Lesson Plan:
Taking Sides—Washington, Mason, Madison, and the United States Constitution

Primary Source(s):
George Mason's Objections, September 1787
Letter of James Madison to George Washington, October 18, 1787

Understanding Goal:
Just because you've lost the battle doesn't mean you've lost the war.

Investigative Question:
After the Constitutional Convention, what arguments did Virginians make both for and against the ratification of the new Constitution?

Standards Addressed:

Virginia Standards of Learning:
USI.7 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the challenges faced by the new nation by
(a) identifying the weaknesses of the government established by the Articles of Confederation;
(b) describing the historical development of the Constitution of the United States.

VUS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to
(h) interpret the significance of excerpts from famous speeches and other documents.

VUS.5 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the issues involved in the creation and ratification of the Constitution of the United States and how the principles of limited government, the consent of the governed, and the social contract are embodied in it by
(a) explaining the origins of the Constitution, including the Articles of Confederation;
(b) identifying the major compromises necessary to produce the Constitution, and the roles of James Madison;
(d) assessing the arguments of Federalists and Anti-Federalists during the ratification debates and their relevance to political debate today;

National History Standards
3A (Grades 9–12) Compare the arguments of Federalists and Anti-Federalists during the ratification debates and assess their relevance in late-20th-century politics.

Overview:
Investigate the Constitution through supplemental background material and inquiry-based learning. Compare and contrast written and spoken declarations by George Mason and James Madison as they debated the merits of the new Constitution and attempted to convince George Washington of their respective positions.

Length of Activity:
1 Class Period

Materials Needed:

Copies of:

George Mason's Objections, September 1787
Letter of James Madison to George Washington, October 18, 1787
Mason's Speeches from the Virginia Ratifying Convention
Madison's Speeches from the Virginia Ratifying Convention
Perspective Columns Handout

Student Performance Tasks:

- Students will examine, research, and present group conclusions about correspondence sent to George Washington by his contemporaries debating the merits of the newly formed constitution.
- Students will compare this correspondence with the speeches and arguments delivered by George Mason and James Madison in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, and determine the consistency and persuasiveness of the arguments.

Background:

When George Mason was on his way back to Virginia from Philadelphia, where he had refused to sign the proposed Constitution and where he had published his long list of defects that required amendment before the document could be made acceptable, his carriage overturned and he was seriously injured. The pain and inconvenience of his injury added to his deep disappointment about the Constitution. Shortly after he returned home, he wrote to his old friend and collaborator George Washington, reporting the latest agricultural news, giving a brief account of his accident, and sending a copy of his objections to the Constitution. Mason, in effect, insisted that his objections be made part of the agenda of the Virginia Ratifying Convention in order gauge public opinion on what he regarded as capital defects in the Constitution. Mason also seriously considered during that autumn and winter asking that a new convention be called to rewrite the Constitution. His insistence on sharply criticizing the work of the convention and his insinuations that unworthy purposes motivated supporters of the Constitution so angered Washington that it ended their long friendship.

James Madison was not entirely satisfied with the Constitution that the Convention of 1787 submitted to Congress and that Congress, in turn, submitted to the states for ratification, but he agreed with George Washington that it was essential for the survival of the new nation for the Constitution to be ratified. After receiving from Washington a copy of George Mason's objections to the proposed Constitution, Madison wrote Washington a long critique of Mason's objections, pointing out several instances in which he believed that Mason's list contradicted his known views and his votes during the convention. Madison also pointed out that the intemperate tone that Mason had begun to adopt in his criticisms of the Constitution was alarming. That, together with other strong criticisms that had begun to appear in some newspapers, led Madison to fear that the task of securing ratification of the Constitution would difficult, especially if Patrick Henry came out in opposition, which he had not yet done when Madison wrote his letter to Washington.

Teacher Actions:

1. Review the events that had taken place during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Discuss the arguments that had been put forth. What were the positions of the various members of the Virginia delegation? Have students examine a copy of the U.S.

Constitution. Which members of the Virginia delegation did not sign the document and why not?

2. Divide the class into groups of four. Assign each member of the group one of the Mason or Madison readings (Mason's letter to Washington with Objections, Madison's letter to Washington, Mason's Ratification Speeches, or Madison's Ratification Speeches). Distribute copies of the necessary readings and the **Four Square Perspective Handout** to each student. NOTE: Students can be divided into groups larger than four, with members teaming up on the readings, in order to bring a different perspective from the same primary source.
3. Discuss with students the fact that Mason and Madison will become the leaders of the Anti-Federalist and Federalist factions, respectively. The disagreements they held about the newly drafted Constitution carried over into the weeks after the Constitutional Convention and the Virginia Ratifying Debates. Why were both Madison and Mason communicating with George Washington? Why is this significant?
4. Have students investigate their sections through the handouts provided, with each group member filling in his or her thoughts on the investigative question in the corresponding box.
5. Ask for student volunteers to present their findings to other classroom members.
6. Discuss the findings with students. Ask if there are any other perspectives that were not presented. Discuss the results of the Virginia Ratifying Convention. Whose point of view won that day? What part of Mason's argument was addressed later by Madison? (It's the need for a bill of rights, which Madison championed during his time in Congress.)
7. Have the class members complete their copies of the **Four Square Perspective Handout** based on their understanding of the arguments of Madison and Mason, along with the investigative question. For homework, have students complete the final section of the Four Square Perspective Handout (Conclusions/Connections/Questions/Realizations …) as a brainstorming activity for a short writing assignment. Assign (or allow students to choose) one of the following questions to prepare a short written response in order to display understanding of the subject matter.

Short Answer Writing Questions:

1. Some of George Mason's objections have been addressed by amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Which amendments addressed his worries? Which of his objections could still be applied to the U.S. Constitution?
2. Do you agree with George Mason's objections to the U.S. Constitution? Choose three objections and discuss why you either do or do not agree with them.
3. Write your own critique of three of Mason's Objections.
4. Who put together the most persuasive argument, Mason or Madison? Explain why you feel this way, citing at least three examples.

For Further Reading:

Kaminski, John P., and Gaspare J. Saladino, eds. *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, Vol. 8: Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Virginia.* 1: xxxv–xxxvi. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988.

Briceland, Alan V. "Virginia: The Cement of the Union." In *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution.* Edited by Patrick T. Conley and John P. Kaminski, 201–337. Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1988.

The Papers of James Madison. Vol. 10. Edited by Robert A. Rutland and others. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Kukla, Jon. "A Spectrum of Sentiments: Virginia's Federalists, Antifederalists, and 'Federalists Who Are for Amendments,' 1787–1788." *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 96 (July 1988): 276–296.

Conley, Patrick T., and John P. Kaminski, eds. *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution*. Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1988.

Taking Sides—Washington, Mason, Madison, and the U.S. Constitution

Name: **Class:** **Date:**

Different Perspectives On:_____

George Mason's Objections	**George Mason's Speeches**	**James Madison's Letter**	**James Madison's Speeches**

Conclusions/Connections/Questions/Realizations:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____