

Classifying Arguments Activity—Answer Key

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District (1969)

After reading the **facts, issue, constitutional amendments, and Supreme Court precedents**, read each of the arguments below. These arguments come from the briefs submitted by the parties in this case. If the argument supports the petitioner, Tinker, write **T** on the line after the argument. If the argument supports the respondent, the Des Moines Independent Community School District, write a **D** on the line after the argument. Work in your groups. When you have finished, determine which argument for each side is the most persuasive and be ready to give your reasons.

Arguments

1. The function of a school is to teach the curriculum. Students in academic classes could have been distracted from their lessons by the armbands. The school district has a legitimate interest in ensuring that instruction remains the focus of classrooms and, to that end, acted within appropriate authority to prohibit the armbands. **D**

2. Public schools are part of state government. The 14th Amendment protects people from state infringement of their First Amendment rights to free speech. **T**

3. Wearing the armbands was a form of speech. It was a silent, passive expression of opinion. **T**

4. Schools are meant to act as an environment for discourse and a forum for different ideas; allowing students the ability to express their ideals is an inevitable part of the educational process. **T**

5. Free speech is not an absolute right. The First Amendment does not say that anyone may say anything, at any place, at any time. Schools are not an appropriate forum for protest. **D**

6. The Vietnam War is a controversial issue. Wearing the armbands could be an explosive situation that disrupts learning. It is the school district's duty to prevent substantial and serious disruption to the learning environment. **D**

7. Students, whether in school or out of school, are “persons” under the Constitution. They possess fundamental rights that all levels of government must respect. **T**

8. Voicing controversial opinions in class or in school areas such as the hallways, lunchrooms, and gym classes may lead to bullying or violence directed against the protesting students. It is the responsibility of the schools to prevent such behavior and protect the safety of all students. **D**

9. The students' speech was not disruptive. The school district gave no evidence that the armbands were a distraction or disrupted the learning process. Just because the schools were afraid that there might be a disruption is not enough to infringe students' speech.

T

10. The students wearing the armbands did not infringe any other student's rights. Wearing the armbands did not intrude upon the work of the schools, teachers, or other students.

T

11. The school district did not ban all types of expressions, just the armbands. They were banned because of their inflammatory nature and potential for significant disruption. Students could still express opinions in other ways. For example, they could wear political emblems such as "Vote for Candidate X" buttons.

D

12. If the Supreme Court rules in favor of the students, it would be overstepping its bounds and interfering with state and local government powers that govern day-to-day school operations.

D

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District (1969)

Argued: November 12, 1968

Decided: February 24, 1969

Facts

In 1966, in Des Moines, Iowa, five students ages 13–16 decided to show opposition to the Vietnam War. The students planned to wear two-inch-wide black armbands to school for two weeks. The school district found out about the students' plan and preemptively announced a policy that any student who wore a black armband, or refused to take it off, would be suspended from school after the student's parents were called.

Mary Beth Tinker, an eighth grader, and John Tinker and Christopher Eckardt, both high school students, wore black armbands to their respective schools. All three teens were sent home for violating the announced ban and told not to return until they agreed not to wear the armbands. Their parents filed suit against the school district for violating the students' First Amendment right to free speech. The federal District Court dismissed the case and ruled that the school district's actions were reasonable to uphold school discipline. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit agreed with the District Court. The Tinkers asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review that decision, and the Court agreed to hear the case.

Issue

Does a prohibition against the wearing of armbands in public school as a form of symbolic speech violate the students' freedom of speech protections guaranteed by the First Amendment?

Constitutional Amendments and Supreme Court Precedent

- **First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution**

“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech”

- **14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution**

“No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law”

- ***West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette (1943)***

The West Virginia Board of Education required that all public schools include a salute of the American flag as a part of their activities. All teachers and pupils were required to salute the

flag. If they did not, they could be charged with “insubordination” and punished. Students who were Jehovah’s Witnesses and had a religious objection to saluting the flag sued the state board of education. The Supreme Court ruled that this mandatory salute was unconstitutional. The Court said that a flag salute was a form of speech, because it was a way to communicate ideas. The justices ruled that, in most cases, the government could not require people to express ideas that they disagree with.