

First Amendment Essay Contest

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The Founding Fathers made no mistake by putting a laundry list of fundamental freedoms at the beginning of the Bill of Rights. These 45 simple, yet electrifying words, which guarantee, among other things, the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, are the most recognized and most applicable items of the Bill of Rights. The entire First Amendment has endured through more than 200 years of history and maintains its status as a major component of the successful democratic government of the United States.

The addition of the Bill of Rights occurred after public disapproval of the Constitution climaxed. The American people felt that the newly-drafted Constitution would allow the government to return to an oppressive state similar to the one they had suffered through during British rule. They demanded limits be added to the existing document, and consequently, the First Amendment was born. Although the definitions of the freedoms in the First Amendment have been altered throughout the years by Sedition Acts and acts of censorship during war times, the basic rights have prevailed – Americans have the right to say what they want and print what they want without oppression or threat by the government.

However, several significant Supreme Court cases have raised the question of the extension of First Amendment rights to students and student publications. Following the reprimand of a group of students for donning armbands in protest of the controversial Vietnam War, the 1969 case of *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* permitted the use of symbolic speech that did not disrupt the normal operation of the school. Yet a later, more well-known decision seemed to partially nullify some of the measures passed by the *Tinker* case. The case of *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* gave school administrations the right to censor and restrain high school newspapers.

High school and college newspapers have become increasingly popular in today's society. These publications, which are written in a concise, appealing manner, may be the only news media to which apathetic students are exposed. This makes the role of student reporters and the exercise of the First Amendment even more necessary. The provisions of the First Amendment guarantee the right of my high school newspaper, *Smoke Signals*, to tackle important, hard-hitting issues without facing chastisement by the government. In order to breed a generation of intelligent, well-informed adolescents, the rights of school newspaper must not be denied. Students are entitled to First Amendment freedoms, and restrictions, such as those presented in the *Hazelwood* case, are detrimental to the strides of scholastic journalism.

Now more than ever, a free press is key to a successful society. In order to preserve the open government that we benefit from today, we must continue to uphold and protect the fundamental freedoms of the First Amendment, for both youths and adults. Otherwise, we will face the consequences of a repressive, chaotic governmental structure.