

A Constitution Catechism



By Paul Engel

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- Catechism are used for religious instruction, but what about constitutional?
- Arthur J. Stansbury developed a catechism on the Constitution back in the early 1800s.
- This tool can help not only the young people it was designed for, but everyone learn the Constitution.

When most people think of catechisms, they think of religious training tools. However, catechisms have been used for training in many subjects in our history. I was recently introduced to the [Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States](#), by Arthur J. Stansbury. While I have not been through the entire catechism, what I have read showed me that this is an excellent teaching tool, not only for the young people whom it was intended to reach, but for adults and seniors as well.

Constitutional Education

We often bemoan the lack of a good education in civics and the Constitution the American education system provides. As I read Mr. Stansbury's catechism, I realized this is not a new phenomenon. Mr. Stansbury published his catechism in 1828, explaining in the Preface:

That a people living under a free government which they have themselves originated should be well acquainted with the instrument which contains it, needs not to be proved.

Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.

Yes, it should be obvious that a people living under a free government they created should have more than a passing acquaintance with the document that created it. Yet today in America the Constitution is not taught in our primary education, our secondary education, or even in the higher education of law. Many people today believe that the Constitution is simply too difficult to read and understand without the higher education one obtains to be an attorney or judge. Mr. Stansbury pointed out that this excuse would not be enough to justify our lack of education.

Were the system, indeed, very cumbrous and extensive, running into minute detail, and hard to be retained in the memory, even this would be no good reason why pains should not be taken to understand and to imprint it upon the mind;

Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.

However, the Constitution is not a complicated document and it is not difficult to read. So what excuse do the American people have for being so ignorant of it?

but when its principles are simple, its features plain and obvious, and its brevity surpassing all example, it is certainly a most reprehensible negligence to remain in ignorance of it.—

Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.

Are the American people negligent in our education? Based on what I have observed of those who discuss the Constitution at all, I would have to say yes.

Constitutional Illiteracy

You may think that our constitutional illiteracy is a new phenomenon, but you would be wrong. A mere 40 years after its adoption, the citizens of this great country were generally

ignorant of the Constitution.

Yet how small a portion of the citizens of this Republic have even a tolerable acquaintance with their own Constitution? It has appeared to the author of the following sheets that this culpable want of acquaintance with what is of such deep interest to us all, is to be traced to the omission of an important part of what ought to be an American education, viz. the study of the civil institutions of our country.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

It seems our lack of civic education is not only a perennial problem, but a long-standing one as well.

We prize them, it is true, and are quite enough in the habit of boasting about them: would it not be well to teach their elements to those whose best inheritance they are?

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

The American education system used to be the best in the world. People would send their children to the United States, not just for a college education, but a primary and secondary one as well. Now the United States rates [#13 in education](#) worldwide. But it appears, even when our education system was the envy of the world, what we taught our children about civics and the Constitution was still lacking. If a free country is our inheritance, should we not teach the elements that make it so to those who will inherit it from us?

Fixing Our Constitutional Illiteracy

What can we do to improve this situation? Mr. Stansbury had an idea.

The following work has been prepared with a view to such an experiment. It is written expressly for the use of boys, and it has been the aim and effort of the writer to bring down the subject completely to a level with their capacity to

understand it.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

It is true that in 1827 such education was focused on boys, not girls, but the point here is that this catechism was designed for young people. It was not reserved to those few who could afford higher education, or even those for whom secondary education, such as high-school, was an expectation. This tool was written so the subject could be understood by 19th century boys. I would hope that Americans would be at least as capable of understanding the material today as they were almost two centuries ago.

Whether he has succeeded the trial must show. He has purposely avoided all abstruse questions, and has confined himself to a simple, common-sense explanation of each article.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

Mr. Stansbury avoided the more abstruse (difficult to understand) questions, focusing on the basic, common-sense understanding of each part of the Constitution. That is yet another reason why our excuses for not being familiar with it rings hollow.

It is very possible some inaccuracies may be discovered; and should this be the case, they shall be carefully corrected, should the work be so far approved as to reach another edition.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

Mr. Stansbury, like all of us, was human. That means it was possible for him to make mistakes. The fact that he recognized this, and made accommodations for future corrections, says a lot about both his character and our ability to trust what he is teaching.

In the mean time he cannot but indulge the hope, that in

laying this little offering upon the altar of our country, he has rendered her an acceptable service.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

This is another example of Mr. Stansbury's apparent humility. He sees this catechism as an offering made to his country, with the hope that his service is acceptable to her. Would the American people also make an offering to their country? An offering of time and effort to become acquainted with the Constitution?

Catechism

There are several ways in which we can educate ourselves and our children. I endeavored to do so when I wrote my book, [The Constitution Study](#), back on 2020. Mr. Stansbury used another technique: A catechism.

Most people think of catechism as a form of religious instruction. While many denominations use catechisms in their education, to catechize someone is:

to instruct systematically especially by questions, answers, and explanations and corrections

[Catechize – Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#)

A catechism is a question and answer form of education. But why use a catechism to learn about the Constitution? For the same reason many early church leaders used them, to help people memorize important facts.

As an educator, I learned early on that questions are powerful tools of the trade. We've all experienced questions when we've taken tests, but may not have realized their true power. When I was in high school, a teacher in a physics class asked a question. It was a yes or no question, meaning I had a 50/50 chance at getting the right answer, so I put my hand up. When the teacher pointed to me, I gave my answer, which was

correct. Then the teacher asked me a follow-up question: "Why?" I was caught. I didn't know why, I hadn't even thought about why. It just seemed like the right answer so I gave it, but now I'm being asked to "prove my work." While I stood there, struggling to figure out why, other students raised their hands to answer, but the teacher said, "Wait, give him a chance." In a minute or two, which seemed like forever for a teenage boy standing in front of a class, I gave my answer, and it too was correct. Here I am, more than 40 years later, and I not only remember that class, but the lesson I learned which had nothing to do with physics.

Yes, questions can explore people's knowledge. This is what happened when my teacher asked the yes or no question. However, questions can also open us up to examine our answers, our assumptions, and the very basis for what we believe to be true. This was the power my teacher used when he asked me "Why?" Similarly, a catechism asks questions. Some of those questions are a simple test of knowledge, like when Mr. Stanton's catechism of the Constitution asks:

Question. In what country do you live ?

Answer. In the United States of America.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

It is a simple test of a person's knowledge, of rote memorization, though a good catechism can do more.

1. Why is this country called the United States?

A. Because it is made up of a number of States which were once separate, but afterwards agreed to unite together.

2. What do you mean by a State?

A. I mean any district of country whose people are all under one government.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

By using a question and answer format, the catechism is meant to educate the student. Something about that format also assists in memorization. I think the most powerful feature of catechism is the personalization of the information. Sure, at first you are given the answer, but do you agree with it? Is there a point to be argued? Also, since catechisms generally go from simpler to more complex questions and answers, the student has the ability to build their knowledge not in the abstract, but in the context that has already been established in the catechesis.

1. Is some government necessary in every country?
A. Certainly; without it nobody would be safe: not only our property, but our lives would be in danger.
2. Cannot all the people of a country govern themselves?
A. If every man was perfectly virtuous, and knew what would be best for himself and others, they might. But this is far from being the case; and therefore the people of every country are and must be governed.
3. How is this done?
A. Laws are made which all must obey; whoever disobeys them is punished.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

Do you see how idea is built upon idea, precept upon precept? That's one of the features of Mr. Stansbury's catechism that I find so beneficial.

Conclusion

I did not know about the [Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States](#) when I was originally studying the document, yet I still find it helpful. Some of the questions forced me to examine my understanding of the Constitution, and make sure I could justify my position. For example:

1. Who is to determine whether any law is contrary to the

Constitution or not, the people themselves

A. No: but certain persons whom they have appointed,
[called Judges of the Supreme Court of the United
States.]

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

This answer is only partially correct. No, the people themselves are not the arbiters of what is constitutional, but the justices of the Supreme Court have not been delegated that power either. Since that power is not prohibited by the Constitution to the states, they retain the power to determine if a law is contrary to the Constitution.

People learn in different ways. Some prefer reading books while others watch videos. Some prefer more academic instruction, while others like a more plain spoken approach. Whether you are a new student of the Constitution or a long-time one, whether an attorney, judge, or just a plain everyday American citizen, I recommend spending some time with the [Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

As the supreme law of the land ([Article VI](#), Clause 2), it is very useful to know what trumps the acts of our governments. Or, as Mr. Stansbury put it.

That a people living under a free government which they have themselves originated should be well acquainted with the instrument which contains it, needs not to be proved.

[Elementary Catechism on the Constitution of the United States.](#)

We claim to be living under a free government. Should we not be well acquainted with the Constitution that created it?

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