American Government
The Branches of Government

Think of the United States government as a tree. What is the thickest part of a tree? The trunk. In our government, the people are the trunk. What are the branches?

The Constitution establishes three branches of government. These branches are the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. Each branch has only the power given to it in the Constitution. This separation is to make sure that no one part of government ever becomes too strong. Think of the tree again. What would happen if one branch of a tree were huge and the others were just little twigs? The whole tree could topple!

To make sure that our government does not fall apart, power is carefully balanced between the branches of government. Each branch of government has a way to curb, or “check,” the power of the other two branches. For example, imagine the President does not agree with a law passed by Congress. He can veto it so it never goes into effect. If the law passes, and takes away someone’s rights, the Supreme Court can rule it is illegal. The legislative, executive, and judicial branches all check up on each other in different ways.

These two important principles are called “separation of power” and “checks and balances.” Together, they help make sure the government works properly and that no one government group, or government official, becomes too powerful.

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1 **legislative** – having to do with making laws
2 **executive** – having to do with carrying out plans and laws
3 **judicial** – having to do with courts and judges
4 **veto** – the power of a president or governor to reject bills passed by the legislative branch
5 **illegal** – against the law
3 BRANCHES of GOVERNMENT

Constitution
(provided a separation of powers)

Legislative
(makes laws)
- Senate
  - 100 elected senators total;
    2 senators per state
- House of Representatives
  - 435 elected representatives total;
    representatives based on each state's population

Executive
(carries out laws)
- President
- Vice President
- Cabinet
  Nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate (with at least 51 votes)

Judicial
(evaluates laws)
- Supreme Court
  - 9 justices nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate (with at least 51 votes)
- Other Federal Courts
1. What established the three branches of U.S. government?
   a. the president
   b. the Constitution
   c. the king of England
   d. the Supreme Court

2. This passage uses an analogy of a tree to
   a. show that government is a part of nature, too.
   b. help the reader understand the parts of government.
   c. show the reader how cases reach the Supreme Court.
   d. explain how government has roots and grows.

3. Based on this passage, what can prevent the legislative branch from passing a law that nobody else likes?
   a. The Supreme Court has to give approval to all laws first.
   b. The legislative branch cannot pass laws, only the President can.
   c. The President could veto that law so it wouldn’t take effect.
   d. The judicial branch would elect a brand new legislative branch.

4. Read the following sentence: “If the law passes, and takes away someone’s rights, the Supreme Court can rule it is illegal.”

   In this sentence the word rule means
   a. to measure
   b. to hate
   c. to decide
   d. to suggest

5. The passage “The Branches of Government” is mostly about
   a. trees that are important to the United States
   b. famous moments in the history of U.S. government
   c. the role and history of the Supreme Court
   d. different parts of government and how they work together
6. What are the three branches of the United States government?

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7. Describe a specific situation where the principle of checks and balances could be used for the good of the people.

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

There are checks and balances in the United States government, and ________ no one person can become too powerful.

   a. previously
   b. as a result
   c. after
   d. on the other hand

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

   The president can veto a proposed law because the constitution grants that power.

   1. Who? the president
   2. What can the president do? ____________________________________________
   3. Why? ________________________________________________________________
10. **Vocabulary Word**: illegal: something that is not right by law.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: ________________________________

________________________________________
Teacher Guide and Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 740

Featured Text Structure: Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

Passage Summary: The United States has three branches of government – legislative, executive, and judicial. Power is carefully balanced between the three branches, and they do different things, which helps prevent any one person from becoming too powerful.

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   d. different parts of government and how they work together

6. What are the three branches of the United States government?
   Suggested answer: The three branches of U.S. government are the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

7. Describe a specific situation where the principle of checks and balances could be used for the good of the people.
   Suggested answer: Answers will vary but can include any bad law being vetoed by the president or ruled unconstitutional by the courts. For example, if a law was passed that took away a right such as freedom of speech the courts could rule it illegal.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.
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9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.
   The president can veto a proposed law because the constitution grants that power.
   1. Who? the president
   2. What can the president do? veto a proposed law
   3. Why? because the constitution grants that power
10. **Vocabulary Word**: illegal: if something is illegal, the law says that it is not allowed or the law says that you cannot do it.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.