

Primary Source

Learning to Read Supreme Court Decisions

Guiding Question

- How can understanding the principles of the Constitution help citizens participate effectively in a democratic society?

Objectives

- ☐ Identify the structure and purpose of a Supreme Court decision.
- ☐ Explain the significance of key phrases or excerpts from landmark decisions.

How the Supreme Court Issues Rulings

The Supreme Court issues decisions through a multi-step process. After hearing oral arguments and reviewing written briefs from both sides (and sometimes amicus briefs), the justices meet in a private conference to discuss the case and vote. The Chief Justice, or the most senior justice in the majority, assigns someone in the majority to write the Court's opinion. Justices may also write concurring (agreeing for different reasons) or dissenting (disagreeing) opinions. Drafts circulate among the justices, and they may suggest edits or change their votes. Once finalized, the Court issues its decision publicly, with written opinions explaining the reasoning.

Background Information

Miranda v. Arizona was a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966. Ernesto Miranda was arrested for kidnapping and sexual assault but was not informed of his rights before being interrogated by police. His confession was used as evidence, and he was convicted. The Supreme Court ruled in 5-4 decision that Miranda's Fifth and Sixth Amendment rights had been violated, establishing that individuals must be informed of their rights before police questioning. The Court's ruling given the seriousness of the crime showed that constitutional rights must be protected for everyone, no matter the crime, to ensure fairness and justice under the law. This decision strengthened procedural protections for suspects and reinforced the role of the courts in upholding constitutional rights. However, some believed that the Court's ruling would "coddle" criminals and make law enforcement have a harder time doing its job.

Miranda v. Arizona (1966) Excerpt

Source: <https://billofrights institute.org/activities/handout-e-miranda-v-arizona-1966>

The **prosecution** may not use statements, whether **exculpatory** or **inculpatory**, stemming from **custodial interrogation** of the defendant unless it demonstrates the use of **procedural safeguards** effective to secure the privilege against **self-incrimination**. [...] He must be warned prior to any questioning that he has the right to remain silent, that anything he says can be used against him in a court of law, that he has the right to the presence of an attorney, and that if he cannot afford an attorney, one will be **appointed** for him prior to any questioning if he so desires

prosecution: The legal team trying to prove someone is guilty in a criminal case.

exculpatory: evidence or statements that show a person is not guilty of a crime

inculpatory: evidence or statements that suggest a person is guilty of a crime

custodial interrogation: questioning by police while a person is in custody (not free to leave)

procedural safeguards: legal protections to ensure fair treatment

self-incrimination: to provide evidence against oneself

appointed: officially assigned or provided (in this case, a lawyer for someone)

Background Information

Engel v. Vitale (1962) was a landmark Supreme Court case concerning the First Amendment and freedom of religion. The New York Board of Regents proposed that students in the state begin the day with a short, non-denominational prayer. Steven Engle, a parent of a student in New York, sued the state. In a 6-1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional for public schools to lead students in a state-sponsored prayer, even if it was voluntary and non-denominational. The Court held that this violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which states that the government can't make an official religion. The ruling reinforced the idea that the government could not demonstrate support for religion. However, some argued that the prayer was voluntary and non-denominational and disagreed that it violated the Establishment Clause.

Engel v. Vitale (1962) Excerpt

Source: <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1961/468>

It is neither **sacrilegious** nor anti-religious to say that each separate government in this country should stay out of the business of writing or **sanctioning** official prayers and leave that purely religious function to the people themselves and to those the people choose to look to for religious guidance. [...] When the power, prestige, and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect **coercive** pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain.

sacrilegious: disrespectful toward religion or religious beliefs

sanctioning: officially approving or allowing something

coercive: using pressure or force to make someone do something

