panel:

Ask three fellow teachers or parents to serve as judges. Provide them a copy of the student chapter and the list of questions that the students are researching. The same set of judges can evaluate all four panels of students (presenting on all four chapters) or you can recruit enough judges so that they specialize in only one chapter.

Alternate Idea:

In very large classes where two groups have been assigned the same lesson, flip a coin for one group to present and the other to serve as judges.

Follow-up Questions:

Create a set of 2-3 suggested follow-up questions for the judges but tell them they may want to think of one or two on their own as the students are presenting. Applications of the ideas from the chapter to current events are especially good follow-up questions. Another good follow-up is to have students elaborate on something that they mentioned briefly in their presentation.

The Hearing:

Rooms Set Up:

Set up the room so that there are enough chairs in the front for each student in the chapter/lesson panel. Across from them, set up a table with chairs for at least three judges.



Judges



Students

Provide the judges a list of the questions that the students rehearsed.

Provide them a suggested set of “follow-up” questions.

Introduce the judges to the class and thank them for coming.

Optional:

Perform some sort of patriotic activity such as a short talk about the importance of the Bill of Rights or of the Constitution, the national anthem or the Pledge of Allegiance.

Hearing Process:

There are two timed parts of the hearing. Since the amount of text has been reduced for this exercise, the hearing time is also reduced from the standard process outline in the Teachers Guide for We the People. Teachers may adapt the time established below to the needs of their students and class time, but it should be consistent among groups. Use a timer.

Timing Suggestion:

4-minute opening presentation

4-minute follow-up question time

Begin the Hearing -Prepared Response:

Students take a seat in the chairs provided for the panel and introduce themselves beginning with the team leader. The judge reads one of the four questions that the student lesson panel has researched. The students who prepared a response present it at this time. The judges then read another question, through all four if time.

As the students speak, the teacher completes an individual score sheet and judges take notes or make a tentative score for this aspect of the hearing on their group score sheet.

Begin the Hearing – Follow-up Questions:

When each pair of students (i.e. the whole lesson team) has answered its prepared question, the judges may ask follow-up questions of any panel member. This is limited to a total of four minutes.

At the end of the time, applaud the students and thank them for their hard work.

Scoring:

Each judge completes a group score sheet for the overall hearing.

Groups 2, 3, 4 (5 for HS):

The first panel of students returns to the audience and the next panel takes its place at the front of the room. If a new set of judges is available, they also should be seated.

Repeat the above procedures until all the lessons and all the panels of students have presented and all the group score sheets have been marked.

Recognition:

Provide all participating students with a Certificate of Achievement and all judges a small thank you gift. Take pictures of each team.

Using the judge's score sheets you may award the winning group and runner up with a special recognition or prize.

Evaluation:

Have students reflect on the preparation and hearing process by answering the questions on the evaluation sheet. Collect the evaluation sheets, any video or pictures you took, samples of the student write-ups for their presentation, and a description of anything special you did to prepare the students.

Responsibility for the Institute:

Submit the student written responses to the questions and their reflection on the process. A suggested set of reflection questions is provided but the teacher is free to develop a process that fits their own evaluation criteria.

Mail the packet of student work to:
Dr. Peg Hill
Dept. of Ed Leadership/Curriculum
CSU San Bernardino
5500 University Pkwy.
San Bernardino, CA 92407

or

Give the packet of student work to the program evaluator when he/she comes to your classroom in the spring.

GOOD LUCK! I THINK YOU WILL FIND THIS ACTIVITY REWARDING FOR YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS.