



How does the Constitution divide power among the three branches—and what stops any one of them from taking over?

Students spend a day as a Capitol intern: they watch the Citizenship 101 episode "American Government," then learn the building by matching the branches to their powers and leaders (Level 1), route the overflowing mailroom to the correct branch—or to the states—and sequence how a bill becomes a law (Level 2), respond to "power grab" alerts by naming the constitutional check that stops each one (Level 3), and write the Chief of Staff's memo explaining why no one in Washington rules alone (Level 4)—climbing from recall to creation as they rise through the ranks.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the three branches of the federal government—their functions and key leaders—as tested on the official U.S. naturalization exam.
- Apply the division of powers by routing citizen requests to the correct branch—or to the states—and sequencing the steps by which a bill becomes a law.
- Evaluate power-grab scenarios by naming the branch and the exact constitutional tool that stops each one.
- Create an original memo that names all three branches, cites one real check in action, and explains why the Founders divided power.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Separation of Powers (Checks and Balances):** Dividing government into three branches, each with the authority to restrain the others through a "cooperative competition," so no one part becomes too powerful.
- **Executive Branch:** The branch headed by the president, who enforces federal laws, directs national defense, and serves as commander in chief of the military.
- **Legislative Branch (Congress):** The branch that makes federal laws; made up of the House of Representatives (435 voting members serving two-year terms) and the Senate (100 senators—two per state—serving six-year terms).
- **Judicial Branch:** The branch that interprets the nation's laws and settles legal disputes; the U.S. Supreme Court, with nine justices led by the chief justice, is the highest court in the country.
- **Cabinet:** A group of advisors—including the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Labor, and Energy—responsible for running the agencies of the executive branch.
- **Veto:** The president's power to reject a bill passed by Congress, preventing it from becoming law at that time.
- **Enumerated Powers:** Powers listed clearly in the Constitution, so that everyone knows what the government can do—and knows it cannot do anything that isn't listed.
- **Federalism:** The division of power between the federal government (which can print money, declare war, create an army, and make treaties) and the state governments (which provide education, police protection, safety, and approve land use).



Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.4, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Civics, U.S. Government

What You'll Need

- Video: *Citizenship 101: "American Government"* ([Watch Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Citizenship 101: American Government* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencils, whiteboard, or projector

Lesson Plan (45–55 minutes)

Warm Up: Who's in Charge Here? (5–7 minutes)

- Open with a quick poll (display or read aloud): *Who is in charge of the United States?* Write answers on the board. Most students will say "the president." Don't correct anyone yet.
- Follow with three rapid-fire questions, students jot silently: *What part of the federal government writes laws? Who is commander in chief of the U.S. military? There are three branches of government—why?*
- Reveal: all three are real questions from the U.S. naturalization test—and the answer to the opening poll is the day's big idea: no one person is in charge alone. The Founders designed it that way on purpose.
- Deliver the twist: "Today you're starting the most coveted internship in Washington. The mailroom is overflowing, somebody is always reaching for power they don't have—and by the end of the day, you'll be the one explaining to visitors how this town actually works."

Intern Orientation: Watch and Learn the Building (12–15 minutes)

- Distribute the worksheet (one per student). Preview **Level 1 | New Intern**: students complete the matching activity as they watch—every term and meaning is covered directly in the episode.
- **Intern briefing** (direct instruction, 2 minutes): Before pressing play, frame the design problem. The Founders feared any one individual or group holding too much governing power—so they divided the government into three distinct but related parts, gave each branch only the powers listed in the Constitution, and set the branches to check one another. Ask students to watch for the following in the episode:
 - The three branches, what each one does, and who leads it.
 - Why Congress is split into two parts—and how that solved the fight between large and small states.
 - The path a bill travels to become a law—and the two ways it can be stopped.
 - Which powers belong to the federal government, and which belong to the states.
- Watch *Citizenship 101: "American Government"* (7 minutes, 10 seconds).
- Give students 1–2 minutes to finish the matching with a partner, then rapid-check the letters as a class—the answer key must be airtight before the mailroom opens.

Mailroom Duty: Route the Mail (8–10 minutes)

- Students move to **Level 2 | Mailroom Duty**: five citizen letters must each be forwarded to the part of government with the power to act, with a one-line justification. Work in pairs so interns must defend their routing to a colleague.
- **Teacher guardrails for this section:**
 - **Don't confirm answers yet.** Let pairs commit to all five routings first; disagreement between partners is where the learning happens.
 - **Watch for the trap letter.** Letter 4 (school funding) belongs to no federal branch at all—education is a state power, along with police protection, safety, and land use. Students who route it to Congress or the President have missed the episode's federalism point.
 - **Require the "because."** The routing is easy to guess; the justification is where understanding shows. "Because Congress makes federal laws" beats "because that's their job."
- Finish with the **Special Delivery** sequencing task: students number the four steps of a bill becoming a law. Debrief by tracing one imaginary bill aloud from introduction to signature to court challenge.

Security Detail: Power Grab Alert (8–10 minutes)

- Students advance to **Level 3 | Security Detail**: three alerts in which someone reaches for power the Constitution doesn't give them. For each, students name who has the constitutional power to stop it—and the exact tool: the veto, review by the courts, or the rule that only Congress can make federal laws.
- **Key idea to surface:** a "check" is not a complaint or a protest—it is a specific constitutional tool one branch uses to restrain another. If students can name the tool, they understand the system; if they can only say "someone would stop him," they don't yet.
- **Optional live version (if time allows):** call out additional power grabs ("The Supreme Court announces it will command the army!" "Congress declares its new law cannot be reviewed by any court!") and have the class respond in chorus with who stops it and how.

The Memo: Chief of Staff (5–8 minutes)

- Students complete **Level 4 | Chief of Staff**: a 4–6-sentence memo answering a visiting foreign student's question—"Who's in charge of America?"—that must name all three branches and their jobs, describe one real check in action, and explain why the Founders divided power.
- Invite two or three chiefs of staff to read their memos aloud. The strongest answers embrace the paradox: the honest reply to "who's in charge?" is "no one alone—and that's the point."
- **Teacher tip:** for early finishers or as an extension, assign the "My Government" research task the episode itself recommends: find the names of your two U.S. senators and your representative, your governor, and your state capital—all of which appear on the citizenship test.

Wrap Up (3–5 minutes)

- Return to the warm-up poll: ask again, *Who is in charge of the United States?* Enjoy the difference in the answers.

- Exit ticket (spoken or written): Name the three branches, and describe one way one branch checks another.
- **Success Criteria:** A strong response names the legislative, executive, and judicial branches and cites a specific check—the veto, court review of laws, or that only Congress can make federal laws—rather than a vague “they watch each other.”
- Collect worksheets as a formative assessment, or have students keep them as part of a citizenship-test study guide if you plan to use other episodes in the series.

Don't have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (25–30 minutes)

Hand out the worksheet and play the episode—the worksheet’s “mission brief” gives students everything they need with no setup. Students complete Level 1 while watching and Levels 2–3 after; assign the Level 4 | Chief of Staff memo as homework. Check rulings against the answer key. (The worksheet is written directly to students as a mission, so it works handed out with the video alone—no lesson plan required.)