

## Freedom of Assembly and Speech - Democratic Values We Share

Freedom of speech and expression, especially about political and other public issues, is essential to any democracy. Democracies are usually filled with many voices expressing different or even contrary ideas and opinions because Democratic governments like Germany and the US do not control written and verbal speech.

Citizens of democracies understand that our freedom depends upon a literate, knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information enables it to participate as fully as possible in the public life of their society. It is the responsibility of each citizen to criticize unwise or tyrannical government officials or policies. In order for a free people to govern themselves, they must be free to express themselves openly, publicly, and repeatedly in speech and in writing.

Protests serve as a vital testing ground for our democracies. The right of people for peaceful assembly is an essential part of the free expression of ideas.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute, and cannot be used to justify violence, slander, libel, subversion, or obscenity. Democracies generally require a high degree of threat in order to justify banning speech that may incite violence, untruthfully harm the reputation of others, overthrow a constitutional government, or promote lewd behavior. Most democracies also forbid speech that incites racial or ethnic violence.

The challenge for our democracies is one of balance: to defend the freedom of speech and assembly, to encourage a free and open debate and protest, while countering those who are protesting without intimidating or using violence against them.

**Key Concept for Elementary Students:** Freedom of speech and assembly are necessary rights for democracies because they hold everyone, especially the government, accountable to their fellow citizens. Making the effort to protest and express our opinions is an important civic virtue.

**Materials:** One printout of the Free Speech/Assembly coloring sheet for each student, and crayons or markers.

### Procedure:

1. Write each vocabulary word on the board. Ask students to help define each word and write a simple definition after each word. Ask students to copy each NEW word onto their master vocabulary list and then copy the definitions

#### Vocabulary

City Hall - a building where government workers have their offices and work

Citizen - someone who is a legal member of a group or country

Government - people with the power to make rules and to force others to obey those rules

Petition - a paper that people may sign that asks their government to do something

Rule - tells us how to act and what to do

Right - freedom or privilege to do something

2. Project the animated cartoon called Free Speech/Assembly. Discuss each frame after it has played. This is a particularly difficult concept, so it's important for students to understand that while they have freedom to express their opinions, there are limits. Also discuss why expressing our opinions is very important in a democracy and how free and open debate protects everyone's freedom.

Ask students to react to the cartoon when completed. Why were people protesting in front of the new store? How did the store-owner react to their protest? Why did the owl say, "Isn't democracy a great thing?"



3. Pass out the Free Speech/Assembly coloring sheet and ask students to draw a picture that shows how people try to change things they don't like in their community.

**Assessment:**

A review of each student's drawing will help you assess whether each student has grasped the Freedom of Speech/Assembly. Because this is one of our most important democratic values, consider reviewing the animation with students who did not depict an appropriate image on their coloring sheet.

