

Civil Discourse, Then and Now

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Required: One or two 50-minute class periods

Historical Thinking Skills: Document analysis, contextualization, continuity, and change over time

Objective(s): Using Federalist No. 1, students will be able to:

1. Understand the arguments in defense of Civil Debate and Good Faith
2. Understand the importance of open Civil Debate in a Republic

Required Materials: Federalist No.1 (excerpts)

Recommended (not required, but helpful): *The Accessible Federalist: A Modern English Translation of 16 Key Federalist Papers* by S. Adam Seagrave

Introduction: Many teachers resist working with the Federalist Papers. The idiomatic writing style widely used by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay (all writing under the name “Publius”) made for good reading in the 1780s, but is dense and difficult to understand today. However, there is great merit to reading these classic works of American political thought, and much that students can relate to. In addition to providing a powerful defense of civil discourse, Publius, perhaps unintentionally, shows how difficult it can be to live up to the lofty aspirations contained within. Students will also develop essential analytical skills by working with these documents and gaining these skills will give them confidence in tackling even tougher documents.

Warm-up Discussion: Though this may add time to the discussion, it may be useful to discuss idioms with your students before embarking on this lesson. Ask your students how language has changed just in their lifetimes, and how it will likely be different in 50 years? If they can’t think of anything, remind them that terms like “LOL,” “TL;DR,” and “IKR”^{*} didn’t exist 50 years ago. It’s just a new, more efficient way of communicating in a world where there are many demands on our time.

Distribute copies, or project the first two paragraphs of *Federalist, No. 1* on the board, and give students the following context:

This is the first essay of *The Federalist Papers*, and in the first two paragraphs, the writer (*Publius*, in this case Alexander Hamilton) basically says that many people have selfish reasons for opposing the new Constitution. Maybe they are doing well under the current system and don’t want it to change? Maybe they like how the Articles of Confederation have created a sense of

^{*} “Laughing out Loud,” “Too Long; Didn’t (or Don’t) Read,” and “I Know, Right?”

chaos and are able to profit from it? Maybe these people get their power from the states having power, and a strong central government will take their power away? Nevertheless, Publius says that we can't just write every opponent to the new Constitution off as selfish and greedy—let's look at the third paragraph of *Federalist No. 1*.

Instructions: Print each of the below sentences on a separate sheet. Have students work in small groups to rewrite each sentence below in modern language. First, they may need to tackle the vocabulary they do not understand (see lesson appendix), and then work together to come up with a readable and understandable version of the sentence. If possible, give each sentence to two separate groups so that you can compare what each group produces.

If you have access to multiple white boards, or large sticky notes, you can place these sentences around the room so students can leave their seats and write their translations on them.

1. "I am well aware that it would be disingenuous to resolve indiscriminately the opposition of any set of men (merely because their situations might subject them to suspicion) into interested or ambitious views."
2. "Candor will oblige us to admit that even such men may be actuated by upright intentions; and it cannot be doubted that much of the opposition which has made its appearance...will spring from...the honest errors of minds led astray by preconceived jealousies and fears."
3. "So numerous indeed and so powerful are the causes which serve to give a false bias to the judgment, that we, upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society."
4. "And a further reason for caution, in this respect, might be drawn from the reflection that we are not always sure that those who advocate the truth are influenced by purer principles than their antagonists."
5. "Ambition, avarice, personal animosity, party opposition, and many other motives not more laudable than these, are apt to operate as well upon those who support as those who oppose the right side of a question."
6. "For in politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution."

Have students return to their seats and individually write the complete paragraph in modern language. Use the below language to transition to the next part of the activity.

Now that we know why Publius believes that it is worth trying to convince skeptics to the need of the new Constitution. But why? Let's look at this final sentence, all together, from the final paragraph of *Federalist No. 1*:

“For nothing can be more evident, to those who are able to take an enlarged view of the subject, than the alternative of an adoption of the new Constitution or a dismemberment of the Union.”

To complete the exercise, ask students to translate this final statement. Permit them to either ask about any terms they do not know or look them up.

Reflection Questions:

1. After reading these passages from *Federalist No. 1*, what is “Good Faith?” Why does Publius believe that Good Faith is essential for debate in a Republic?
2. What are some of the arguments that Publius makes about why someone might honestly disagree with his position? What does he think can be done about this? What should *not* be done?
3. What, according to Publius, is at stake in deciding the issue of whether to adopt the new Constitution?

Application Exercise: Have students write a version of this final selection using language that they think their peers would understand—encourage them to use texting language, emojis, etc.

Extension: There is an excellent classroom conversation to be had about the value of civil discourse and the challenges of maintaining it. If you wish to use *The Federalist Papers* in the ongoing conversation, *Federalist*, No. 67 is an excellent example of the challenge of maintaining a civil tone and assuming good faith on the part of your opponents.



Federalist, No. 1 Vocabulary

Disingenuous	Indiscriminately	Opposition
Situations	Ambitions	Candor
Oblige	Actuated	Intentions
Astray	Preconceived	Jealousies
Magnitude	Judgement	Bias
Influenced	Reflection	Advocate
Ambition	Principled	Antagonists
Motives	Avarice	Animosity
Absurd	Laudable	Apt
Persecution	Proselytes	Heresies
Evident	Enlarged	Alternative
Adoption	Constitution	Dismemberment



Sentence One

I am well aware that it would be disingenuous to resolve indiscriminately the opposition of any set of men (merely because their situations might subject them to suspicion) into interested or ambitious views.

Sentence Two

Candor will oblige us to admit that even such men may be actuated by upright intentions; and it cannot be doubted that much of the opposition which has made its appearance...will spring from...the honest errors of minds led astray by preconceived jealousies and fears.

Sentence Three

So numerous indeed and so powerful are the causes which serve to give a false bias to the judgment, that we, upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society.

Final Sentence

For nothing can be more evident, to those who are able to take an enlarged view of the subject, than the alternative of an adoption of the new Constitution or a dismemberment of the Union.

Notes

