

Freedom of Speech and Automatic Language: Examining the Pledge of Allegiance

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Grade Band

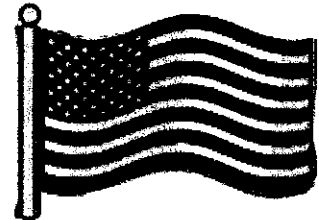
9-12

Estimated Lesson Time

Four 50-minute sessions

Overview

Most students in American classrooms know the words to the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance. The words are a kind of automatic language. We say them easily—perhaps every day, but we may not think in detail about what we are saying. This lesson plan asks students to explore this rote learning and their own right to freedom of speech by examining the Pledge of Allegiance from a historical and personal perspective and in relationship to fictional situations in novels they have read. Using a novel such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Andersen or *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi, students learn how the novel's protagonist and other characters in the story deal with free speech issues in varying ways and are invited to think about pledges that they are willing to make and how they express their freedom of speech.



From Theory to Practice

In "By Design or By Habit," Frank Hubbard asks his students to think carefully about the words that we say as a result of rote memorization, such as the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, the "Star-Spangled Banner," or a religious prayer or quotation. Hubbard calls such memorized pieces "automatic language." They are pieces "with language that has been so routinized or memorized that its user finds the language invisible, or nearly so" (4). By examining language word-by-word, students are challenged to "focus on the intention, the meaning behind the words, thus helping them reclaim something from its automatic status and restore it to a living and vital form" (4). In this lesson, students think not only about the words they say when they recite the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, but also the specific words of the First Amendment to the Constitution and what the right to freedom of speech means on a personal level.

Further Reading

Hubbard, Frank 1984. "By Design or By Habit: Writing and Learning about Automatic Language." *Courses for Change in Writing: A Selection from the NEH/Iowa Institute*. Eds. Carl H. Klaus and Nancy Jones. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, pp. 3-21.

Student Objectives

Students will

- explore the history and meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance
- define critical words in the Pledge, focusing on their intention and meaning
- read the First Amendment and discuss the right of citizens to speak freely or to not speak, as they choose
- make connections between the novel and fictional characters and their own free speech choices
- write an original pledge that promises to be true or faithful to something important to them

Resources

- [History of The Pledge of Allegiance](#) (FOX news article, the [Wikipedia entry](#), the [American Legion History of the Flag](#), or a text from your library)
- [Examining the U.S. Pledge](#)
- [Free Speech and Pledge Background](#)
- [Looking at Other Pledges](#)
- [Pledge Writing Rubric](#)
- [Writing Your Own Pledge](#)
- [Dictionaries](#)
- Novel that highlights First Amendment rights

Instructional Plan

Resources

- [Examining the U.S. Pledge](#)
- [Looking at Other Pledges](#)
- [Free Speech and Pledge Background](#)
- [Writing Your Own Pledge](#)
- [History of The Pledge of Allegiance](#) (FOX news article, the [Wikipedia entry](#), the [American Legion History of the Flag](#), or a text from your library)
- Bookmark Web sites, or make hard copies of Web resources
- Dictionaries for teams of students
- Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, or other novel that highlights First Amendment rights (e.g., *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli)
- [Pledge Writing Rubric](#)

Preparation

- Students should have read all or most of a novel that features free speech issues (e.g., *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli).
- Make copies or overhead transparencies of the handouts for the lesson: [Examining the U.S. Pledge](#), [Looking at Other Pledges](#), [Free Speech and Pledge Background](#), [Writing Your Own Pledge](#), and [Pledge Writing Rubric](#).
- If desired, make copies of the history of The Pledge of Allegiance explained in the [FOX news article](#), the [Wikipedia entry](#), the [American Legion History of the Flag](#), or a text from your library. Alternately, students can read the text online or in small groups.
- Test the [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#) on your computers to familiarize yourself with the tools and ensure that you have the Flash plug-in installed. You can download the plug-in from the [technical support page](#).

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Begin the session by inviting the students to share what they know about the First Amendment and Freedom of Speech.
2. Ask them to make connections to the Pledge of Allegiance.
3. Provide the students with an overview of the project—looking at First Amendment Rights and the Pledge of Allegiance.
4. Read about the history of The Pledge of Allegiance in this [FOX news article](#), the [Wikipedia entry](#), the [American Legion History of the Flag](#), or a text from your library. Students can read the text online or you can provide printouts.
5. As the students read the article, ask them to answer questions from the [Examining the U.S. Pledge](#).

Session Two

1. As a class, examine [the First Amendment](#). This can be done online or with a printed hard copy.
2. Invite students to share their thoughts:
 - o What does the First Amendment mean?
 - o Why is it important?
3. Ask students to talk about how the First Amendment plays a role in their lives. Encourage student participation.
4. Examine the [Free Speech](#) and the [Pledge Background](#) sheet.
5. Discuss the role of the First Amendment in the novel that your class is reading. For instance, in *Speak*, Melinda chooses not to speak at all because she has something terrible that she cannot tell anyone else. The issue of free speech is brought out in Mr. Neck's class when he refuses to listen to points of view that conflict with his own even though he opened a debate, which is intended to be a discussion of varying ideas, supported with evidence.

Session Three

1. Examine [the Supreme Court decision](#) regarding a citizen's right to choose whether or not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.
2. Invite the students to share their reactions to the court's decision.
3. Discuss what making a pledge means (making a promise) and that promises are not to be taken lightly or offered frivolously.
4. Review key definitions from the Pledge of Allegiance: pledge, allegiance, republic, indivisible, and liberty. If desired, share [Pledge of Allegiance Explained by Red Skelton](#) or the [American Legion Explanation of the Pledge](#).
5. Discuss the [Looking at Other Pledges](#) handout: read the alternative pledge and show how it mirrors the national pledge. See the Web Resources below for additional pledges and oaths that can be used to supplement your class discussion.

Session Four

1. Examine the [Pledge Writing Rubric](#) with the students, so they know the expectations and targets for their own writing.
2. Using the [Writing Your Own Pledge](#) handout, help students brainstorm ideas for their own pledges, each a personal promise to be true to something they believe in, following the style of the national pledge.
3. Refer to the Purdue Online Writing Lab exercise on [parallel structure](#) if students need to work on that skill before writing their own pledge.
4. Students can publish their own pledges using the [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#), and create a flyer, brochure, booklet, or newspaper.

Extensions

- Conduct ongoing class discussions about free speech and the First Amendment, which would enrich students' understanding of the novel and of their rights and responsibilities as American citizens. Are the characters in the novel simply expressing their right to free speech or is the situation more complicated? How does peer pressure play into the situation?
- Discuss how students can respect other citizens' right to free speech (staying quiet while others recite the pledge if they choose, disagree with ideas and not attacking a person, etc.)
- Ask students to research other Supreme Court cases regarding students and free speech, drawing conclusions about the court's decision and whether or not they agree with it. Ask students to present their information to the class or a community group in one of the following ways:
 - o Speech
 - o Essay
 - o Web page
 - o PowerPoint
- Research accounts of American citizens being shunned or harassed for expressing unpopular views.

One example is when the Dixie Chicks' Natalie Maines told her concert audience that they were ashamed of President Bush. Outraged fans have boycotted concerts and some radio stations have refused to play their music. Are there times to restrain from expressing opinions or is it always wrong to stifle views of citizens? Read about at least three different cases before you formulate your opinion.

- Think of other books, movies, songs, or other media that you remember having to do with free speech. What was the idea presented? How was it important? How has your perception of that book (etc.) changed now that you've reflected on free speech more specifically?
- Research pledges of other countries. Use the [Venn Diagram](#) to compare the two pledges.

Web Resources

The First Amendment

http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html

The transcript of Bill of Rights, from the National Archive. The page links to images of the original document.

West Virginia State Board of Education vs. Barnette

http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/printer_friendly.pl?page=us/319/624.html

A link to the Supreme Court case which states that people are protected by the First Amendment and do not have to salute the flag.

History: The Pledge of Allegiance

http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,56320,00.html

History of the Pledge by FOX News, including notes about what was included, and what was omitted.

Pledge of Allegiance Explained by Red Skelton

<http://www.getipm.com/personal/red-skelton.htm>

A word-by-word explanation of the pledge, as remembered by comedian Red Skelton. Site includes an audio file of Skelton telling the story.

Additional Pledge and Oath Examples

[Irish Oath of Allegiance \(1922\)](#)

[Canadian Oath of Allegiance](#)

[Florence Nightingale Pledge \(Nurse's Pledge\)](#)

[American Oath of Allegiance](#)

[U.S. Army Oath of Enlistment and Oath of Office](#)

[The Student Pledge Against Gun Violence—Older Students, Younger Students, In Spanish](#)

[International Webmasters Association Pro-Ethics Pledge](#)

[Graduation Pledge](#)

[Boulder Pledge](#)

Student Assessment/Reflections

As students discuss free speech, the pledge, and their readings, listen for comments that indicate that students understand the specific meaning of the words and the underlying meaning of the pledge. Additionally, monitor student interaction and progress during class discussion to assess social skills and assist any students having problems with the exploration. Look for evidence in students' contributions to the discussion as well as in their individual work in response to the [Examining the U.S. Pledge](#), [Looking at Other Pledges](#), and the [Writing Your Own Pledge](#) sheets that they have engaged in the process of moving from automatic language to deeper understanding and that they have explored the related ideas in their readings. For formal assessment, use the [Pledge Rubric](#) to shape your response and feedback.

NCTE/IRA Standards

1 - Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

8 - Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).



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