

Interpreting the Law

Teacher
Resources



Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center

925 W. Ottawa St.

P.O. Box 30048

Lansing, MI 48909

517-373-7171

web: courts.mi.gov/learningcenter

Level

With preparation, the lesson is adaptable for later elementary, middle, and high school.

Time Required

1–2 class periods

Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss why laws need to be interpreted. (Social Studies: 3 – C3.0.3, 3 – C3.0.4, 3 – C3.0.5; HS – C1.3.3.4, HS – 3.3.7)
- Study and discuss laws/constitutional provisions to clarify their meaning and write a response. (English Language Arts: R.CM.04–08.02, R.CM.04–08.04, CE.1.1.2, CE.1.1.3, CE.1.3.7, CE.1.3.8, CE.2.1.3, CE.2.1.7, CE.2.1.11, CE.2.3.4)
- Present their findings to the class. (English Language Arts: S.CN.04–08.01, S.CN.04–08.03, S.DS.04–08.04, L.CN.04–08.02, CE1.3.9)

Instructional Resources

Overheads/handouts of laws/constitutional provisions, oath of office

Pencils, pens

Paper

Dictionaries and other reference materials

Sequence of Activities

1. Before the lesson, select relevant excerpts from the Michigan Compiled Laws (MCL) or the Michigan Constitution and prepare overheads or handouts. Printed volumes are available through public libraries. The Michigan Legislature also provides online versions at <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/>.

Example Laws

257.658	Riding on seat of bicycle, motorcycle or moped; number of persons
257.710e	Safety belt required
380.1284b	School in session before Labor Day
380.1272b	School lunches
409.104	Work permits for minors
750.143a	Video game rating system

Example Constitutional Provisions

Art. I, § 1	Political power
Art. I, § 2	Equal protection; discrimination
Art. I, § 5	Freedom of speech and of press
Art. I, § 11	Searches and seizures

2. Discuss why we have laws.
 - Laws are like school rules.
 - Laws keep people safe.
 - Laws tell people what is expected of them.
 - Laws are written down so people know what they are and can follow them.
3. Discuss the roles of the three branches of government related to laws.
 - Legislative – make
 - Executive – enforce (carry out)
 - Judicial – interpret and apply
4. Study the oath of office; then, swear in students as judges to prepare them to interpret the law.

Oath of Office

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the constitution of this state, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of [judge] according to the best of my ability.

[Michigan Constitution, Art. XI, § 1](#)

5. Discuss why laws have to be interpreted.
 - People have to know what laws mean in order to follow them. The language of laws can be complicated.
 - Laws cannot be written to anticipate every situation. Judges often have to decide whether a law fits a particular case. For example, does a law about [aircraft](#) apply to drones?
 - Laws often include words like “reasonable,” so they can be applied to many situations. A judge applies the facts of a case to decide what these words mean. For example, is it “reasonable” to drive [70 miles per hour on the highway](#) during a blizzard?
 - More than one law or constitutional principle may apply. Classic examples involve balancing the common good with individual rights.
 - Laws cannot violate constitutional law, which is the supreme law of the land.
6. For younger students, discuss the law(s) as a class. (See example discussion of MCL 257.658(2).) For older students, divide the class into groups of three, similar to a three-judge panel in the Michigan Court of Appeals.

Discuss the meaning and write a paragraph-long “opinion of the court,” clarifying the intent of the laws. Then, use the written opinion to:

- Develop a hypothetical situation that fits within the law.
- Develop a hypothetical situation that does not fit within the law.
- Report findings to the class (older students).

7. As a class, debrief the discussions.
- Was it difficult for the group to agree on the meaning of the law? Why?
 - Did they think the law was fair? If not, were they tempted to change the meaning? Judges must interpret and apply laws whether they like them or not.
 - Was it easier to create a situation that fit within the law or one that did not fit within the law? Why?
 - How did their discussion change their idea of the meaning of “interpreting the law?”
 - Based on this experience, do they think they would like to be a judge?

Example Discussion
of [MCL 257.658\(2\)](#)

Michigan Vehicle Code (Excerpt)

A bicycle or motorcycle shall not be used to carry more persons at 1 time than the number for which it was designed and equipped.

- A. Introduce the idea that students are reading part of an actual law that was made by the legislative branch and is enforced by the executive branch. They will interpret what the law means as judges, using dictionaries and reference materials as necessary.
- B. Read the section of the law aloud.
- C. Discuss the meaning of "Michigan Vehicle Code," the state law (code) about cars, trucks, motorcycles, autocycles, bicycles, etc. The vehicle code includes many sections and topics. This is only one subsection of the code.
- D. Arrive at definitions for "bicycle" and "motorcycle." To stimulate ideas, "assemble" bicycles and motorcycles from photos or drawings of parts (wheels, handlebars, chains, etc.) The legislature wrote the following definitions:
 - "'Bicycle' means a device propelled by human power upon which a person may ride, having either 2 or 3 wheels in a tandem or tricycle arrangement, all of which are over 14 inches in diameter." ([MCL 257.4](#))
 - "'Motorcycle' means every motor vehicle having a saddle or seat for the use of the rider and designed to travel on not more than 3 wheels in contact with the ground but excluding a tractor." ([MCL 257.31](#))
- E. Discuss what "shall not" means. Compare the use of "may" (allowed) and "shall" (must), two common words used in laws.
- F. Returning to the definitions of "bicycle" and "motorcycle," decide what "carry more persons at one time" and "designed and equipped" mean.
- G. Check for student understanding of the full statement.
- H. Ask if students think the law allows more than one person to ride a bicycle at one time. Introduce the idea that a bicycle can be designed with two or more seats. Should their interpretation allow user-added seats, such as after-market baby seats? What about homemade seats?
- I. Write the "opinion of the court" as a class. The opinion could include a restatement of the law, definitions of words, or even a test for other judges to use in similar cases, such as: "The number of riders is within the law if (1) each person has a seat and other necessary equipment and (2) the bicycle or motorcycle can be operated safely."
- J. Test the opinion by brainstorming situations that comply/do not comply with the interpretation.
- K. Debrief the exercise as outlined in step 5.



