



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
CENTRAL FLORIDA
BILL OF RIGHTS ESSAY COMPETITION

The Central Florida chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, in an effort to promote understanding of the importance of the Bill of Rights in guaranteeing civil liberties for all Americans, offers a scholarship to one Central Florida student each year. Any student attending public, private, or home school in Orange, Lake, Seminole or Osceola counties is eligible to participate. The scholarship of \$500.00 will be awarded to the high school senior who is judged to have written the best essay on the subject of Civil Liberties. Essays must be no more than 500 words and will be judged (by a panel of ACLU volunteers) based primarily on content, with secondary emphasis on composition.

Essays must be submitted by mail to:

J Langston
170 Broadmoor Ave
Lake Mary, FL 32746

The following information must be included with each essay on a separate sheet of paper: writer's name, home address, telephone number, and school (or parent's name if home-schooled). The deadline for submissions is > February 1st. The winner will be notified no later than May 1st, and receive a check for \$500.00, made out to the student, from the Central Florida ACLU no later than May 30th.>

The Central Florida ACLU reserves the right to reprint the winning essay in future ACLU publications, including web-sites, and to submit essays to the local press.

Tips for students:

Make it personal. We are not looking for a history of the Bill of Rights, but its relevance (or lack thereof) to you and/or your peers. To see an example, check the scholarship page of our website <http://www.acluscholarship.org> for past winner's essays.

Don't waste your money on flashy presentation folders. Entries are judged on content, not appearance. Please fit your 500-word (maximum!) essay on a single sheet of paper (saves us copying costs), with your identifying information on a separate sheet (even a large post-it note is okay).

No need to send it Certified or Express; regular mail is fine. The deadline applies to the postmarked date, not the date received.

Keep a copy, as we will not be able to return your original.

If you have further questions, call 407-321-5953.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2008 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition

Jon Ball of Harmony High School

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS

The Bill of Rights gives every citizen of the United States rights that many of us take for granted. The Bill of Rights is what separates the United States from other countries, because it grants us freedoms many countries don't receive. The Bill of Rights allows me to follow my religion, bear arms, vote, have the freedom of speech, and the right to a fair trial. All of these rights are very important to me because it is what makes me an American.

The Bill of Rights secures our right to vote without discriminating against your sex, race, and color. This is very important to me because I like to vote for a candidate that I feel will do the best job representing me in office. Since I recently turned 18, I have been anxious to vote because I would like to help choose a president that I think will do a good job in office. In my opinion there is nothing more fundamental than my right to vote.

The first amendment is also very important to me because it allows me to exercise my religion, practice free speech, and have a free press. This right allows me to practice my religion of choice without the government pushing a religion on me. The freedom of speech is very important because it lets me stand up for what I believe in. This also allows people in our country to peacefully protest against anything they don't agree with. The freedom of the press allows news organizations the right to release any news stories to the public. This is very important because the government does not control the news we hear.

Another important right that I have involves the fifth, sixth, and fourteenth amendments. This allows me to be "innocent until proven guilty," unlike many countries where people are "guilty until proven innocent." If I was accused of a crime I would receive fair trial. It is really good to know that if I am accused of a crime I have the right to prove to the jury that I am innocent. The Bill of Rights allows the accused parties a fair, speedy trial, by an impartial jury.

The Bill of Rights is very important to me because it grants me the right to have freedom. I am very pleased to have all these rights that I have mentioned, because it is what makes our country free.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2007 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition
Anthony Morrison from West Orange High School

It lies stoically, revered and reserved, glorified by many, yet mocked by razors of jealousy – the United States Bill of Rights is the foundation of individuality, of American strength, culture, ingenuity. Making the very Constitution of this great country whole and complete, the Bill of Rights in itself allows Americans to be “free”; it was built by the vast ideas and faded voices of many.

Born destitute in the island country of the Philippines, and an immigrant to the “Land of Opportunity” at the age of four, I’ve come to value so much the capability to redress my grievances in ways and methods within decency, to have the choice to practice my own religion, to fear not the power of my own voice. These are my rights and liberties that cannot be compared anywhere else; they cannot be matched by any incentive; they belong to us all.

In acknowledging these facts, one must beg the question of why these liberties and freedoms have progressively been taken advantage of; right beneath our very noses, why are they consistently becoming battered and ignored? Has our society turned into dullards because of choice, or of ignorance?

Pampered and spoiled, many Americans have lost the gratitude and feelings of honor owed to our Founding Fathers for the rights and liberties that were laid out for us through suffering and great sacrifice. We, the people, have allowed myriad extremists to persuade our minds in stretching the meaning and accuracy of our Rights, skewing the very values of individual freedom and intellect. It is the Bill of Rights that grants permission to those who dishonor patriotism and civil liberties. Likewise, it is the Bill of Rights that grants even me, now a U.S. Citizen, the right and freedom and courage to bring its relevance in peoples’ lives to light and vivid color.

The freedom to speak the thoughts that I think, the ability to express and exercise personal opinion in peace, the endearing fact that I am created equal too, underlies the message that though specific rights may at times conflict, it is those same rights that protect my individuality, the persona that is me. The same rights that are given and exercised by those who take pleasure in offensive protests, in burning flags, in disagreeing with our country’s leadership, are the same rights that are granted to me: an ability to uphold the very alive and breathing elements of the basic privileges that are unalienably mine, and for that I am most grateful.

Quintessentially, we must come back; we must return. Return to the core values and principles that this great and mighty country was founded upon, values that allow everyone everywhere, of each denomination and culture and background to define themselves without fear or persecution or ostracism. A country gushing with diversity, too long have too many been afraid to speak; we’ve become afraid to embrace one of the most vital rights we have been given. We underestimate the power of our voices.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2006 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition
Amy Xaychaleune from Celebration High School

May United States citizens do not realize the freedoms they possess every day of their lives. Other countries may have representative governments, but their citizens have only “limited freedoms.” In the Bill of Rights, the amendments guarantee freedom forever. Through understanding the Bill of Rights and understanding the lack of rights in other countries, I understand how fortunate I am to live in this country and will always be thankful.

As an American born to foreign parents, I live very appreciatively. Some of my parents’ stories from their lives in different countries terrify my soul. During my mother’s stories, I always exclaim “that’s not right!” She responds, “See? How lucky you are!” My appreciation for the Bill of Rights began with my mother’s influence.

When I was about five years old, my mother applied for citizenship. My father gained his before I was a toddler; I did not see him go through the intense studying. Kids think it is hard to memorize the Bill of Rights in their own language? If only they could imagine learning everything about U.S. law as a foreigner! As my mother asked her American friends to help her study, I saw how important it was to her, to gain citizenship and become an official part of this great country. I had a childhood where I knew I could speak my mind. I was protected under the first amendment of the Bill of Rights. She had a childhood where she knew that any words spoken against government beliefs would receive severe punishment.

At the time when my mother was a child in her country, the government was martial law; there was no Bill of Rights. A family could not own a gun to protect themselves, what would they be protecting themselves against? The government knew what was best. Housing soldiers was supposed to be an honor to the family, not a hindrance. The government could also search and seize anything, anywhere, and at anytime they wanted. I once asked my mom, “but don’t they have lawyers?” There was no such right for “criminals” to go through due process or have jury trials. Also, the government punished whoever they wanted, any way they wanted. Cruel and unusual punishment? It was cruel and usual.

My life means so much more in the United States because of the Bill of Rights. By the ninth amendment, I am granted more rights than could ever be written in any document. The United States may be the youngest nation, but its government is the longest lasting because of the Bill of Rights. The citizens have the unwavering right to live without fear of the government taking away their basic freedoms; this makes the people content. With the Bill of Rights, I do not have to suffer the way my mother and so many other foreigners did. I have the right to live my life to its fullest potential.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2005 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition

Amanda Laber

Oviedo High School

1. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; of abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. "
- The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America

So vital that it is addressed in the First Amendment to the Constitution, many Americans hold the right to Freedom of Speech near their hearts. As a person submerged in the political process, this is the most important right granted to me. As a former Girls State delegate, and as an AP Government student, I understand that the functioning of our country and the functioning of individuals depends on the right of the individual over his or her own words and thoughts.

On the national level, with the election of President Bush, many people find themselves unsatisfied with the current leadership of the country. It is their freedom of speech that allows our country to function, without facing a rebellion or revolution. There are outlets for their dissatisfaction, without allowing dissention among our unified front as Americans.

Personally, one of the major concerns that I have found involving freedom of speech is in regards to censorship. Over the summer, my English class was assigned to read "House of Sand and Fog" by Andre Dubus III. However, the day before school began, it was stricken from our reading list, due to a "concerned parent" who was offended by two pages of the book. They felt that their own thoughts and words outweighed those of Mr. Dubus, and took on the duty of getting the book banned from our English classes. Having dealt a bit with censorship the previous year (with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*), our class fought back, and won permission to discuss the book during class. We found it to be our right to read the book for ourselves, and form our own opinions. We found it to be our right to grow creatively through exposure to different pieces and authors, regardless of their "vulgar content". It was our right to read, to agree or disagree, and it was a right that we cherished.

Freedom of Speech is a right that I hold dear to my heart, and that I will fight to retain if necessary. It is a right that all Americans should fight to retain. Freedom of Speech allows us to speak our minds, and form our own opinions. It guarantees us the right to grow creatively, through our thoughts and words. It also grants us the right not to speak, if we do not believe there to be truth in those words. And all of this is given to us, to be exercised without consequence, without censorship.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2004 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition

Robert L. Doud, III
West Orange High School

The United States Constitution is the most flexible and durable document to withstand the test of time and still be the basis for a modern government. The original document features an appendix of nine rights to be afforded to the American citizen, and one for the states. To this day, we as citizens still debate these rights and their interpretation to ludicrous extremes.

Despite the media coverage and the religious lawsuits, the most interesting aspect of the Bill of Rights is the fact that these rights effectively apply only to those over the age of eighteen. The average American teen spends most of his or her day at a public school. As long as the school is in custody of the child, it is to act as a parent, and although there are times when the truncation of rights are required to keep peace, the restrictions can become absurd. Students cannot fight the institution by striking, as would a labor union, since it is both illegal to be truant and detrimental to grades. It seems as though American society values its criminals more than its youth.

I myself have felt this degrading feeling of entrapment. Just within the past year I was assigned a debate topic regarding the reasonable right to privacy and military involvement in schools. I had to argue that the military had no right to retrieve a student's personal information. As part of my debate and research material, I included a paper that explained how ROTC classes and military recruiters were overrunning schools. Following my presentation of the facts, I offered the class the opportunity to contact me, and view the research on their own time. The instructor immediately called the vice principal, and I was removed from class the following day. I was not given the opportunity to explain my situation until after a full, ninety minute lecture as to why I should not have brought the paper to school and how it was considered "an anarchist attempt to upset the administrators." Yet even when I had explained that the paper was part of the research material I was required to bring in for a debate assignment, I was still left with the command to never do it again.

No, minors do not have access to the protections afforded their adult counterparts by the Bill of Rights at all times. It is a tragedy that the rights afforded to my fellow students are restricted in a similar fashion as criminals. Any attempt to utilize one's rights that merely has the potential to inform or bring about administrative change must be shut down. By the First Amendment, we are guaranteed a petition of grievances against the administration above us. Students do not elect their "president" principal, yet are restricted by the laws that he or she may deem necessary to preserve office. Within the confines of public education, a minor's rights are null and void. This is truly a cruel and unusual punishment, sentenced without trial.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2003 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition

Elizabeth Violin
Lake Brantley High School

As a high school student who has taken American History and is presently in an American Government class, I have had the opportunity to study the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. These amendments guarantee all Americans priceless civil liberties. Recent events have made me realize that safeguarding these rights for all Americans is a continuous and challenging obligation; one which we must assume if we are indeed to remain "the land of the free."

The September 11 tragedy has changed the atmosphere in our country. We are still reacting to this attack on American soil by foreign-born individuals, some of whom lived in the United States for a period of time. People are scared and full of suspicion. Our government is continuously trying to find ways to keep our country secure and safe from harm - at the borders, in airports, and wherever else security may be breached. Our travels, belongings, and documentation are scrutinized more closely than ever. This is permissible as long as it does not step over the line. We must not allow the government to infringe upon the civil liberties of its people in its attempt to thwart future terrorism; otherwise, we are undermining the very foundation of our system of government. We are doing the terrorists' work for them!

Some of the liberties in danger are our right to freedom of speech, our right to privacy, the prohibition in the fourth amendment against unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to a speedy and public trial and to be informed of the nature and cause of an accusation as set forth in the sixth amendment, and the due process and equal protection guarantees of the fourteenth amendment. It is important that these liberties be preserved for all Americans including those of Arab descent. The rights of naturalized citizens are clearly protected in the fourteenth amendment, where they are placed on the same level with the rights of those born in the United States. After all we are a nation of immigrants! I have read that some Arab Americans are returning to their foreign birth places because they no longer feel safe in the United States. We must be careful or we may look back in shame on our handling of this crisis, much like we look back with shame at the way Japanese-Americans were treated during World War II. If we go to war with Iraq, I fear the situation may get worse.

The Bill of Rights protects us every day from abuses of power. In fact we may take these rights and liberties for granted. However, if we are not vigilant, they can be taken away. It is our challenge to make certain that the Bill of Rights protects all Americans, especially in these troubled times.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2002 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition

Jamie K. Davis

Eustis High School

The United States of America was founded on a few key principles that were included in the Bill of Rights. This original set of rules and policies were established to form a more perfect union in which all were equal and had equal rights. As a typical American high school student, I look to these codes as a guideline for my life. In the first Amendment, it states that Congress cannot establish a law forbidding free speech or the petition of the government. As a high school senior, I am not directly correlated with the U.S. government, but I am aware of my high school “democracy”. Given the right to speak my mind and the freedom to challenge this form of government has allowed me to be a part of a changing generation. A few times during my junior year, myself and other classmates found it necessary to review certain standards devised by our principal and because of our freedom to speak and challenge, we were able to stop an unnecessary rule from ever starting. This amendment has also taught me that I should never be afraid to speak up and make others hear me, as long as what I have to say is appropriate.

Another amendment that is meaningful to me is Amendment eight. In this amendment, it states that no cruel or unusual punishment shall be inflicted. With the tragedies of September 11th, I, along with other teens, am left to wonder what punishment for these terrorists is just. Speculation has been made that in the camps in Cuba where the detainees are being held, the accused terrorists are being tortured. It clearly states in this amendment that no cruel and unusual punishment shall occur; but I wonder, in these times, is this punishment appropriate? When it comes to matters like these I look to why this amendment was written. When our forefathers wrote the Bill of Rights, they were concerned about humanity and a more civil society. If men hundreds of years ago could be so compassionate about life and the freedoms that all men and women deserve, why can't I? This amendment has taught me to look past my emotions and my instincts, and view these accused terrorists as people also, even if they have caused this horrible disaster. I also believe that by torturing these prisoners, we as a society become no better than what these terrorists thought they were fighting.

Overall, I find that I have greatly benefited from researching and learning from the Bill of Rights. I am now more aware of what I can do to be a better citizen of my town and a better American. I have also gained a new attitude about this country and all its greatness over the last few months and I feel as though this country was founded on the principles of a few great men, and it will continue to thrive because of the of great people that inhabit it today.

The Essay below Won First Place in the 2001 Central Florida ACLU Scholarship Competition and was published in the Orlando Sentinel on 5/14/2001

Student: We Must Learn How Civil Liberties Apply To Us
by Jason Alexander -
12th Grade at Boone High School in Orlando

In millions of classrooms around the nation, students are learning about the framework that established our country. They are studying the history and significance of such treasured documents as our Constitution and its first 10 amendments, known as the Bill of Rights.

Civil liberties, which are guaranteed by these documents, are also a part of the curriculum in a history class. However, many times students are not instructed about how the rights established by our Founding Fathers apply to them today. By lack of proper instruction, many students are not aware of the rights they have as students. These rights include the rights to free expression and the right to privacy.

In the Constitution, the First Amendment states that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech. While many students are taught this in school, they often are not instructed in how this pertains to them as students.

According to the First Amendment, students have rights so they may write what they like; hold protests, demonstrations and rallies; and form clubs at school. The right of free expression does have some limitations at school. As long as the subject matter does not interfere with classes or other activities, you have the right to express your opinions.

Forms of protest are also acceptable manners of expression as long as they are peaceful and do not hinder the school from carrying out its function.

Student organizations are also permissible as long as they are not discriminatory in their membership or activities.

Another student right is the right of privacy. Although the right to privacy is not mentioned in the Constitution, the Supreme Court has ruled that several amendments create the right to privacy.

However, when students are at school, their rights to privacy are sometimes very limited. The Supreme Court, in *New Jersey vs. T.L.O.*, ruled that school officials have the right to search a student without a warrant when they suspect that the search will produce evidence that will link the student either to breaking the law or a school rule. Strip searches are illegal in many states, and school officials must have a good suspicion that a student is hiding something illegal before they can search a locker. Some schools also reserve the right to search cars that are parked on campus, but the driver must be present when this search takes place.

Although the rights to privacy are limited in school, they are nonetheless guaranteed in the framework of our laws.

The rights and civil liberties that students are taught in school are sometimes never fully understood. In extreme cases, students may even get themselves in more trouble through this misunderstanding. There is a difference between learning something and knowing how to apply it in everyday life. Education is the purpose of our schools; understanding civil liberties is a lesson worth learning.