

Formal English—The Bill of Rights

The U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights and the other amendments, is written in a style known as formal English. This style is typical of government documents. It differs from informal English—the style of everyday speech—in several ways. The chart on this page lists the contrasting characteristics of formal and informal English.

	Formal	Informal
Tone	Serious, dignified, official	Personal, friendly, casual
Vocabulary	Long or technical words No contractions or conversational language	Simple, familiar words Contractions and common expressions
Sentence Structure	Long, often complicated sentences	Varying sentence length

Take a closer look at the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights as an example of formal English:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The amendment is one long, complicated sentence. The tone is dignified and sounds official. The language contains legal vocabulary and several words not commonly used in everyday conversations.

How would you rewrite the First Amendment in informal English? One version follows.

Congress is not allowed to set up an official religion. Congress cannot pass laws that limit five of your basic rights:

1. To practice the religion of your choice
2. To state your ideas
3. To publish your ideas
4. To meet peacefully in groups
5. To ask the government to hear complaints and respond accordingly

Project

Use formal English to write a Children's Bill of Rights. Your Bill of Rights should contain ten points, or statements, focusing on the right of children to a safe, decent, and healthy life.

Designing the First U.S. Flag

In June 1777, the Continental Congress called for the adoption of a new American flag. The statement read as follows.

Resolved that the flag of the U.S. be 13 stripes alternate red and white and the union be 13 stars in a blue field, representing a new constellation.

The resolution spelled out the elements that should be displayed on the new flag, but it left open many questions about the specific design. For example, what should the stars look like and how should they be arranged? Several different versions of the flag were suggested. There were flags with stars enclosed in circles, stars arranged in rows of varying numbers, and stars with 5, 6, 7, or 8 points.

Another flag reversed the position of the stars and stripes. In the upper right-hand corner, red-and-white stripes appeared on a square patch of fabric. On the main portion of the flag, 12 stars were arranged in a circle with one star in the center. Note the variations of flag designs on this page.

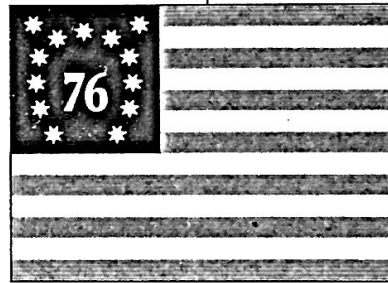
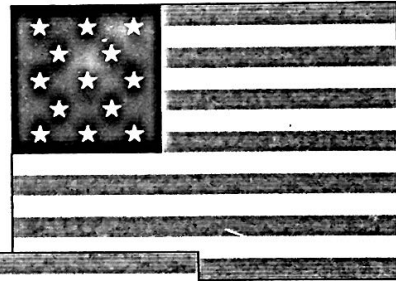
According to legend, Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia seamstress, made the flag that became the first official flag of the United States. Supposedly George Washington's direct request inspired her creation. Some historians, though, question the truth of this story.

The meaning of the stars and stripes on the American flag is well-known. The 13 stripes represent the 13 original colonies. The stars symbolize the new states of the Union.

Project

Design your own version of a flag for the new United States. Use the same elements mentioned in the flag resolution of 1777—13 red and white stripes, blue field, and 13 white stars. Experiment with the arrangement of these elements and put them together in an original way.

The most popular design for the flag in the late 1770s had alternating rows of three and two stars. The design with 13 stars in a circle (shown at the bottom of the page) was not as common.



This flag is known as the Bennington Flag because it was flown during the Battle of Bennington in 1777.

