

## Teacher Notes



# The Federal Court System

## Activity 1: Understanding the Structure of the Federal Court System

### Activity at a Glance

- ◆ **Subject:** Social Studies
- ◆ **Subject Area:** Civics/Government
- ◆ **Category:** The Federal Government
- ◆ **Topic:** Federal Court System
- ◆ **Grade Level:** 10 – 12
- ◆ **Prerequisites:** Understanding of branches of the federal government, purpose of the judiciary, and checks and balances
- ◆ **Total Teaching Time:** 120 minutes

### Materials

- ◆ TI-84 Plus/TI-83 Plus
- ◆ TI-Navigator™ classroom network
- ◆ Unit-to-unit link cables
- ◆ NoteFolio™ application
- ◆ TlmeSpan™ software
- ◆ Activity 1-1 Student Handout (Directions)
- ◆ Activity 1-2 Student Handout (Question Sheet)

### *Activity Overview*

In this activity, students investigate the purpose and structure of the United States federal court system. Students work in groups of three and then independently research their assigned court (for example, federal district court, circuit court of appeals, or the Supreme Court). Students share their findings with their groups, and the groups create time lines of the federal court system. While researching the makeup of the specific court they have been assigned, the students also answer a list of questions in order to make a more detailed time line.

### *Directions*

#### *Before the Activity Begins*

1. Ensure that each student has a TI-84 Plus/TI-83 Plus with the TlmeSpan™ software and NoteFolio™ application.

2. Students should be familiar with navigating within the TlmeSpan™ software and NoteFolio™ application.
3. Place students into groups of three. Assign each student a number from one to three within his/her group. They will research in detail the court that corresponds to the number they were assigned: 1-Federal Courts, 2-Court of Appeals, 3-Supreme Court.
4. Students must have access to the Internet. If this is not possible, print out copies of the information that students will require from the Web sites listed below, which are included in Activity 1-1 Student Handout (Directions).

Note: All of these sites were available at the time this activity was produced. You may want to verify that they still exist before providing the list to students.

<http://www.uscourts.gov/> (Web site designed to inform the reader about the broad nature of U.S. Courts)

<http://www.supremecourtus.gov/> (United States Supreme Court Web site)

[http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content\\_5\\_0.html](http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content_5_0.html)

[http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content\\_3\\_0.html](http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content_3_0.html)

5. Distribute Activity 1-1 Student Handout (Directions). Explain to the students that they will research the structure and purpose of the federal courts in the United States. They will research in detail the court that corresponds to the number they were assigned: 1-Federal Courts, 2-Court of Appeals, 3-Supreme Court.
6. Distribute Handout 1-2 Student Handout (Question Sheet). Explain to the students that they will answer the questions that correspond with the court they were assigned, in a NoteFolio™ file. This will allow the students to generate a more detailed record of their court system, and it will make all members of the group accountable for the assignment.
7. Read and review the directions on Activity 1-1 Student Handout (Directions) with the class.

### ***During the Activity***

1. Monitor student/group progress. Circulate and assist students in their research, and guide the discussions, if necessary. Make sure that the students focus on the correct aspects of the court necessary to the success of the assignment.
2. Ensure that each of the students answers the questions from Activity 1-2 Student Handout (Question Sheet) in a NoteFolio™ file.
3. Circulate when the groups have reconvened, to monitor the progress on the groups' timelines. Ensure that the students demonstrate how an issue makes it to federal court, and how it proceeds all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

***After the Activity***

- 1.** Use the TI-Navigator™ classroom network to collect students' NoteFolio™ files.
- 2.** Ask the individual groups to discuss their federal court timelines. Use the TI-Navigator™ classroom network to display each group's timeline. Ask the class to discuss aspects that may have been omitted.
- 3.** Create a timeline with the whole class, which can be used as a study aid for a later test or quiz.

**Activity 1-1 Student Handout  
(Directions)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***Understanding the Structure of the Federal Court System***

**Part 1:**

1. Each member of your group independently researches one federal court system in the United States. The court system you research corresponds to the number you are assigned within your group. For example, if you are assigned the number 1, you research United States District Courts; if you are assigned number 2, you research United States Circuit Courts of Appeals; if you are assigned number 3, you research the United States Supreme Court.
2. Search both your textbook and the following Web sites to obtain information on your assigned court.

<http://www.uscourts.gov/> (Explains the broad nature of U.S. Courts)

<http://www.supremecourtus.gov/> (United States Supreme Court Web site)

[http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content\\_5\\_0.html](http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content_5_0.html)

[http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content\\_3\\_0.html](http://www.uscourts.gov/understand02/content_3_0.html)

3. Read the questions that relate to your court from Activity 1-2 Student Handout (Question Sheet), and enter the information into a NoteFolio™ file. Answer all the questions in complete sentences. These answers will be collected as part of the assignment. Upon completion of this section, save the NoteFolio™ file using your last name.

**Part 2:**

1. When you have completed the steps in Part 1, meet as a group to discuss what you have learned about the different federal courts. Each member will discuss the answers to the questions on Student Handout 1-2 with the rest of the group so that all of the members will become knowledgeable about the entire federal court system.
2. When each member of the group has discussed what he/she has learned about the individual court and how it operates under the federal government, use the TlmeSpan™ software to create a timeline of the federal courts. The phases of this timeline show what is needed to get into federal court, how one appeals, and how one would proceed all the way to the Supreme Court.

**Part 3:**

1. Connect the TI-84 Plus/TI-83 Plus to the nearest TI-Navigator™ hub so that the instructor can collect their NoteFolio™ and TImspan™ files.
2. When the class reconvenes, your group will present your timeline. You will discuss what you learned about the three courts in the United States, and the process of getting a case heard in any of these courts.

**Activity 1-2 Student Handout  
(Question Sheet)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions about United States Federal Courts**

**Directions:**

Each box contains a set of questions about an individual court. For example, if you are researching federal district courts, then you will answer only the questions from **Box 1: Questions for United States District Court**; if you are researching the court of appeals, then you will answer only questions from **Box 2: Questions for United States Circuit Court of Appeals**; if you are researching the Supreme Court, then you will answer only questions from **Box 3: Questions for the United States Supreme Court**. All questions are to be answered in complete and thoughtful sentences in your NoteFolio™ file.

**Box 1: Questions for United States District Court**

How many federal district courts are in the United States?

Who appoints federal district court judges?

What is the federal district court for your county?

Do federal district courts hear criminal and civil cases?

What types of issues can be heard in federal district court?

How do cases get into district courts?

How do district courts make decisions?

Who can appeal the decision and why?

**Box 2: Questions for United States Circuit Court of Appeals**

How are the United States Courts of Appeals organized?

How many circuits are in the United States?

What circuit is our school located in?

How are circuit court judges appointed or hired?

How long do circuit court judges serve?

What special cases are heard by the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit?

Is there a time limit on appeals?

**Box 3: Questions for the United States Supreme Court**

What is the role of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

How many Justices are currently on the Supreme Court?

How does the Supreme Court determine what cases to hear?

Who nominates the Justices on the Supreme Court?

How long do Supreme Court Justices serve on the Supreme Court?

How many Justices must vote to hear a case before it is added to the Court's docket?

Who writes the opinions of the Supreme Court?