

We the People

Study Guide

Dear Teacher,

We have created the following study guide to help make your students' theater experience with **WE THE PEOPLE** as meaningful as possible. For many, it will be their first time viewing a live theatrical production. We've learned that when teachers discuss the play with their students before and after the production the experience is more significant and long lasting. Our study guide provides pre-and post-production discussion topics, as well as individual and class activities. Enjoy the show!

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, 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 of the United States of America."

Preamble of the United States Constitution - 1787

The Story

We're in the school auditorium. Student Council elections will take place at 3:00. Our heroine, Dawn Shapiro, is running for Student Council President, but she's having a tough time getting her act together. Her speech is supposed to answer the question "What Does My Government Mean to Me?," but Dawn is in panic mode: she feels that the local Mall has more meaning for her than her government. What to do?

Suddenly, with cymbals and drum-roll, appear the "Founding Fathers" – George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin – looking like the funkier rock band ever, wigs and all. They've come to save the day for Dawn by giving her a crash course in how the Colonies became a nation and how that nation created a government – one that still works today.

When the Founding Fathers ask Dawn why she wants to be Student Council President, her answer disappoints them; she wants it for her future college applications, so she can get into a really good school! But the FFs don't give up. Using song, dance, role playing, a wrestling match, and their own persuasive passion, they teach Dawn – and us – what she needs to understand her government: the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the branches of government, the Congress, how a bill becomes a law, the Supreme Court, the system of checks and balances, and – yes! – even the Electoral College!!

Gradually, it dawns on Dawn that this is indeed an amazing government created by these great men. However, now she feels that she's not *good* enough to be Council President! But they won't let her give up on herself. Hasn't she ever helped her school or her community? Has she done enough? *What can a kid do for a government anyway?* This funny, crazily sane and hip musical will give you answers – and teach, too!

Before Seeing the Musical

1) Vocabulary Building

Ask your students to study some new or challenging words that will be heard in the show:

| | |
|-------------------|-------------|
| ADDRESS | IMPEACH |
| AMENDMENT | INTERPRET |
| APPEAL | JUDICIAL |
| ASSEMBLE | LEGISLATIVE |
| BILL | OVERRIDE |
| BRANCH | PATRIOT |
| CANDIDATE | PETITION |
| CHECK | PREAMBLE |
| COMPROMISE | PRECEDENT |
| CONSENT | REPEAL |
| DECLARATION | REPUBLIC |
| DEMOCRACY | REVOLUTION |
| ELECTORAL COLLEGE | SOVREIGNTY |
| ENFORCE | SYMBOL |
| EXECUTIVE (adj) | VERSUS |
| HOUSE | VETO |

2) Learning about Theatre

Discuss with your students -

- A. Some important terms to know about a play or a musical:
- **Setting** (where does the story take place? when?)
 - **Characters** (who are the people?)
 - **Plot** (what happens?)
 - **Theme** (what is the Big Idea?)
 - **Structure**: Acts and Scenes (how is the play “built”?)
 - **Style** (how again: - realistic? fantastical? futuristic? – etc.)
- B. Some important people who make a play or a musical happen:
- Good **playwright**
 - Creative **director**
 - Believable **actors**
 - Imaginative **designers**
 - **set**
 - **costumes**
 - **lighting**
 - **sound**

A musical also needs *special* creators: a “**book**” **writer** (spoken words), a **composer** (music) and a **lyricist** (words that are sung); and a **choreographer** (dances).

- C. Some ways to be a great audience member:

Great audiences can make good shows even better. Here’s how:

- Listen, really listen!
- Laugh if it’s funny; cry if it’s sad – but please don’t talk (actors hear you)!
- Exercise your memory (Hey! That’s the tiger they talked about in Act One!)
- Turn off cell phones and pagers!
- Eat your candy bar before or after. Scientific studies prove that *it’s impossible to unwrap it quietly!!*

3) Learning to Be a Good Citizen

Much of this musical's plot is about the ways in which our government serves us, its citizens. But this is a two-way proposition: we citizens have an obligation to give back, to help each other, to help the political system.. Ask your students, in small groups or as a class, to think about and discuss their own roles as young Americans.

Explore your own experiences:

- How often do you listen to the news or read a newspaper?
- How often do you discuss the news with friends or family?
- What kind of "political system" is at your school? Are you part of it?
- Have you done community volunteer work? If so, how did you feel?
- Write down your thoughts and share them with the group or the class.

After Seeing the Musical

1) Being Drama Critics

While it's still fresh in your minds, discuss **WE THE PEOPLE**.

A. If your class previously has been studying American History and/or US Government, discuss ways in which the musical further developed concepts or introduced new concepts. Was anything unclear? If so, help out each other.

B. Discuss the main characters — and the actors who portrayed them. What specific lines or actions did actors use to help you understand these characters as historic American figures. If you were directing the musical, would you add or change anything about the characters?

C. How did the songs change or add to your understanding of the characters or the Big Ideas? Which songs did you particularly enjoy and why?

D. Discuss the designs. For example, how did the *set* help you to imagine the world of **WE THE PEOPLE**? How did the *costumes* say something about the characters – AND the Big Ideas?

2) Being You

A play is like a mirror. What do you see of yourself (or someone you know) when you look into the "mirror" of **WE THE PEOPLE**? How does seeing yourself through this musical make you feel connected to others? Write a paragraph about your thoughts and share the paragraph in a small group.

Being Socially Conscious

Toward the end of the show, we learn that Dawn has done a number of things for others. Are there opportunities in your community to do things like:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| ▪ Food drive | ▪ Planting trees |
| ▪ Clothing drive | ▪ Recycling |
| ▪ Read-a-thon | ▪ Thinking green |
| ▪ Saving water | ▪ UNICEF on Halloween |

Brainstorm in small groups or with the class about other ways to become socially conscious where you live. Brainstorm about how young people can become involved in government, even though you're still in school. Remember, "when you do what heroes do, you can be a hero too."

Like Dawn, we all can "change what we don't like and get passionate about things we do." What changes would *you* make? What could become *your* passionate cause?

Additional Activities

1) **Reinforcing Vocabulary**

Ask your students to group together words from the original vocabulary list that relate to an aspect of government described in the show, then turn each word group into a coherent paragraph explaining that aspect.

2) **Creative Dramatics**

Many of your students are probably familiar with the art of improvisation: actors create mini-scenes “on the spot” – usually being told by the audience only the basic situation and identifies. Even quite young students can have fun doing “improv.”

A. “Negotiation” Improv

Consider the words “*negotiate*” and “*compromise*”: harmonious politics depends on the ability of people with different views to negotiate and compromise. Discuss these two words, then ask each student to write on a slip of paper a situation for two characters – *one which needs negotiation*; for ex., between two senators or two representatives, two citizens at a Town Hall meeting, two teenagers whose parents have political differences, a taxi driver and his passenger, etc. Put the ideas into a “hat.” Ask one of *two volunteers* to draw from the hat. Give the actors 10-15 seconds to read the paper and choose roles before beginning to speak. Limit the improv to about 2-3 minutes. The actors’ *goal* is to negotiate a compromise, but if they don’t achieve this by “time’s up” that’s fine – let them and the audience discuss possible resolutions.

B. “Founding Fathers” Improv

Follow the same basics as above. This time, ask an audience member to say where the action takes place and what is the situation, as well as what problem must be solved. You can choose to use two, three, or all four FFs. For example, the place is a laundromat, and Jefferson has removed Adams’ wet clothes from the only dryer and is using it for himself. Actors’ goal: to respond in character!

C. Original Scene

Ask your students to research a current issue and then to write and act out a dialogue on the issue between two Supreme Court justices.

3) **Creative Writing**

A) Ask your students to think about (perhaps discuss) and write –\

- Your speech for the Student Council
- A Senate or Houses debate on an issue
- A Supreme Court scene

B) Assign a more formal essay –

- What Makes a Leader?
- If I Ran for Office, It Would Be For_____
- If I Were President of the United States
- My Bill for Improving My Country
- What Does My Government Mean to Me?

4) Artistic Expression

- Draw or paint a diagram of the three government branches and their responsibilities
- Draw or paint a chart showing how a bill becomes law
- Create a new symbol or symbols; e.g., *flag, political button, national anthem*
- Create an effective campaign ad, commercial, or song
- Draw, paint, or sculpt your interpretation of our current national symbols: *eagle, elephant, donkey, Uncle Sam, stars and stripes*. Make your own political hand puppets (and let them talk politics together!)

5) Speaking

Ask your students to -

- Argue a point in a persuasive speech
- Design a shared class reading of the Declaration of Independence, with discussion following about these great words and how it feels to say them

6) Memorization

Ask your students to learn, memorize, and prepare to be quizzed on –

A) The first five amendments in the Bill of Rights

B) Important numbers, as follows:

- 1776 (separation from England)
- 1776-1783 (dates of the Revolutionary War)
- 10 (number of articles in the Bill of Rights)
- (Electors in the Electoral College, number of votes needed to win the presidency)
- 1600 Pennsylvania Ave (Street address of White House)

7) Discussion

Ask your students to reflect on (at home) and to come to class prepared to discuss -

- A. The Bill of Rights as practiced today; would you add anything?
- B. Ideal attributes in a candidate

8) Research Projects

Students can learn more about the ideas, people, and events that led to an independent America and its government by doing some research, exploring the library or the Internet for information. Students can work individually or in groups and create presentations displaying their finds. Here are some subjects to consider:

- Causes of the Revolution
- Your state during the war
- The Boston Tea Party
- Creation of the Declaration of Independence
- King George's failings
- Famous Period paintings
- Biographies of the Founding Fathers
- The issue of slavery in creating the Constitution
- Women's contributions during the war; e.g., Betsy Ross or Molly Pitcher

What Can YOU do?

- **WRITE** - to your local Congressperson
- **PETITION** – collect signatures for a cause
- **VOTE** - when issues come up in your school
- **PARTICIPATE** - in your school government
- **RUN** - for an office in your school government

**TRY!
ACT! – REACT!
MAKE IT NEW!
DARE TO FLY!**