



Federal Bar Association

The premier bar association serving the federal practitioner and the federal judiciary.

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What Does It Mean to Support and Defend the Constitution?

2021 Civics Essay Contest Sponsored by Federal Bar Association

Have you ever taken an oath or witnessed the administration of an oath?

The United States has a long history of these solemn declarations, starting with the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1788, which established the Presidential Oath of Office, perhaps the most well-known oath. The federal government requires oaths prior to officials taking office, also known as swearing-in ceremonies.

This year, the Federal Bar Association acknowledges the contributions of those who swear an allegiance to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America by asking students to consider what it means to support and defend this document which establishes the basic principles of the American Government.

FAST FACTS about Oaths

(click on the links or visit www.fedbar.org/2021-essay-prompt to access important guidance for your essay!):

- The Constitution only specifies an oath of office for the President, but Article VI requires one of other officials.
- The Presidential oath is the only sentence contained in quotation marks in the Constitution.
- A state legislator once introduced a bill to have high school students take an oath as a condition of graduating.
- Benedict Arnold learned the consequences of failing to follow his oath: He got caught conspiring to surrender West Point to the British in 1780, and his name was erased from the U.S. register of officers. He was labeled a traitor and suffered a tarnished reputation.
- Naturalized U.S. citizens swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution, “so help me God,” as the final step to citizenship, but an alternate, secular version is available if requested.

What does it mean to take an oath to support and defend the Constitution and why is it important? Why is the oath different for different groups? Why and how are oaths carefully and precisely worded? Do you agree that oaths should be required under certain circumstances? What do you think about being required to take an oath to graduate from high school? Can an oath be ended? How?

Timeline of Oath History

June 21, 1788 – U.S. Constitution Ratified. Article II, Section I sets forth the Presidential Oath of Office.

March 26, 1790 – Naturalization Act of 1790 requires applicants for citizenship to swear an oath to support the Constitution.

May 13, 1884 – Congress changes oath for federal employees, eliminating the post-Civil War “Ironclad Test Oath” that had required individuals to swear that they had “never previously engaged in criminal or disloyal conduct.”

June 29, 1906 – Naturalization Act of 1906 requires naturalized citizens to swear an oath to “support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

October 5, 1962 – Public Law 87-751 provides that individuals enlisted into the Armed Forces of the United States shall take an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States.

September 6, 1966 – Public Law 89-554 establishes oath of office for all federal employees other than the President.

January 23, 2013 – Arizona legislator introduced HB 2467 proposing an oath to support and defend the Constitution for all high school graduates.



George Washington at his first inauguration. Federal Hall in New York City, April 30, 1917. Engraving(c) National Archives

The Federal Bar Association invites middle and high school students to consider the question: “What does it mean to support and defend the Constitution?” Students should address the role of oaths in government and the relation of oaths to the U.S. Constitution and explore topics such as: why oaths are required for certain individuals; how oaths have evolved over time; and what does supporting and defending the Constitution mean today? Essays should cite relevant statutes and/or cases as well as applicable historical events.

2021 FBA Civics Essay Contest Rules

Who May Enter

The contest is open to middle and high school students enrolled in public, private, parochial and charter schools and home-schooled students of equivalent grade status in the United States and its Territories. Middle school students are defined as those in grades 6-8. High school students are those in grades 9-12.

Essay Length and Format

The maximum essay length in the Middle School Division is 500 words, and the maximum length is 1,000 words for high school entries. While not required, proper use of endnote citations and bibliographies will be credited during judging but are not included in the word count. Essays must be submitted as a Microsoft Word document (preferred) or PDF file and follow these formatting guidelines:

- Use 12 pt. Cambria or Times New Roman font, double-spaced text, with one-inch margins
- DO NOT include a title page, page headers or footers, or page numbers
- Include your name on the first page only
- Place all in-text, numbered citations at the end of your essay as endnotes, followed by a bibliography (if included)
- Name your file as follows: Firstname Lastname.ext (example: John Smith.doc; John Smith.pdf)

Entry Submission and Deadline

Essays must be submitted with a completed entry form, available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Essay21>. The online entry form provides instructions for uploading documents. Entries accepted through 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on March 31, 2021. Winners will be notified no later than June 1, 2021.

Judging

Essays will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Understanding of constitutional principles – 40 points
- Clarity and effectiveness in expressing the theme – 30 points
- Grammar, spelling and composition – 25 points
- Use of footnotes, bibliographies – 5 points

Prizes

Middle School Division: First place, \$750; Second place, \$500; Third place, \$250
High School Division: First place: \$1,500; Second place: \$1,000; Third place, \$500

Publication Release

As a condition of entry acceptance, all publishing rights are retained by the Federal Bar Association and the association reserves the right to copyright material in its name and to reprint it in any FBA publication/media as it sees fit.

Copyright

Adherence to all U.S. copyright laws and fair use practices is required. Visit www.fedbar.org/about-us/outreach/civics-essay-contest/ for more information and resources.

Disqualification

Reasons for disqualification include (but are not limited to): incomplete or improperly formatted entries, off-topic essays, providing false information, committing plagiarism, not meeting the submission deadline, and not providing a release form if requested.

Questions? Visit www.fedbar.org/about-us/outreach/civics-essay-contest/contest-faqs/ or email civics@fedbar.org

For more information and important resources, visit www.fedbar.org/2021-essay-prompt