

COMMON CORE UNIT:

A Close Reading of an Excerpt from Linda R. Monk's *Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*. New York: Hyperion, 2003.

UNIT SUMMARY

The goal of this one to two day exemplar is to give students the opportunity to observe the dynamic nature of the Constitution through the close reading and writing habits they've been practicing. By reading and re-reading the passage closely combined with classroom discussion about it, students will explore the questions Monk raises and perhaps even pursue additional avenues of inquiry. When combined with writing about the passage and teacher feedback, students will form a deeper appreciation not only of Monk's argument and the value of struggling with complex text, but of the Preamble of the Constitution itself.

Reading Task: *Students will silently read the passage, first independently, and then following along with the text as the teacher reads aloud. The teacher will then lead students through a set of concise, text-dependent questions that compel students to reread specific paragraphs and discover the structure and meaning of Monk's argument.*

Vocabulary Task: *Most of the meanings of words in this selection can be discovered from careful reading of the context in which they appear. This practice is both called for by the standards and is vital. Teachers must be prepared to reinforce it constantly by modeling and holding students accountable for looking in the context for meaning as well.*

Discussion Task: *Students will discuss the passage in depth with their teacher and their classmates, performing activities that result in a close reading of the text. The goal is to foster student confidence when encountering complex text and to reinforce the skills they have acquired regarding how to build and extend their understanding of a text.*

Writing Task: *Students will paraphrase Thurgood Marshall's quote and then write an explanation of Monk's text in response to one of three prompts. Students will be afforded the opportunity to rewrite their explanation or revise their paraphrase after participating in classroom discussion, allowing them to refashion both their understanding of the text and their expression of that understanding.*

Text Selection: This selection, taken from Appendix B of the CCSS, while brief, allows for an in-depth investigation into three of the most highly charged words in the Constitution, and offers a capsule history of the dramatic and sweeping changes to how the phrase "We the People" has been interpreted over the years. Rich both in meaning and vocabulary, the excerpt from Monk's text not only validates the close reading approach but presents a focused and concise opportunity that students in both ELA and history classrooms will find engaging.

Outline of Lesson: This lesson can be taught in one or two days of instruction and reflection on the part of students and their teachers, with the possibility of adding additional days of instruction (see Appendix A) or an additional day devoted to peer review and revision of the culminating writing assignment.

Standards Covered: The following CCS standards are the focus of this exemplar: RI.6-8.1-3,5, & 6; W.6-8.2, 4 & -59)

Monk, Linda R. *Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*

From “*The Preamble: We the People*”

The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.

But who are “We the People”? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America’s first advocates for women’s rights, asked in 1853, “‘We the People’? Which ‘We the People’? The women were not included.” Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African Americans—slave or free. Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:

for a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: ‘we the people.’ when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens . . . the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.

Through the Amendment process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of “We the People.” After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the right to vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment extended suffrage to eighteen-year-olds.

elected body that creates laws

interpreted

formal change to a legal contract

membership in a state or nation with rights, privileges, and duties

Instructional Exemplar for Monk’s *Words We Live By*

Summary of Activities (Focus on CCS Standards RI.6-8.1-3, 5, & 6; W.6-8.2, 4 & 9)

1. Teacher introduces the passage and students read it independently
2. Teacher then reads the passage out loud to the class and students follow along in the text
3. Teacher asks the class a small set of guiding questions and tasks about the passage in question
4. Teacher assigns homework that asks students to write an analysis of Monk’s passage

Text under Discussion	Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students
<p>The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.</p> <p>But who are “We the People”? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America’s first advocates for women’s rights, asked in 1853, “‘We the People’? Which ‘We the People’? The women were not included.” Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African Americans—slave or free. Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">for a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: ‘we the people.’ when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens . . . the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.</p> <p>Through the Amendment process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of “We the People.” After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the right to vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment extended suffrage to eighteen-year-olds.</p>	<p>1. Introduce the text and ask students to read independently Other than giving an initial gloss to words students would likely not be able to define from context (underlined in the text), avoid giving any background context or instructional guidance at the outset of the lesson while students are reading the text silently. This close reading approach forces students to rely exclusively on the text instead of privileging background knowledge, and levels the playing field for all students as they seek to comprehend Monk’s argument. It is critical to cultivating independence and creating a culture of close reading that students initially grapple with rich texts like Monk’s passage without the aid of prefatory material, extensive notes, or even teacher explanations.</p> <p>2. Read the passage out loud as students follow along Asking students to listen to Monk’s “The Preamble: We the People” exposes students a second time to the content and structure of her argument before they begin their close reading of the text. Speaking clearly and carefully will allow students to follow the shape of Monk’s argument, and reading out loud with students following along improves fluency while offering all students access to this complex text. Accurate and skillful modeling of the reading provides students who may be dysfluent with accurate pronunciations and syntactic patterns of English.</p>

Central Concern #1	Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students	
<p>Why does Monk focus on the first three words of the Constitution?</p> <p>The passage from Monk’s text is a close examination of the way in which those three words have been interpreted over time.</p>	<p>3. Guide discussion of the passage with a series of specific text-dependent questions and tasks.</p> <p>As students move through these questions, be sure to check for and reinforce their understanding of academic vocabulary in the corresponding text (which will be boldfaced the first time it appears in the text). At times the questions may focus on academic vocabulary.</p> <p>(Q1) What is (and isn’t) the meaning of “popular sovereignty”? Why does Monk claim that this is the form of government in America?</p>	
<p>Text Under Discussion</p> <p>The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the <u>legislature</u>, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.</p> <p>But who are “We the People”? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America’s first advocates for women’s rights, asked in 1853, “‘We the People’? Which ‘We the People’? The women were not included.” Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African Americans—slave or free.</p>	<p><i>Elected body that creates laws</i></p>	<p>These are fairly straightforward questions for students to answer but must be grasped to understand the remainder of Monk’s analysis. The second question requires students to infer that the first three words of the Constitution refer to the doctrine of popular sovereignty, and perceptive students will be able to connect the title of the chapter and/or the opening of the second paragraph to the Constitution’s Preamble.</p> <p>(Q2) Is Lucy Stone confused when she asks “Which ‘We the People’?” Why does Monk say this question has “troubled the nation”?</p> <p>Students need to be able to discern that Stone is not confused but rather critical of the seemingly all-embracing phrase “We the People” when looked at in the light of the history of America. It is this history that Monk says is “troubled.” Then it is revealed that the “true rulers in American Government” did not include women, Native Americans, free blacks, enslaved African-Americans, or even white males who did not own property. Students should be able to deduce that those with the vote were primarily white men with property.</p> <p><i>N.B. Assuming this is a part of a unit on government/civics, students should be familiar with terms like Constitution, Supreme Court, and Preamble. Given their importance, still “check-in” with students and briefly review to help solidify students’ grasp of these concepts. If it is not, then this reading will serve as a solid introduction to these essential words.</i></p>

Central Concern #2	Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students
<p>What insights does Justice Marshall bring to the issue of interpreting “We the People”?</p> <p>As the first African American on the Supreme Court, Marshall’s appointment exemplifies the changing nature of the constitutional conception of who is included in the phrase “We the People.”</p>	<p>(Q3) What does the phrase “founding fathers” mean? Why does Marshall think the founding fathers could not have imagined a female or black Supreme Court Justice?</p> <p>This question is a good way to summarize the argument so far as answering it will drive students back to what was read and discussed earlier. The correct answer relies on making the connection between the lack of political rights granted to women and blacks by the founders—those that wrote the Constitution—and recognizing Marshall’s point that at the time he was writing both a female and the descendant of a slave were members of the Supreme Court—the judicial body that holds the final interpretation of the Constitution.</p>
<p>Text Under Discussion</p> <p>Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:</p> <p>for a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: ‘we the people.’ when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens . . . the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.</p>	<p>Having discussed the meaning of Marshall’s quote, ask students to put his ideas into their own words in a brief two to three sentence paraphrase.</p> <p>Insisting that students paraphrase Marshall at this point serves the purpose of solidifying their understanding of Monk’s analysis as well as testing their ability to communicate that understanding fluently in writing. Circulate and perform “over the shoulder” conferences with students to check comprehension and offer commentary that could lead to on the spot revision of their “translation” of Marshall’s ideas.</p> <p>Sidebar: Images of the Supreme Court over the last century</p> <p>If students are particularly intrigued by the composition of the Supreme Court, Appendix B includes a series of images of the justices every forty years starting in 1890, vividly illustrating the demographic changes the court has undergone.</p>

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Central Concern #3	Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students	
<p>How has the Amendment process altered the character of the Constitution?</p> <p>Monk demonstrates that there have been several changes to the Constitution that have altered the understand of who is included in the phrase “We the People”</p>	<p>(Q4) What evidence is there in the final paragraph regarding Marshall’s claim about the “evolving nature of the Constitution”?</p> <p>This question requires students to methodically cite evidence to answer the question completely and grasp that the amendment process changed the meaning of who was included in “the people.”</p> <p>Sidebar: The Goals of the Constitution</p> <p>If students are intrigued, share with students the text of the Preamble and ask them to identify what the Founding Fathers were trying to accomplish in forming a Constitutional government through popular sovereignty:</p> <p>We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.</p>	
<p>Text Under Discussion</p> <p>Through the <u>Amendment</u> process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of “We the People.” After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans <u>citizenship</u>, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the right to vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment extended <u>sufrage</u> to eighteen-year-olds.</p>	<p><i>formal change to a legal contract</i></p>	<p>4. For homework students write a paragraph length explanation that answers one of the following prompts. Provide evidence from the text in your response to justify your analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on Monk’s writings, explain how the notion of who the “people” are—as defined by the Constitution—has changed over time in America. • Based on Monk’s writing, how does Thurgood Marshall’s presence on the Supreme Court illustrate the evolution of the constitution? • Analyze Monk’s explanation of what has led to the modifications that have been made to the Constitution. <p>During the next class period the paragraph could be used in a peer-to-peer critique and/or revised.</p>

Explanatory Writing Assignment: Guidance for Teachers

Teachers might wish to consider the following guidance with regards to evaluating the following prompts:

- Explain how the notion of who the “people” are—as defined by the Constitution—has changed over time in America.

Look for a logical explanation of the evolution of who has been considered a “person” in the eyes of America over time. The paragraph could be organized chronologically, drawing evidence from the text that at the nation’s founding the creators of the Constitution would not “have in mind the majority of America’s citizens” and primarily saw persons as white males with property. Students should then observe that over time, however, the notion of “We the People” has grown to include African Americans (through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendment) as well as women with the 19th Amendment. They might invoke Thurgood Marshall’s observation (from Monk’s piece) that these two groups, previously discriminated against, now have representatives on the Supreme Court—the final arbiter of the Constitution’s “We the People.” Students would end by noting the extension of the franchise to 18 year olds, and perhaps point out that the final status of one group mentioned early on remains unexplained—Native Americans.

- How does Thurgood Marshall’s presence on the Supreme Court illustrate the evolution of the Constitution?

Look for student essays that address the question asked, i.e. focus on why the fact that Thurgood Marshall is on the Supreme Court reflects the notion of an evolving Constitution. Students might start by drawing evidence from the text that Marshall was “the first African American on the Supreme Court” and note that at the founding of America “We the People” did not recognize the status of African Americans “slave or free.” They might go on to explain what is meant by an evolving constitution, citing the fact from Monk’s piece that “[t]hrough the amendment process” groups that were earlier not included under the framework of popular sovereignty were now added (in the case of African Americans, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments added to the constitution specifically addressed their status), paving the way for Marshall’s ascension to the court a century later. To round out their essay they might integrate into their essay Marshall’s ironic observation that “[t]he men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined... that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed ... the descendant of an African slave.”

- Analyze Monk’s explanation of what has led to the modifications that have been made to the Constitution.

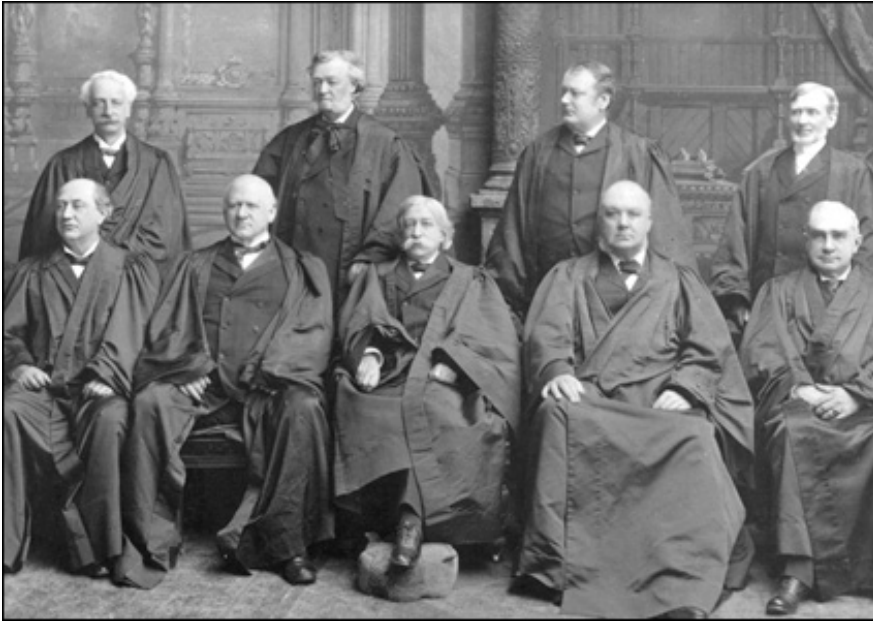
Students might begin their paragraph by observing that Monk begins her analysis noting the significance of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and how that opens up the question of who “the people” are. Look for students then to consider the various causal mechanisms for change to the Constitution, from the role of “advocates for women’s rights” like Lucy Stone to the importance of trailblazers like Thurgood Marshall, “the first African American on the Supreme Court.” But students should give special emphasis to “the amendment process” explained in Monk’s piece and how through it “more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of ‘We the People.’” Students might round out their paragraphs by citing some of the changes to the constitution in the form of various amendments (e.g. “the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide”).

Appendix A: Additional Instructional Opportunities for Monk's Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution

If teachers wish to add additional instructional time, they might want to consider having small groups of students of mixed abilities tackle one or more of these questions, or ask individual students to pursue one of these lines of investigation.

1. Although Marshall is right in claiming that the Founding Fathers did not imagine an African-American or a woman serving on the court, they did envision possible changes to the Constitution and created an amendment process to accommodate such changes. Indeed, right after the Constitution was written, ten Amendments were passed, commonly referred to as the Bill of Rights. Students could look into the reasons why the Constitution was altered so soon after it was adopted or pick one of the Amendments in the Bill of Rights and research the history of that particular amendment or a particular legal case connected with that Amendment (e.g., *Gideon v. Wainwright* and the Sixth Amendment).
2. The idea of a changing definition of "people" in Monk's text will intrigue middle school students. They could examine the different "types" of people at the nation's founding (immigrants, Native Americans, indentured servants, slaves, etc) and how they have been viewed within a Constitutional framework. Specific historical events could be used to illuminate the treatment of groups not protected by the constitution, from the Cherokee Removal to the Chinese Exclusion Act to even the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment.
3. There are many times the Constitution is invoked on both sides of a debate about rights. To reinforce the concept that the U.S. Constitution is a living document, students could investigate an area of debate where the interpretation of an Amendment or amending the Constitution is central to the argument and then debate it in class. Some possibilities are gun control, balancing the federal budget, gay marriage, or even the legality of selling alcohol.
4. Students could select one of the amendments mentioned by Monk that expanded the conception of who the people were and research it more in depth, examining the historical background, the reasons for its adoption, and its effects both intended and otherwise.

Appendix B: Images of the Justices of the Supreme Court



Fuller Court, 1890



Taft Court, 1930



Burger Court, 1970



Roberts Court, 2010

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