

From Kings to Constitutions: The Legacy of the Magna Carta Up to Revolution

Magna Carta Hall

Educators Guide and Lesson Plan created by Simone Morris, Brownwood ISD



Grade Level

10th Grade

Time Required

1.5 – 2 hours

Supplies/Materials Needed

- Excerpts from the Magna Carta
- Excerpts from the English Bill of Rights
- Excerpts from the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights
- Excerpts from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Pre-visit timeline activity
- Clipboards
- Writing utensils
- Dry erase markers
- Four Corner Opinion Signs

Standards

AP Historical Thinking Skills

- Comparison
- Contextualization
- Continuity and Change Over Time
- Primary Source Analysis
- Historical Argumentation
- Evaluating Evidence

Essential Question(s)

- Why was the Magna Carta created?
- How did the Magna Carta limit the authority of the English monarchy?
- Was the Magna Carta a democratic document?
- How did ideas from the Magna Carta influence later political documents?
- How did the definition of rights change between 1215 and 1948?
- Did the Magna Carta create new rights, or did later generations give it greater meaning?

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Explain the historical circumstances that led to the creation of the Magna Carta.
- Analyze selected clauses from several influential political documents.
- Compare how different documents define rights, government authority, and the rule of law.
- Identify political ideas that remained consistent across time.
- Evaluate how ideas about rights became more inclusive over time.
- Use primary-source evidence to support claims during a seminar discussion.
- Develop and defend an argument about the historical significance of the Magna Carta.

Pre-Visit

Before visiting the museum, students will complete a brief background lesson on medieval England and King John.

The teacher will introduce:

- The feudal political system
- King John's military failures

Key Vocabulary

Magna Carta, limited government, rule of law, due process, Constitutional Monarchy, Absolute Monarchy, Individual rights, civil liberties, consent of the governed, habeas corpus, Parliament, charter, universal rights, historical context

- Heavy taxation
- Conflict between King John and the English barons
- King John's dispute with Pope Innocent III
- The meeting at Runnymede in 1215

Students will examine a short timeline leading to the signing of the Magna Carta.

They will then read a brief overview of the document and respond to the following prompt: Should any ruler be above the law? Explain your answer.

Students will also become familiar with the document-analysis categories they will use at the museum:

- Historical context
- Intended audience
- Purpose
- Rights protected
- Groups included
- Groups excluded
- Limits placed on government
- Connections to later documents

Museum Visit

Opening in **Magna Carta Hall**

Students will gather in Magna Carta Hall near the Magna Carta display.

Say: "The Magna Carta is often described as one of the most important documents in the history of liberty. However, it was written by powerful nobles, protected only certain members of medieval society, and failed almost immediately. Today, you will decide whether it truly deserves its reputation."

Briefly review the events of 1215 and introduce the central inquiry question:

How revolutionary was the Magna Carta, and how did its ideas change over the next 800 years?

Document Comparison Activity - attached



Large laminated excerpts from each document will be placed around Magna Carta Hall. Students will move from excerpt to excerpt, reading and discussing with peers and answering the questions on their handout.

- Document One: Magna Carta, 1215
- Document Two: English Bill of Rights, 1689
- Document Three: United States Constitution and Bill of Rights
- Document Four: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

Post Gallery Walk Seminar Discussion

After the document analysis, students will sit around the table in Magna Carta Hall, and first analyze and discuss the painting on the wall of the room and connect it to some of the questions they answered during the gallery walk.

Facilitate a seminar (similar to Socratic...everyone must contribute at least once to receive credit - think of it as the King's Round Table) using questions such as:

- Why did the barons force King John to accept the Magna Carta?
- Was King John giving rights willingly?
- Was the Magna Carta democratic?
- Which social groups benefited most?
- Which groups received little or no protection?
- What ideas remained consistent across all four documents?
- Which document expanded rights the most?
- How did rights change from privileges belonging to certain groups into universal principles?
- Did the Magna Carta directly cause later constitutional developments?
- Why have later generations treated the Magna Carta as a symbol of liberty?
- Is historical significance determined by a document's original purpose or by its later influence?

Students must refer to at least one document when contributing to the discussion.

Four-Corners Argument Activity

Read the following statement:

The Magna Carta is the most important political document in world history.



Students will move to one of four positions: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

Students will discuss their reasoning with others in their corner. Each group will then present an argument supported by evidence from at least two documents. Students may change positions after hearing the arguments.

Post-Visit

Students will complete an AP-style written response.

Option One: SAQ

- A. Explain one historical circumstance that led to the creation of the Magna Carta.
- B. Explain one similarity between the Magna Carta and a later political document.
- C. Explain one way ideas about political rights changed between 1215 and 1948.

Option Two: Written Reflection

Students will respond to the following prompt:
To what extent was the Magna Carta a turning point in the history of government and individual rights?

Students must:

- Develop a clear claim
- Use evidence from at least two documents
- Explain one limitation of the Magna Carta
- Explain one way its principles influenced later political thought

Variations and Extensions

Socratic Seminar Extension

Assign each student one discussion question before the museum visit. Students must prepare evidence and a follow-up question.

Timeline Extension

Students create a visual timeline connecting:

- Magna Carta, 1215
- English Bill of Rights, 1689
- United States Constitution, 1787

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- United States Bill of Rights, 1791
 - Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789
 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

Earlier Legal Traditions

Add excerpts from:

- Code of Hammurabi
- Twelve Tables
- Justinian Code

Students evaluate whether the Magna Carta represented a completely new idea or continued earlier legal traditions.

Modern Magna Carta - My Favorite

Students create a modern charter containing ten rights that every government should protect.

They must identify:

- The right
 - The government power being limited
 - The historical document that inspired it
 - Why the right remains important
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Directions: As a class, examine the timeline below. For each event, discuss how it increased tension between King John and his subjects. Then answer the guiding question:

Which event do you think contributed most to the signing of the Magna Carta? Explain your reasoning using historical evidence.

Year	Event	Why It Mattered
1199	King John becomes King of England.	John inherits the throne after Richard I and faces immediate political and financial challenges.
1204	England loses Normandy to France.	John loses valuable territory and spends heavily trying to regain it, leading to increased taxation.
1205-1213	Dispute with Pope Innocent III over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury.	England is placed under an interdict, and John is excommunicated, weakening his authority.
1207-1214	Heavy taxes are imposed on nobles.	Barons grow increasingly resentful of paying for unsuccessful military campaigns.
1214	Defeat at the Battle of Bouvines.	John's failed attempt to recover French lands damages his reputation and convinces many nobles that he is an ineffective ruler.
Early 1215	The English barons rebel against King John.	Frustrated by taxation and arbitrary rule, they demand limits on the king's authority.
June 15, 1215	King John signs the Magna Carta at Runnymede.	The charter places legal limits on royal power and establishes that even the king is subject to the law.

Discussion Questions

1. Which event do you believe was the turning point that made conflict unavoidable?
2. Was the Magna Carta created because King John was uniquely tyrannical, or because the English political system lacked limits on royal power?
3. Could the Magna Carta have been avoided? Why or why not?
4. What patterns do you notice about the causes of conflict between rulers and their subjects?

Excerpt 1: Rule of Law

"No free man shall be seized or imprisoned... except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- What right is being protected?
- Who qualifies as a "free man"?
- Is everyone protected?

Excerpt 2: Justice

"To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Why would this promise have been important?
- What does it suggest about King John's government?

Excerpt 3: Taxation

"No scutage or aid shall be imposed... except by the common counsel of our kingdom."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- How does this limit the king?
 - Who gets a voice in taxation?
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Excerpt 1: Parliamentary Consent

"That levying money for or to the use of the Crown... without grant of Parliament... is illegal."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- How is this similar to the Magna Carta?
- Who now has authority over taxation?

Excerpt 2: Elections

"That election of members of Parliament ought to be free."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Why are free elections important?
- Who was allowed to vote in 1689?

Excerpt 3: Cruel Punishment

"Excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Where have you heard this idea before?
 - Why would governments need limits on punishment?
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Fifth Amendment

"No person shall... be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Which Magna Carta clause does this resemble?
- Why is due process important?

Sixth Amendment

"In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Why would a public trial matter?
- How does this build on the Magna Carta?

Eighth Amendment

"Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Which earlier document contains a similar protection?
 - Why do democracies limit punishments?
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Article 1

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- How is this different from the Magna Carta?
- Who now receives rights?

Article 7

"All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- How has the idea of equality changed since 1215?
- Would King John have agreed with this statement?

Article 10

"Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal."

Discussion Questions - On student handout

- Which earlier document introduced this idea?
 - How has it expanded?
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	Excerpt 1	Excerpt 2	Excerpt 3
Document 1: Magna Carta	• What right is being protected? • Who qualifies as a "free man"? • Is everyone protected?	• Why would this promise have been important? • What does it suggest about King John's government?	• How does this limit the king? • Who gets a voice in taxation?
Document 2: The English Bill of Rights	• How is the similar to the Magna Carta? • Who now has authority over taxation?	• Why are free elections important? • Who was allowed to vote in 1689?	• Where have you heard this idea before? • Why would governments need limits on punishment?
Document 3: US Constitution and Bill of Rights	• Which Magna Carta clause does this resemble? • Why is due process important?	• Why would a public trial matter? • How does this build on the Magna Carta?	• Which earlier document contains a similar protection? • Why do democracies limit punishments?
Document 4: Universal Declaration of Human Rights	• How is this different from the Magna Carta? • Who now receives rights?	• How has the idea of equality changed since 1215? • Would King John have agreed with this statement?	• Which earlier document introduced this idea? • How has it expanded?