Chapter 8 – Section 1

The Federal Court System
Equal Justice for All

- Courts settle civil disputes between private parties, a private party and the government, or the United States and a state or local government.

- In a civil case, a court settles a disagreement between two parties to recover damages or receive compensation.

- Each side presents its position.

- The court applies the law and decides in favor of one or the other.
Equal Justice for All (cont.)

- Courts also hold criminal trials for people accused of crimes.

- In a criminal case, a court determines whether a person accused of breaking the law is guilty or not guilty of a misdemeanor or a felony.

- Witnesses present evidence and a jury or a judge delivers a verdict of guilt or innocence.
Equal Justice for All (cont.)

- All accused people have the right to a public trial and a lawyer. 

- If they cannot afford a lawyer, the court will appoint and pay for one.

- Accused people are considered innocent until proven guilty.

- They may ask for a review of their case if they think the court has made a mistake.
Equal Justice for All (cont.)

- The goal of the legal system is equal justice under the law.
- This goal is difficult to achieve.
Why is the goal of equal justice under the law difficult to achieve?

Judges and juries are not free from personal prejudices or prejudices of their communities. Poor people do not have the money to spend on the best legal help.
The Federal Court System

- Article III established a national Supreme Court and gave Congress the power to establish lower federal courts.

- Over the years, Congress set up three levels in the federal court system—district courts at the bottom, appeals courts in the middle, and the Supreme Court at the top.

- Each state also has its own laws and court system.
United States Court System

U.S. Supreme Court

(Justices/No Jury)

Jurisdiction: Limited original jurisdiction and appellate jurisdiction

U.S. Courts of Appeals

(Judges/No Jury)

Jurisdiction: Appellate

U.S. District Courts

(Judges and Juries)

Jurisdiction: Original
The Federal Courts Pyramid

- U.S. Supreme Court
- U.S. Court of Appeals
- U.S. District Courts
The Federal Court System (cont.)

- **Jurisdiction** is a court’s authority to hear and decide cases. ↓
  - The Constitution gives federal courts jurisdiction over eight kinds of cases. ↓
  - If the law in question **applies to the U.S. Constitution**, a federal court hears the case. ↓
  - Federal courts hear cases involving violation of federal laws.
The Federal Court System (cont.)

- Any disagreement between state governments winds up in federal court.
- Federal courts hear lawsuits between citizens of different states.
- If the U.S. government sues someone or someone sues the U.S. government, a federal court hears the case.
- Federal courts hear disputes between a foreign government and either the U.S. government or an American private party.
The Federal Court System (cont.)

- Admiralty and maritime laws concern accidents or crimes on the high seas.
- Federal courts hear cases involving U.S. diplomats.
- For most of these eight areas, federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction—only they may hear and decide such cases.
The Federal Court System (cont.)

• In a few circumstances, the state and federal courts have concurrent jurisdiction—they share jurisdiction and either may hear the case.
In what eight areas do federal courts generally have exclusive jurisdiction?

Federal courts generally have exclusive jurisdiction in cases involving (1) the Constitution, (2) violations of federal laws, (3) controversies between states, (4) disputes between parties from different states, (5) suits by or against the federal government, (6) foreign governments and treaties, (7) admiralty and maritime laws, and (8) U.S. diplomats.
Checking for Understanding

Define  Match the terms on the right with their definitions on the left.

B  1. cases in which only federal courts have jurisdiction

A  2. a court’s authority to hear and decide cases

C  3. cases in which state and federal courts share jurisdiction

A. jurisdiction
   B. exclusive jurisdiction
   C. concurrent jurisdiction
List Name the three levels of federal courts.

The three levels of federal courts are the district courts, appeals courts, and the Supreme Court.
Explain Define what is meant by the words that are inscribed on the United States Supreme Court building: “Equal Justice Under Law.”

Answer It is the goal of the legal system to treat everyone the same.
Critical Thinking

**Question**

**Making Inferences** Why do you think Congress established federal appeals courts in 1891?

**Answer**

They were established to handle the volume of cases.
Which judicial circuit is Virginia in?
Directions: Answer the following question based on the bar graph.

Which two presidents have appointed the most Supreme Court justices?

A  Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy
B  Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford
C  Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan
D  Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower
The Phrase *Equal Justice Under Law* is carved on the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. Do you think that our federal judicial system accomplishes this goal?
Your Turn

1. Why do we need courts?

2. What is the goal of the U.S. court system?

3. What is jurisdiction?

4. If a case involves the Constitution, which court hears the case?