

The Bill of Rights—Simplified

First Amendment

Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Assembly, Right to Petition

The government cannot support any religion or prevent citizens from worshipping as they please; the government cannot censor people or the media; people have a right to gather peaceably; and people can complain to the government. There are exceptions to these rights.

Second Amendment

Right to Bear Arms

People have the right to own weapons.

Third Amendment

Quartering Troops

Citizens cannot be forced to house soldiers in their homes during peacetime and only during wartime as the law requires.

Fourth Amendment

Right to Privacy, Search Warrants

Officers of the law must get a warrant from a judge to search and take property or persons. A judge must have a “reasonable cause” to issue a warrant to officers and the warrant must describe the place to be searched and the items or persons to be taken. There are exceptions to this amendment.

Fifth Amendment

Rights of the Accused, Due Process, Right to Remain Silent

A grand jury must determine if there is enough evidence to send to trial a person accused of a serious crime. A person cannot be put on trial more than once for the same crime (double jeopardy). A person has the right not to answer questions asked by officials. The government must follow certain fair procedures (due process) before it can take away life, liberty, or property.

Sixth Amendment

Right to a Speedy and Fair Trial, Right to Face Accusers, Right to a Lawyer

An accused person will not be held in jail for a long period of time before their trial begins. An accused person will also get a public trial before a fair jury. An accused person has a right to face their accusers. If an accused person cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided to defend them.

Seventh Amendment

Civil Suits

A jury may be provided if one person sues another person and the case involves more than \$20 (these cases are generally no longer heard in federal court).

Eighth Amendment

Reasonable Bail and Punishment

Bail will not be set unusually high as to make it impossible for someone to pay. No cruel or unusual punishment will be used against an accused or a convicted person.

Ninth Amendment

People’s Rights

Citizens have rights beyond those written in the Constitution and they cannot be taken away.

Tenth Amendment

States’ Rights

Those powers not given to the federal government are given to the states.

Bill of Rights History

After the founders wrote the Constitution in 1787, they needed nine states to approve it before it became law. The Antifederalists, people who opposed the Constitution, feared a powerful national government. To get support from states like New York and Virginia, the Federalists, supporters of the Constitution, agreed to pass a bill of rights to limit government power.

The Congress wrote twelve amendments but the states only passed ten. On December 15, 1791, Virginia became the last state to ratify the Bill of Rights making them a part of the Constitution. Originally, the Bill of Rights applied only to limiting the power of the government of the United States and not state governments. However, by the mid-twentieth century, the courts began applying the Bill of Rights to state governments as well.

The Bill of Rights contains the very core of American liberty: limited government and individual freedom.