

Building Fluency through Reader's Theater

The Constitution of the United States

The Foundation of Our Government



Kathleen E. Bradley

Social Studies

The Constitution of the United States

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Tips for Rehearsing Reader's Theater

By Aaron Shepard

- Make sure your script doesn't hide your face. If there is anyone in the audience you can't see, your script is too high.
- While you speak, try to look up often. Don't just look at your script. When you do look at the script, move just your eyes and keep your head up.
- Talk slowly. Speak each syllable clearly.
- Talk loudly! You have to be heard by every person in the room.
- Talk with feeling. Your voice has to tell the story.
- Stand or sit up straight. Keep your hands and feet still if they're doing nothing useful.
- If you're moving around, face the audience as much as you can. When rehearsing, always think about where the audience will be.
- Characters, remember to be your character even when you're not speaking.
- Narrators, make sure you give the characters enough time for their actions.

Tips for Performing Reader's Theater

By Aaron Shepard

- If the audience laughs, stop speaking until they can hear you again.
- If someone talks in the audience, don't pay attention.
- If someone walks into the room, don't look at him or her.
- If you make a mistake, pretend it was right.
- If you drop something, try to leave it where it is until the audience is looking somewhere else.
- If a reader forgets to read his or her part, see if you can read the part instead, make something up, or just skip over it. Don't whisper to the reader!
- If a reader falls down during the performance, pretend it didn't happen.

The Constitution of the United States: The Foundation of Our Government



Characters



Narrator

Ben Franklin

Madison


Washington

Delegate

John Russell

Setting

This reader's theater takes place in the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



Act I

Narrator:

By mid-morning in June 1787, the air inside the Pennsylvania State House is hot and sticky. The East Room is filled with 55 delegates. These men represent 12 out of the 13 states in the union.

Madison: As we've already agreed, the Articles of Confederation established a "league of friendship" between our states, but not much more, sir.

Narrator: Tempers flare and voices rise while they hash out the details of a new Constitution for the United States of America. A Massachusetts delegate pounds his fist upon the table.

Delegate: But the Articles gave our smaller states the power to do as we see fit. They protected our personal liberties. Your Virginia Plan gives too much power to a central government. In Great Britain, they call that a monarchy!

Madison: Need we remind you of Shay's Rebellion that originated in Massachusetts one year ago? It took Congress six months to gather enough money and troops to put an end to eight months of rioting. Your state's court system was practically held captive by the local farmers.

- Narrator:** The eldest delegate to attend, 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin, adds to the conversation.
- Ben Franklin:** Shay's Rebellion! Pure chaos, I dare say! I should think you delegates from Massachusetts would be the first in line to sign your names to this new plan.
- Madison:** There are 13 different states each printing their own money, taxing one another excessively, not paying their debts. The Articles just do not work.
- Ben Franklin:** Mr. Madison is right. We all agreed weeks ago that the present Articles will not protect us in times of peace or trouble. We also agreed to adopt the Virginia Plan as this Constitution's foundation. We should move forward now.
- Delegate:** Tax us to death. That's all a big government will do. Once for the war we won and twice for the war to be!
- Ben Franklin:** Wars are not paid for in wartime. The bill comes later. Our debt is still owed. We must pay back France. We may need her help again someday.

Narrator: There is a scuffle in the front of the room. George Washington, the delegate voted to preside over the Constitutional Convention, raises his hand to silence the men.

Washington: Hold your tongues, gentlemen! We have strangers amongst us.

John Russell: Let me go!

Washington: What goes on there?

Narrator: All at once, the delegates turned to face the front of the hall. A guard clutches a boy by the shoulder with one hand and a crumpled envelope in the other. George Washington steps down from the raised platform. Confidently, he strides across the room, toward the young intruder. Mr. Washington is an imposing man with broad shoulders. His expression is stern.

Washington: What is the meaning of this, guard? You know your orders are to keep anyone from entering. Your commanding officer will be notified. Return to your post.

Narrator: The boy pulls himself free. He grabs the envelope.

Washington: Speak your name, young man.

John Russell: Sir, it is an honor to be in your presence. My name is John Russell.

Washington: How much have you heard?

John Russell: Only that our Articles of Confederation are in jeopardy.

Washington: State your purpose.

John Russell: I was ordered to bring this letter to you and the other delegates.

Washington: Ordered? By whom?

John Russell: The Rhode Island General Assembly.

Narrator: The boy gives Ben Franklin the letter. Mr. Franklin places his glasses on the tip of his nose. He scans the letter.

- John Russell:** The authorities in Rhode Island believe you've gathered here to destroy our union's Articles of Confederation.
- Washington:** Destroy is a mighty powerful word, Mr. Russell.
- John Russell:** That is their word, sir, not mine. I didn't believe it, until I just heard it spoken aloud in this room.
- Ben Franklin:** Oh, a spirited lad. Not afraid to speak his mind. Child, what you've overheard is simply us speaking our minds, too.
- John Russell:** Yes, sir. My apologies.
- Ben Franklin:** Young man, you've done your job well. Across the street is the City Tavern. A fine place for good food and drink. Go and fill your belly. Tell them Mr. Franklin will pay the charge.
- John Russell:** Thank you, kind sir. I am most grateful for your generosity.
- Narrator:** George Washington shakes his head. He strokes his chin with his hand.

Washington: Gentlemen, must I remind you of the secret nature of these meetings. The guard has committed a grave error. This boy cannot be released. He has heard too much. The task at hand is still in progress.

Ben Franklin: So what are we to do with him? Plug his ears, stuff him in a box, and prop him in a corner until we've finished debating?

Narrator: Ben Franklin winks at the boy. John Russell smiles back.

Ben Franklin: I like this lad. I'll vouch for his good nature. He'll keep his lips sealed better than I.

Narrator: The delegates laugh.

Delegate: You? Ben Franklin vouching for someone's ability to keep a secret? How many times have we rescued you from spilling a detail or two about these meetings at the City Tavern?

Ben Franklin: Fair enough. Fair enough.

Washington: Who then will take this boy?

Madison: I will take him.

Narrator: The delegates turn to the voice at the back of the room. There, seated at a table covered with papers and books is James Madison.

Madison: I agree. The boy must remain. We are close to putting the quill to paper on this plan. He'll sit with me, as my apprentice. Can you write, son?

John Russell: Yes, sir.

Madison: Then the first item we'll write is a letter to your family explaining the situation. Until these meetings are concluded, you will assist me in recording these often long conversations. Your help will be appreciated.

Poem: It's My Honor

Act 2

Narrator: After two months of daily debating, the delegates are exhausted. On July 23, 1787, they decide to take off 10 days to rest. Five delegates are elected to remain and write a draft of the Constitution.

Washington: Before we leave on our much-needed break, let us review what we do actually agree upon. Mr. Madison, before I ask you to begin, I would like John Russell to listen very closely. John, if anything we say is unclear, please let us know.

Delegate: Why should it matter what a boy thinks?

Washington: I'll tell you. John Russell, what is your father's business?

John Russell: He was a farmer, sir, before the war. He died in the battle of Yorktown.

Washington: A farmer and a patriot . . . My sympathies, son, to you and your family. Gentlemen, this young man's ability to understand this Constitution is critical. Through him, we will know if our words will be clear to all men, from farmers to lawyers.

Narrator: James Madison scans his notes. Before standing up to deliver the information, he hands the quill to the boy.

Madison: Do your best, John. I can always fill in the blanks later.

Narrator: James Madison steps in front of his table. He is dressed in knee-length trousers with white silk stockings. A crisp, white ruffled shirt with a bow tied at the neck peeks out between the lapels of his long suit coat.

Madison: Thank you, gentlemen. First, we have agreed that our United States of America must be just that—*united*. This will be accomplished by creating a stronger national government. The laws of the United States will be the supreme laws of the land. These laws will have power over and above the laws of any of the 13 individual states.

Narrator: Grumbling can be heard from around the room. James Madison clears his throat. John Russell's hand shakes slightly against the parchment as he tries to write.

Madison:

In order to create and protect these laws, a system of three branches of the government will be established. The first will be the legislative branch, the second will be the executive branch, and the third will be the judicial branch.

Delegate:

Let this point be very clear. The people of each state will elect members for the legislative branch. This branch will be made up of two houses of Congress. The House of Representatives will be based on the population of each state. The Senate will have just two elected officials from each state. Congress will make the laws for the government.

Madison:

That is correct. Most importantly, there will be a system of checks and balances. For instance, both houses of Congress must approve a law by at least one-half of its members before it can go before the executive branch for final approval.

Narrator:

John Russell leans over and whispers to Ben Franklin.

John Russell:

What is the executive branch?

Ben Franklin: The executive branch will consist of the president of the United States, his vice president, and a cabinet of advisors. The president will either approve a law that Congress presents to him, or he will veto it.

John Russell: Veto? What does that mean?

Ben Franklin: That means that the president can always say “no.” However, if he does, the law will go back to Congress and it can still become a law if a two-thirds majority from each house votes in favor of it.

John Russell: So, no one man has absolute power? Like a king?

Madison: Yes. Each branch will check and balance the other.

Ben Franklin: And these representatives, these senators, and the president will have limited amounts of time that they can serve.

Delegate: Congress will propose the laws to protect our country. They will order the formation of a United States militia. This army and navy will govern the land and sea of all 13 states. Congress will be responsible for funding this militia.

- Madison:** Further, it will be responsible for decisions involving making coin money, taxation, and declaring war.
- Narrator:** John Russell writes as quickly as he can.
- Delegate:** Our central government will mint the money that will be used by all 13 states. It will ensure that it is backed by gold and silver. No longer will one state's money be worthless in another state.
- Ben Franklin:** Then it is agreed that the power will lie mostly with Congress, which is elected by the people of each state, rather than the power lying with just one person—the president.
- Madison:** The president's primary duty will be to review and either deny or sign the laws that Congress proposes. He will also be able to select men to help him keep relations strong with other countries.
- John Russell:** Like Mr. Franklin did over in France?
- Ben Franklin:** Yes. That was a glorious time in my life. A president cannot be in several countries all at once. He must send a person in his place

to represent our country's wishes. But if any agreement is to be made between our country and theirs, the president is the person to make that decision.

Delegate: . . . with the approval of Congress.

John Russell: It seems that the legislative branch and the executive branch will work closely together. But what about the judicial branch? How will they be involved?

Washington: The judicial branch will be the third branch of our government. It will house the United States Supreme Court and other United States courts. They will make sure that the laws that are written in the Constitution are followed.

John Russell: Does that mean that there will no longer be courts within our own states?

Washington: No, not at all. Your state's courts will continue, but each state will govern their people based on the laws of the Constitution. However, if there is a problem involving two different states or anything that involves a foreign party, or treason, then the U.S. courts will become involved.

John Russell: So they will be like watchdogs over everyone?

Ben Franklin: Yes! Nipping at our heels, if we step out of line.

Narrator: A silence falls over the room as each delegate thinks about the plan. Only the buzzing of a single blue-bottle fly can be heard. It lands on John Russell's quill pen. He shakes it off without thinking. Indigo ink flies off the tip of the quill and splatters across Ben Franklin's spectacles.

John Russell: Oh! Mr. Franklin, please forgive me.

Ben Franklin: Lucky for me I never wear a white wig!

Narrator: The delegates laugh. James Madison bites his bottom lip to conceal a smile.

Madison: Gentlemen, those are the main points of our new Constitution.

Washington: Very well then, this meeting is concluded.

Narrator: The delegates shake one another's hands. Laughing, Benjamin Franklin leans over and tousles John Russell's auburn hair.

Act 3

Narrator: On September 17, 1787, in the East Room of the Philadelphia State House, 39 delegates gather together to sign a piece of parchment that begins with the words “We the People.”

Washington: Gentlemen, four months ago you were chosen to come to Philadelphia to create a better plan for the people of our United States. It was not a simple task. You should be proud of the work that you have done for your country.

Narrator: As the president of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington signs the document first. He passes the quill pen to Ben Franklin.

Ben Franklin: Even though I do not agree with everything written in this document, I will sign it. I urge everyone here to do the same. We must all stand behind this Constitution.

Delegate: Hear! Hear!

Washington: The work done here will form a bright future for generations to come. This Constitution will be sent to your state for approval. Nine out of the 13 states in our union must formally agree to it. Then it will become law.

Narrator: James Madison steps up to the table with the Constitution on it. He takes a deep breath then signs his name under the state of Virginia. The other delegates sign and then say their good-byes to each other. James Madison shakes hands with several of the delegates and then walks back to his own table. John Russell is standing beside it. A delegate from Massachusetts is speaking to John.

Delegate: Young man, I would be happy to assist you in returning to Rhode Island. There is room in my carriage for more than one.

John Russell: I am most grateful, sir.

Narrator: James Madison interrupts.

Madison: Pardon me. If I may, I'd like to have a private word with John. I'll send him out to meet you in just a moment.

Delegate: Certainly, Mr. Madison. Good day, sir.

Narrator: James Madison turns quietly to John Russell.

Madison: It has been a pleasure to work with you, son.

Narrator: John Russell bows slightly to his mentor.

John Russell: Thank you, sir. It was an honor to work as your apprentice.

Madison: As a remembrance of your good service, I'd like you to have this.

Narrator: James Madison gives John a thin wooden box with a silver latch. John opens it. He smiles. Inside rests the bottle of ink and the white quill pen that John and James used to take their notes.

Madison: Two simple tools that helped change your world. Good luck, my boy. Be well.



Song: We the People



It's My Honor

To be part of something great--
Am I ready for the task?
It's a privilege to be called.
I am honored to be asked.

The delegation's trust
Has been given to my care.
I want them all to know
Their trust rests safely there.

The work that they are doing
Is more important than I guessed.
I'll give them everything I've got
Until, at last, we rest.

One day my children's children
Will be proud of what I've done--
Helping to preserve our nation
And the freedom that we won.



We the People



We the people —
Must have our own voice.
We the people —
Have respect for choice.
We will not have a monarchy.
We'll celebrate our liberty.
Our goals will be life-long.
We'll keep this country strong.
Oh, we the people —
We the people

We the people —
Our words they must be clear.
We the people —
So everyone can hear.
The laws that make this country great.
The Constitution of the United States.
Oh, we the people —
We the people

Glossary

Articles of Confederation—articles which combined the 13 original colonies into a loose confederation

constitution—document that outlines the laws that govern a country

Constitutional Convention—meeting of the delegates from the states to decide how to revise the Articles of Confederation

debate—to discuss or examine a question

delegates—people who are sent to a meeting to speak for a group of people

liberty—freedom

representative—person standing or acting for another, especially through delegated authority



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“Thank you for helping us
create a world in which
children love to learn!”



The Constitution of the United States

The U.S. Constitution Lesson Plan

Objectives

- **Fluency:** Students will participate in an oral reading, focusing on the use of correct phrasing.
- **Content Area:** Students will understand the various parts of the Constitution and how each part shapes the United States government.

Summary

John Russell is a young man who enters the highly guarded Pennsylvania State House just as the delegates are debating about a Constitution for the United States. John Russell's story is told in *The Constitution of the United States: The Foundation of Our Government*, where he is given the opportunity to assist the delegates. George Washington praises him for the work he does, and James Madison gives him a very special gift.



Materials

- *The Constitution of the United States* script booklets
- *The U.S. Constitution Character Masks* (pages 110–115 or Teacher Resource CD), copied on cardstock
- copies of *Take-Home Script: The Constitution of the United States* (Teacher Resource CD)
- PowerPoint® slide show (Teacher Resource CD)
- overhead transparencies of the poem and song (Teacher Resource CD)
- Performance CD and CD player or computer with a CD drive and speakers

Introduce the Literature

Before reading *A More Perfect Union: The Story of Our Constitution* by Betsy Maestro, ask the students why they think we need a constitution. What does a constitution do for our country? What would our country be like without one? Then, read the story to the class. Ask the class what the book revealed about the Constitution of the United States. What would have happened if the delegates could not have agreed upon the items found in the Constitution? Have the students form small groups. In their groups, have them finish the following sentence, using information found in the book. “Without the Constitution, we . . .” Then, ask them to share their sentences with the class.



ELL Support

Various parts of the U.S. Constitution might be particularly difficult for ELL students to understand. Prior to reading the literature book to the class, review vocabulary words found in the book.

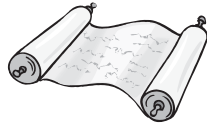
Involving All the Students

While this script has only six roles, there are many different ways you can involve all of your students. For this reader's theater experience, divide the students that have not been assigned roles into groups of six. Then, assign each group a part of the U.S. Constitution, such as the Preamble, the Bill of Rights, etc. Allow the groups to create large murals that show the meaning of their parts of the U.S. Constitution. Then, display the murals during the performance.

The Constitution of the United States

The U.S. Constitution Lesson Plan

Reading the Script



1. Read the Preamble aloud to the students. Then, place the students into small groups and give them large sheets of paper. Assign each group a section of the Preamble. Have them create large posters, showing the meaning of their assigned sentences. Then, ask the students to share their posters, in the order they appear in the Preamble. Ask the class why the U.S. Constitution was written. Explain to them that though the delegates who were sent to write the Constitution knew why they were writing it, they still had many compromises and issues to work out before creating a document that could stand the test of time.
2. Provide each student with a copy of the script. You can give the script booklets to small groups or you can print copies of the Take-Home Script.
3. Post new vocabulary words on chart paper and discuss the definition of each word. Then, give students index cards. Ask them to create flash cards for the vocabulary words. They may write the word on one side, and then either the definition or a picture on the other. Allow them to practice learning the new words with partners.
4. Make a list on the board of the five characters from the script (excluding the narrator). Then place the students into five groups. Assign each group one character from the story. Have the groups use index cards to describe their assigned characters. They may also include quotes from the script on their cards and play “Who Am I?” Have the students read their descriptions aloud. Then, have the rest of the class name the characters that are being described.
5. Allow students time to practice their scripts before performing them for their class, other classrooms, or even parents, paying close attention to phrasing as they practice.

ELL Support



If ELL students continue to have a difficult time processing the meaning of the vocabulary

words, allow them to find graphics on the computer that show the meanings of the words, rather than having them draw their own pictures. Then, have them glue the pictures on one side of the index cards, while writing the vocabulary words on the other side. This way, they can review the meaning of the vocabulary words. You may have other students help them find pictures that can be used on the flash cards.

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The U.S. Constitution Lesson Plan



Assigning Roles

Assign roles to students based on their reading proficiency. It is important to remember that when students practice fluency, they should read materials at or below their reading level. This helps them to focus on their accuracy, expression, and reading rate. If a student is reading text that is too difficult, attention will be focused on decoding words rather than reading with fluency. These are approximate reading levels for the roles in this script:

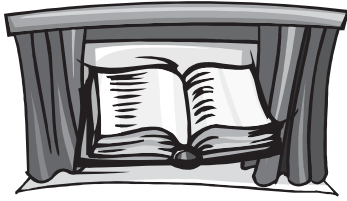
- | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| ❖ John: high 3rd grade | ❖ George: low 4th grade | ❖ James: high 4th grade |
| ❖ Ben: high 3rd grade | ❖ Delegate: low 4th grade | ❖ Narrator: high 4th grade |

Meeting the Fluency Objective

1. The fluency objective for this script focuses on students' ability to read passages fluently using correct phrasing. Write a few sentences from the script on the board.
2. Read the first line in a very choppy manner, sounding out words, or slowing down and speeding up as you read. Then, ask the students if they could easily understand and comprehend what you were reading. Read the sentences again—but fluently this time. Ask the students which reading they preferred.
3. Ask students to read the script over and over so they are familiar with each part of the script. Then, place each student who has been assigned a role into a small group with other students that do not have roles. Ask the students to look at their lines, and discuss difficult words that they may have to sound out. Have the students practice their roles in the small groups, with the other members of the groups giving advice on how to improve their phrasing.
4. Allow the students to perform their scripts, paying close attention to correct phrasing as they read.

The Constitution of the United States

The U.S. Constitution Lesson Plan



Social Studies Connection

Hand out copies of the United States Constitution. Discuss the contents of the document with the students and how each part affects the United States and its citizens.

1. Then, to help students further understand checks and balances, a major part of the Constitution, do the following activity.
2. Assign one student in the class to be president. Assign nine students to be Supreme Court Justices. The rest of the class will be Congress. Divide Congress into the House and the Senate.
3. Have members of Congress create possible bills that they would like to turn into laws. These bills can be about changes they would like to see in the classroom, such as having a snack on Fridays or having extra free time. Allow them to introduce their bills to Congress. Using the Constitution as a guide, have the students vote on the bills in Congress, and see if they pass. Then, have the bills go to the president, for him/her to either sign or veto. You may wish to instruct the president that he/she can only sign one bill—just so that not too many class changes are being made. Once a bill is signed, take it to the Supreme Court to make sure that the new law is constitutional (or realistic for the classroom). Discuss with the class the importance of checks and balances and having a government run by more than one branch.
4. Then, ask the students which part of the Constitution they feel is the most important. Have them write short paragraphs explaining which part of the Constitution they feel is the most important and why. Have them share their thoughts and ideas with the class.



ELL Support

Provide ELL students with dictionaries and other resources that will make it easier for them to

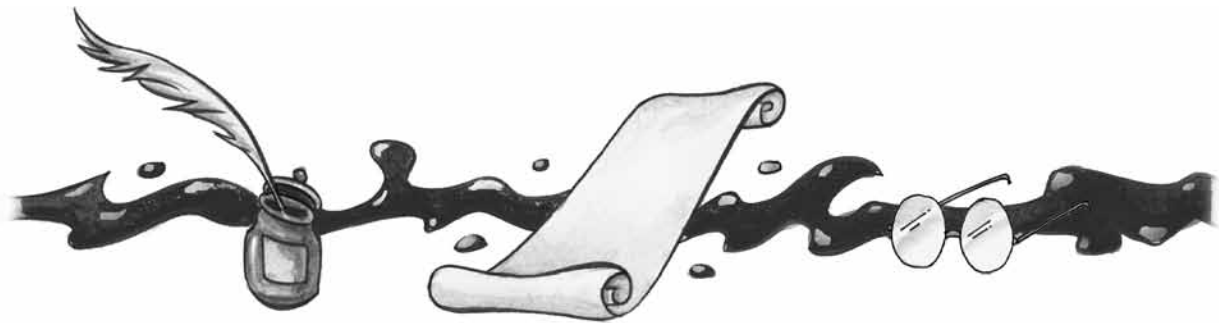
understand the words found in the Constitution. This way, they will have an easier time explaining their thoughts about which part of the Constitution they feel is the most important.

The Constitution of the United States

The U.S. Constitution Lesson Plan

Fine Arts Connection

1. *The Constitution of the United States* contains a song and a poem. The song and poem relate to the reader's theater, but are not limited to use only with this script.
2. The key to the song or poem performance is practice, practice, and more practice. Be sure to emphasize the correct use of phrasing when performing the song and poem. Use the professional recording of the poem and song to demonstrate how they should be read.
3. After students have listened to the professional recording of the poem, ask them to create their own poems about the United States Constitution. Tell them to think about each part of the Constitution. What words come to mind as they think about the Constitution? How did they feel, knowing their fathers or grandfathers created such a document?
4. Ask students to think about the meaning of each line of the song. How does it relate to them and the world in which they live? Place students into small groups. Assign each group a line from the song. Then, have the groups illustrate the meaning of their assigned lines and how the lines apply to them today. As the song is being performed, have the groups hold up their posters for the audience.



ELL Support

Give ELL students lists of vocabulary words that they might use as they create their poems. This will allow them to record their thoughts for their poems without having to determine the types of words to use.

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Performance CD

Description	Track
Characters, Setting, and Script Reading, pages 4–11	Volume III, Track 06
Poem: “It’s My Honor”	Volume III, Track 07
Script Reading (<i>cont.</i>), pages 12–21	Volume III, Track 08
Song: “We the People”	Volume III, Track 09

Teacher Resource CD

Description	File Name
Constitution Character Masks	masks_Constitution.pdf
Take-Home Script: Constitution of the U.S.	THS_Constitution.pdf
<i>PowerPoint</i> ®: Constitution of the U.S.	PP_Constitution.ppt
Song Transparency: “We the People”	song_Constitution.pdf
Poem Transparency: “It’s My Honor”	poem_Constitution.pdf

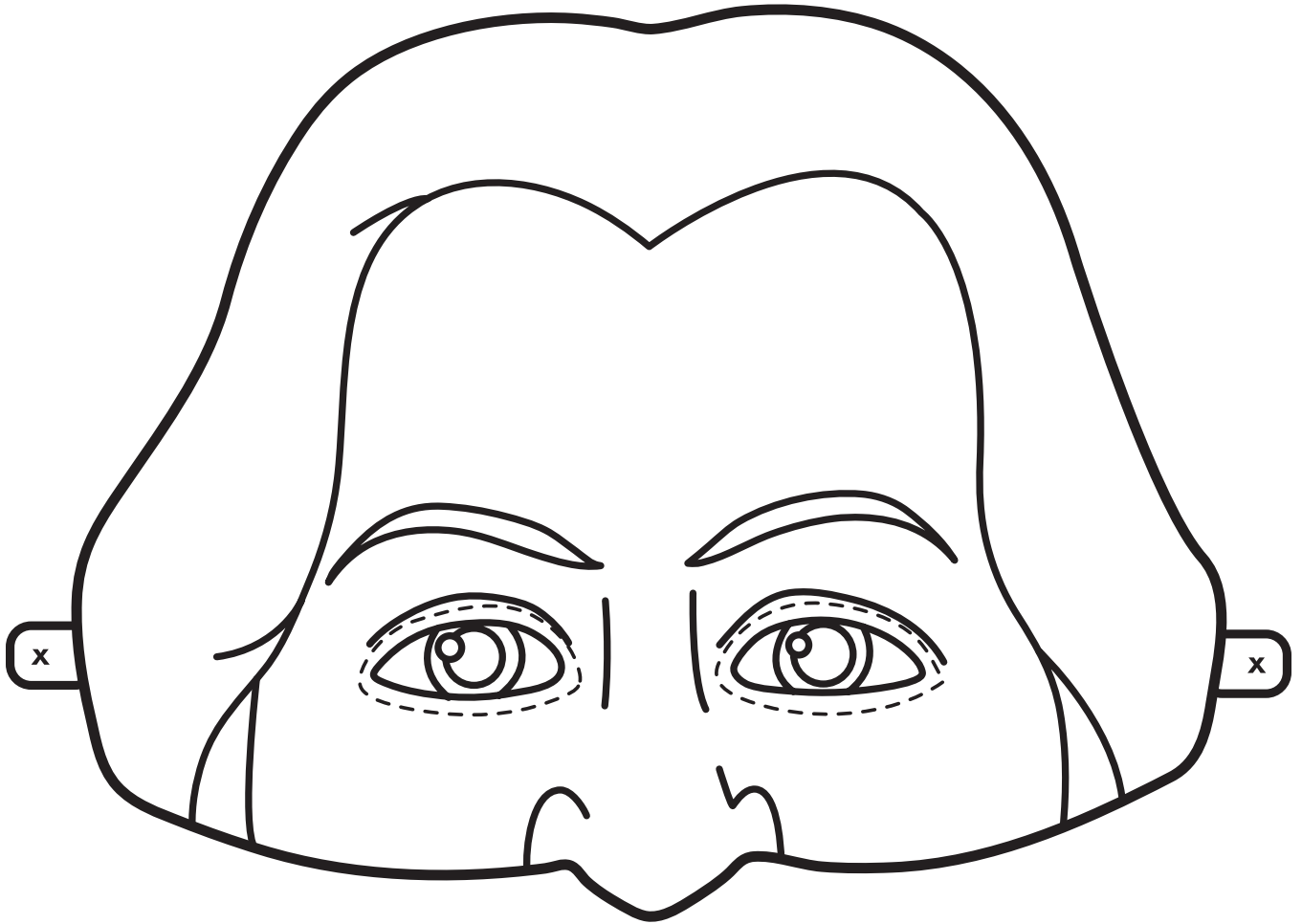
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Ben Franklin



Delegate



George Washington



James Madison



John



Narrator

