

Why Do We Need Government?

This learning experience will support students with primary source analysis and accompanying tasks to answer the compelling question.

Grade 3



Richmond City Hall, 1001 East Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia (1933).
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey

Task Overview:

During this learning experience, students will explore why we need government by examining photographs from the Library of Congress. Students will discuss what happens when rules and leaders are missing, and discover how the government helps people stay safe, organized, and fair. Through image analysis and hands-on tasks, students will show what they've learned by creating posters, recordings, or letters that explain why government is important.

Targeted SOLs:

3.9 The student will apply history and social science skills to

- a. explain the purpose of governments and understand that other countries have governments similar to and different from that of the United States.

Unpacked Standards:

Students will know (facts)	Students will understand that... (concepts)	Students will be able to (Do) (skills)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Governments make and enforce rules.• Governments provide services that help people (schools, safety, communication).• Local, state, and national governments all work to organize communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People need governments to work together and solve problems fairly.• Governments help maintain order, protect citizens, and provide shared resources.• Without government, communities would struggle to stay organized or safe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look closely at photographs to notice details and clues.• Identify examples of how government helps people.• Explain and write about why government is important.• Create and share ideas in writing, drawings, or recordings.

Instructor Directions:

This inquiry is designed to take approximately 45–60 minutes and may be completed in one class period or extended across multiple sessions. Teachers may facilitate the learning experience using a variety of instructional structures, including whole-group discussion, partner work, small groups, or independent tasks, depending on student needs.

Teacher Background Information:

This inquiry helps students consider why people need rules, leaders, and cooperation. It uses open-access Library of Congress photographs to help students explore government services and civic life.

Teachers should review the Library of Congress '[See-Think-Wonder](#)' strategy and prepare the images for discussion.

Resources: [Teacher's Guides and Analysis Tool](#) | [Getting Started with Primary Sources](#) | [Teachers](#) | [Programs](#) | [Library of Congress](#)

Vocabulary Support

- government – a group of leaders who make rules and help people.
- citizen – a member of a community, state, or country.
- services – things the government provides to help people (like schools or parks).
- fairness – treating people in a just and equal way.

Part 1: Staging the Question (Activation/Hook)

[Slide Deck - Why do we need a government?](#)

1. Begin by asking: 'What would happen if our class didn't have any rules? How would we decide what to do?'

👉 **Possible student responses might be:**

"Everyone would be talking at the same time."

"People wouldn't know when it's their turn."

"Some kids might do whatever they want."

"It could get really loud and messy."

"People might argue or feel it's not fair."

"No one would know what to do next."

"Some people might not feel safe."

2. Show an image of a [busy, rule-free scene](#) (like traffic without signs). Ask students:
 - What's happening here?
 - How do you feel when no one is in charge?
 - What could help make this situation better?
3. Guide discussion to the idea that rules and leaders help everyone work together fairly. Sample discussion questions:
 - What problems do you notice when there are no rules?
 - Who seems confused in this picture?
 - How might people feel in this situation?
 - How do rules help people know what to do?
 - What rule would help fix this problem?
 - Who might be in charge of helping in this situation?
 - What does a leader do to keep people safe?
 - What could happen if people made up their own rules?
 - Where else do we need rules and leaders besides our classroom?
 - What would happen in a town or city without rules?
 - Why do you think communities decide to have rules and leaders?
4. Introduce the compelling question: **Why do we need government?**

 **Teacher Tip:** Display the [image](#) on a projector or screen so students can notice small details together.




Part 2: Exploration & Source Analysis

1. Place students in pairs or groups. Provide each group with 3–4 Library of Congress photographs (see 'Student Resources').
2. Before looking closely at the photographs, tell students that they are looking for examples of how communities are helped by rules and leaders. Explain that as they examine each photo, they should be thinking about which of these ideas they notice:
 - Keeps people safe
 - Teaches us and helps us learn
 - Connects us and helps people communicate
 - Makes rules and decisions
3. Distribute the [See-Think-Wonder](#) graphic organizer.
4. Model with one photo:
 - **See:** What do you notice?
 - **Think:** What does this make you think about?
 - **Wonder:** What does it make you wonder?
5. Groups record their ideas and share with the class.
6. Chart ideas under categories:
 - Keeps us safe
 - Teaches us and helps us learn
 - Connects us and helps people communicate
 - Makes rules and decisions
7. Wrap up discussion: Governments keep communities safe, organized, and fair for everyone.

Part 3: Demonstration of Learning/Assessment

Goal: Show understanding of why we need government and how it helps people in our community.

Invite students to choose one of the following options:

 Poster	 Recording	 Letter
<p>Create a poster that shows one way the government helps people or one way it could help people even more.</p> <p>Add a caption explaining why this service is important.</p>	<p>Record a short video or voice message explaining why we need government and one service you think leaders should focus on.</p>	<p>Write a short note beginning with “Dear Leaders, I think government is important because...”</p> <p>Include one idea or service you would like leaders to provide or improve.</p>

Assessment Criteria:

- Includes a clear example of how the government helps people.
- Uses evidence from the photograph or class discussion.
- Explains why government is needed and important.


See “  ProductsPerformances.pdf ” for additional ideas for product choices.

Resources

Student Resources

1. Richmond City Hall, Richmond, Virginia (1933) — <https://www.loc.gov/item/va1296/>
2. Government School, Cape Prince of Wales, Alaska (1900–1930) — <https://www.loc.gov/item/99614657/>
3. Town Meeting (Colonial illustration) — <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006691549/>

Teacher Resources

1.  ProductsPerformances.pdf
2. [See-Think-Wonder](#) Organizer
3. [Student Choice Directions sheet](#)

4. Schoolchildren Pledging Allegiance, Connecticut (1942) –
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017865342/>
5. U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C. (2008)
– <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010630189/>
6. Postal Worker Delivering Mail (1923) –
<https://postalmuseum.si.edu/sites/default/files/interpretive1image3.jpg>
7. Firefighters outside house ruins (1923) –
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2016834074>
8. Photograph of Virginia State Police trooper -
<https://vatrooper.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/DSC7390-1024x683.jpeg>
9. Snowplow Clearing a Roadway -
[https://pxl-virginiadotorg.terminalfour.net/fit-in/1429x2000/filters:quality\(80\)/prod01/vdot-cdn-pxl/media/vdotvirginiagov/travel-and-traffic/driver-safety/weather/24547906775_ba7fcd9265_k-2047X751.jpg](https://pxl-virginiadotorg.terminalfour.net/fit-in/1429x2000/filters:quality(80)/prod01/vdot-cdn-pxl/media/vdotvirginiagov/travel-and-traffic/driver-safety/weather/24547906775_ba7fcd9265_k-2047X751.jpg)
10. Smith Mountain Lake State Park -
<https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/smith-mountain-lake>