



MINNESOTA  
JUDICIAL  
BRANCH

# How Laws Affect Me

A Lesson Plan and Student Activity



# About the Law

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Far more than we realize, the work of the courts affects every aspect of our lives – from birth to death and in conflict resolution regarding business, criminal activity, and individual rights.

Even if we never enter a courtroom, the court system affects our lives. At the state level, the Judicial Branch is a separate, but co-equal branch of government with the Executive Branch (Governor) and the Legislative Branch (state senators and representatives). The courts interpret and apply the laws written by the Legislature and signed into law by the Governor. In this way, the three branches make up the balance of power that protects citizens from unchecked government authority and protects our rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

*This lesson was modified by the Court Information Office of the Minnesota Judicial Branch and used with the permission of the Learning, Law and Democracy Foundation.*

# What is a Law?

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What are laws and why do we need them?



- Laws are rules that have been established by a society or government, which apply to all people in that society.
- Laws can be written in the form of legislation, they can be recognized customs, or they can be policies recognized and enforced by judicial decisions.



- Laws promote and preserve order
- Laws help protect our general safety
- Laws help ensure our rights as citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution
- Laws protect citizens from unchecked government authority
- Laws help protect our freedoms as outlined in the Bill of Rights

# What is the role of the Minnesota Judicial Branch with regard to laws?



- The Minnesota Constitution establishes the judiciary.
- The judiciary is one of three branches of our government and is responsible for assuring justice in our society by resolving disputes peacefully.
- The Judicial Branch balances the other two branches of government and protect people's rights and liberties under the Constitution and the law.
- The Judicial Branch is responsible for interpreting and applying the laws and peacefully resolving conflicts between laws and people.
- Sometimes, people do not follow laws. At other times, laws may be unclear or conflict with other laws or our Constitution. When these things happen, the Judicial Branch gets involved when a case is filed.
- The courts interpret and apply the laws written by the Legislature and signed into law by the Governor.
- There is a district courthouse in each of Minnesota's 87 counties. More than 280 judges work in these courthouses and hear more 1.3 million cases a year.
- If someone is unhappy with the result of the district court case, they may appeal to the Minnesota Court of Appeals. If they are still unhappy, they may ask the Minnesota Supreme Court to hear their case.



# WHERE DO LAWS COME FROM?

## Constitutional Law

The United States Constitution is often referred to as the “supreme law of the land.” It provides for the organization of our government, granting certain powers to each branch. It also outlines the rights and responsibilities as citizens.

States also have Constitutions which only apply to cases arising out of that particular state. In Minnesota, the state Constitution also provides for our three branches of government. The state Constitution limits government powers, and outlines our rights and responsibilities. The state Constitution may grant more rights than the U.S. Constitution, but not fewer rights.

## Statutory Law

These laws typically come from the legislative branch of government at both the state and federal levels. At the state level, statutes are typically passed by the Legislature and signed into law by the governor. State laws only apply inside the state. At the federal level, Congress passes statutes and the President signs them into law.

## Common Law

These laws come from the Judicial Branch of government. They are created over time through judicial decisions. Judicial decisions are based on interpretations of statutes, the state and federal Constitutions, and previous rulings in similar cases. Many of our common laws trace their roots to English common law.

# Other Types of Laws

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## **Regulations**

These are typically rules of an agency of the executive branch, like the Department of Agriculture or the Department of Natural Resources, that are promulgated (enacted) by the agency through a grant of authority by the legislature to do so. They may set the standard for milk production or lay out the rules for hunting and fishing.



## **Ordinances**

These are typically local laws that apply only within a certain area, like a city, township, or county.

## Student Exercise

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Now that you know a little more about laws, use the following table decide if the listed activity has a legal impact and why.

When you've completed the table, please visit the website of the Office of the Revisor of Statutes at [www.revisor.mn.gov](http://www.revisor.mn.gov). There, you can use the activity's corresponding keywords in the "Search Law by Keyword" feature on the website (see the menu at the top of the page) to see if the activity has a legal impact.

# IS THERE A LEGAL IMPACT?

**Review each activity and decide if it has a legal impact and why. Don't forget to check the Minnesota Revisor's Office Statute page to check the (keyword) for a corresponding law!**



Wake up, turn on light  
(electricity)



Drive to school (driving)



Wash face (water)



Buy lunch in the cafeteria  
(restaurant)



Get dressed (clothing)



Buy a pair of jeans on credit  
(credit card)



Eat breakfast: cereal, bacon,  
eggs, orange juice (oats, pork,  
eggs, juice)



Pick up paycheck, deposit in  
bank (banking)



Read newspaper (newspaper)



Watch television (television)



Get in the car (vehicle)



Go to bed (sleep)