



“THE RULE OF LAW”: WHAT DO THE WORDS REALLY MEAN?

“Words, words, words,” Hamlet says when Polonius asks him what he is reading. Although Hamlet intended his response to be sarcastic, he was expressing a universal truth that every teacher understands: Regardless of what we teach, every lesson begins with “words,” whether spoken or printed.

This activity takes an abstract concept, “the rule of law,” and approaches it word by word, drawing on students’ prior knowledge of what the individual words mean to arrive at an understandable and practical definition of this often misunderstood phrase. In the end, the activity serves as a springboard for a larger discussion of the rule of law as the foundation for all of our democratic ideals and institutions.

Begin by writing each word on a separate piece of chart paper (this technique tends to be more effective than a white board/chalk board because many classrooms have limited board space). Ask students to tell you what they know about each word, especially the part of speech (they may need your help here since the meaning of the word will depend on how it is used in the phrase), meanings they associate with each word, synonyms, *etc.* After “deconstructing” the phrase, ask students to use their findings to construct a one sentence definition of the rule of law. Once you have completed this step, give students a handout with several textbook definitions of the concept and ask them to compare their definitions to the “scholarly” examples. Now you and you students can use these definitions to engage in a discussion of how democracy cannot exist without the rule of law. Let the game begin!

NOTE: The examples that follow illustrate some of the ideas teachers may want to look for during the activity.

THE:

A definite article used as a function word to indicate that the following word, phrase, or clause is definite or unique: “The” car vs. “a” car – “the car” applies to a specific car while “a car” could be any car anywhere; “the rule” refers to a specific or unique rule while “a rule” refers to an indefinite or unnamed rule.

RULE (Remind students that rule is used here as a noun; how does this affect its meaning?):

Etymology: Fr. Latin: to lead; straight, direct; same source as the word *right* (Share these original meanings with your students to see what they think.)

Meanings:

A prescribed guide, principle, or regulation for conduct or behavior
An established and authoritative principle or standard
Accepted procedure or custom; acceptable habits or standards of behavior
Form of governance; governing procedures
The act of maintaining orderly conduct in a deliberative assembly
Political or social conventions
A settled, well-regulated state or condition
Control; government; governance; dominion
Legal precept or doctrine

OF:

Etymology: Latin: away, from

Meanings:

Indicates origin or derivation
Indicates cause, motive, or reason

LAW:

Etymology: Latin: law; a connecting or unifying bond; to bind

Meanings:

A binding custom or practice; a binding agreement
A body of customs, practices, rules, regulations, standards and principles recognized as binding on the members of a particular society or community
The customs, rules, habits, and practices that must be obeyed to secure order
Precept, statute, ordinance, canon

DEFINITION OF “THE RULE OF LAW”: The concept that an orderly, well-regulated government is derived from a binding agreement of the people to obey an established or recognized body of customs, standards, principles, beliefs, etc.

Sources:

Garner, Bryan A. (Ed.). (2010). *Black' Law Dictionary* (Abridged ninth edition). St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company.

Simpson, J. A., & Weiner, E. S. C. (Eds.). (1989). *The Oxford English Dictionary: Volumes VIII and XIV* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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