

**Excerpt from Monk: *The Words We Live By:*  
*Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution***

**From “The Preamble: We the People”**

The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.

But who are “We the People”? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America’s first advocates for women’s rights, asked in 1853, “‘We the People’? Which ‘We the People’? The women were not included.” Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African-Americans— slave or free. Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:

“For a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: ‘we the people.’ when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens ... the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not ... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.”

Through the Amendment process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of “We the People.” After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African-Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment extended suffrage to eighteen-year-olds.

**STUDENT WRITING PROMPT:**

Consider the claims made about the purpose of the Constitution and the source of its legitimacy traced in the excerpt from Linda R. Monk’s *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*. How does Thurgood Marshall’s presence on the Supreme Court illustrate the evolution of the Constitution? Use evidence from the excerpt to develop your answer.

**QUESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING:**

- 1. What knowledge, skills and strategies will my students need to know and be able to use in order to respond effectively to this prompt in writing?**
- 2. And what knowledge, skills and strategies will I need to teach them?**