

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

The government of the United States has three branches: the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch.

Key Terms

appropriate, impeach, constituents

Read to Learn

- the goals of the three branches of the government.
- the powers of the three branches of the government.

The Legislative Branch

Congress, the legislative branch of the government, makes the nation's laws. It also has the power to "lay and collect taxes" and to declare war. Congress has two houses, the House of Representatives and the Senate.

House and Senate Today the House of Representatives has 435 voting members and nonvoting delegates from the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The number of representatives from each state is determined by the state's population. Representatives must be at least 25 years old and serve two-year terms. The Senate consists of 100 members, two from each state, who must be at least 30 years old and serve six-year terms. The terms are staggered, which means that one-third of the Senate seats are up for election every two years.

Congress Congress has two primary powers: to make the nation's laws and to control government spending. The government cannot spend any money unless Congress has approved it or sets aside funds. All tax and revenue bills must originate in the House of

Representatives and gain approval in both the House and the Senate before moving on to the president for signature.

Congress also serves as a watchdog over the executive branch, monitoring its actions and investigating possible abuses of power. The House of Representatives can **impeach**, or bring formal charges against, any federal official it suspects of wrongdoing or misconduct. If an official is impeached, the Senate acts as a court and tries the accused official. Officials who are found guilty may be removed from office.

The Senate also holds certain special powers. Only the Senate can ratify treaties made by the president and confirm presidential appointments of federal officials, such as department heads, ambassadors, and federal judges.

All members of Congress have the responsibility of representing their **constituents**, the people of their home states and districts. As a constituent, you can expect your senators and representatives to promote and protect your state's interests as well as those of the nation.



Seal of the
U.S. Congress

Congress at Work Thousands of bills, or proposed laws, are introduced in Congress every year. Because individual members of Congress

cannot possibly study all these bills carefully, both houses use committees of selected members to evaluate proposed legislation.

Standing committees are permanent committees in both the House and the Senate that specialize in a particular topic, such as agriculture, commerce, or veterans' affairs. These committees usually are broken down into **subcommittees** that focus on a particular aspect of a problem or issue.

The House and the Senate sometimes form temporary **select committees** to deal with issues requiring special attention. These committees meet only until they complete their task.

Occasionally the House and the Senate form **joint committees** with members from both houses. These committees meet to consider specific issues, such as the system of federal taxation. One type of joint committee, a **conference committee**, has a special function. If the House

and the Senate pass different versions of the same bill, a conference committee tries to work out a compromise bill acceptable to both houses.

When it receives a bill, a committee can kill it by rejecting it outright, "pigeonhole" it by setting it aside without reviewing it, or prepare it for consideration by the full House or Senate. While preparing bills, committees hold public hearings at which citizens can present arguments and documents supporting or opposing the bills.

Once a bill is approved by a committee in either house of Congress, it is sent to the full Senate or House for debate. After debate the bill may be passed, rejected, or returned to committee for further changes.

When both houses pass a bill, the bill goes to the president. If the president approves the bill and signs it, it becomes law. If the president vetoes the bill, it does not become law,

Unless Congress **overrides** (cancels) the presidential veto by a vote of two-thirds of the members in each house.

Reading Check Sequencing List the basic steps of how a bill becomes a law.

The Executive Branch

The executive branch of government includes the president, the vice president, and various executive offices, departments, and agencies. The executive branch carries out the laws that Congress passes.

Chief Executive The president plays a number of different roles in government, each of which has specific powers and responsibilities. These roles include the nation's chief executive, chief diplomat, commander in chief, chief of state, and legislative leader.

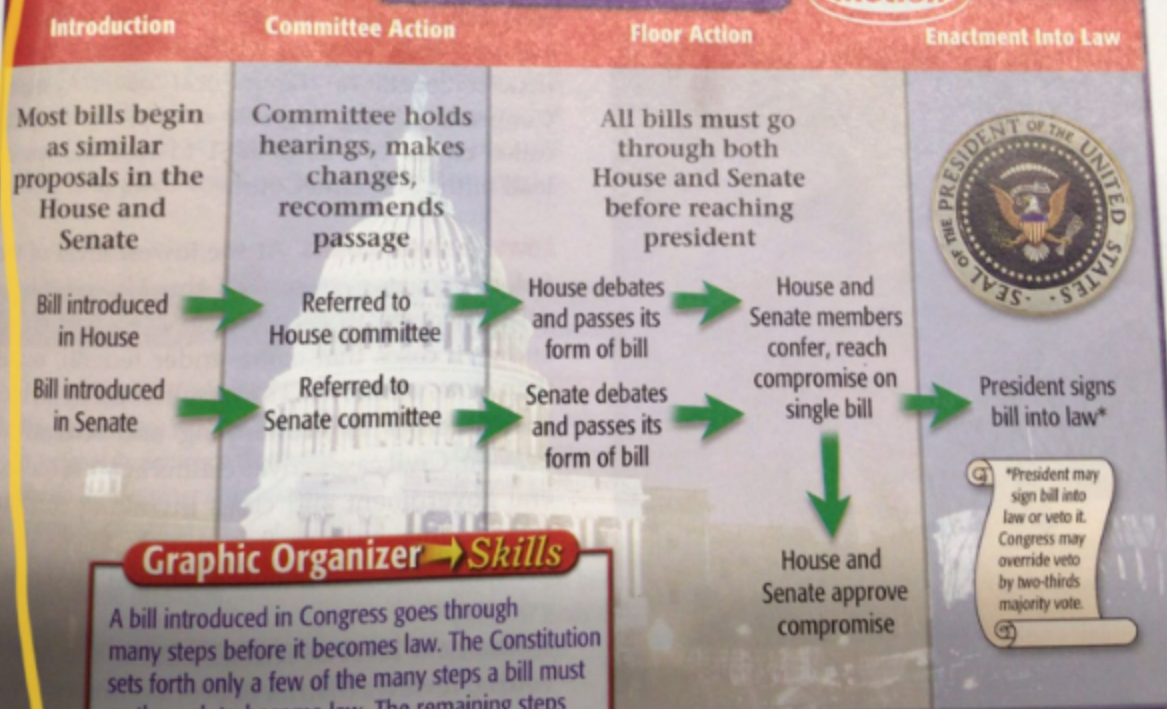
As chief executive, the president is responsible for carrying out the nation's laws. Many executive departments and agencies assist the president in this job.

Chief Diplomat As chief diplomat, the president directs foreign policy, appoints ambassadors, and negotiates treaties with other nations. Treaties must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the Senate before they go into effect.

Commander in Chief As commander in chief of the armed forces, the president can use the military to intervene or offer assistance in crises at home and around the world. The president cannot declare war; only Congress holds this power. The president can send troops to other parts of the world for up to 60 days but must notify Congress when doing so. The troops may remain longer only if Congress gives approval or declares war.

How a Bill Becomes a Law

In Motion



Graphic Organizer → Skills

A bill introduced in Congress goes through many steps before it becomes law. The Constitution sets forth only a few of the many steps a bill must go through to become law. The remaining steps have developed as Congress has grown in size and the number of bills has increased.

Analyzing Information What role does the president play in the passage of a new law?

*President may sign bill into law or veto it. Congress may override veto by two-thirds majority vote.