

Join the national conversation!



Focus Words

advocates | contrary | prohibit | release | reverse

Weekly Passage

Should people who commit serious crimes be sentenced to death? The death penalty is also known as capital punishment. It is allowed in some states, but not in others. In the year 2005, sixty people were put to death by lethal injection in the United States.

Advocates of the death penalty say that the threat of being punished by death stops people from committing violent crimes. They also contend that the death penalty helps murder victims' families find peace.

Those who take the contrary position argue that the death penalty does not lower rates of violent crime. These death penalty opponents also point out that in some cases, innocent people have been sentenced to death. After further investigation their sentences were reversed. For example, DNA testing showed that some people had not committed the crimes they were accused of committing, so they were released from

prison. Death penalty opponents worry that many innocent people have been put to death.

Should the death penalty be prohibited, or are there good reasons to keep it? When, if ever, do you think capital punishment is justified?

TEACHER

Discussion questions:

- ▶ How many people were put to death in the United States in 2005?
- ▶ Why do advocates of the death penalty claim that capital punishment is good for our society?
- ▶ Why do others think the death penalty should be prohibited?
- ▶ What caused some people's death sentences to be reversed?
- ▶ Do you advocate the use of the death penalty? Why or why not?

Unit 1.13 - Is the death penalty justified?

Focus Word Chart (teacher version)

Word	Meaning	Forms			Related Words
		Inflectional	Basic Word Classes	Prefixes/ Suffixes	
advocates	(n.) – supporters	advocate (sg.) advocate (v.)			vocal provoke revoke invoke vocabulary
contrary	(adj.) – opposite; opposing				contrast contradict contraband
prohibit	(v.) – to not allow; to forbid	prohibits prohibiting prohibited	prohibitive	prohibitory	inhibit
release	(v.) – to let go; to set free	release (n.) releases releasing released			
reverse	(v.) – to change back; to overturn	reverse (n.) reverses reversing reversed		reversal	converse inverse obverse versus versatile vertex

Unit 1.13 - Is the death penalty justified?

Problem of the Week

Death penalty **advocates** say the death penalty helps society by discouraging crime and eliminating the most dangerous criminals.

On the **contrary**, some say a society that executes its own citizens will be less moral and less fair overall. Many countries around the world, from Mexico to South Africa, have abolished the death penalty. The European Union (EU) **prohibits** the death penalty in all EU countries.



Between 1973 and 1995, American courts sentenced 5,760 people to death. Of these people, only 313 were executed. A study found that 68% of death sentences were **reversed** because of serious errors. In 9% of those reversals, the defendant was eventually acquitted and **released**.

Option 1: Of 5,760 people sentenced to death, only 313 were actually executed. What percent of the people sentenced to death were actually executed?

- A) about 5.4%
- B) about 10.3%
- C) about 16.8%
- D) about 20.1%

Option 2: If 68% of death penalty cases are reversed and in 9% of those reversals the defendant is eventually declared not guilty, what percent of people sentenced to death are eventually acquitted?

acquitted: free from criminal charge

Answer: $.68 \times .09 \approx .0612$, or about 6.12%

Math Discussion Question: The study cited above found that in 68% of the cases where a defendant was sentenced to death, the sentence was **reversed** by another court because serious mistakes had been made during the trial. Death penalty opponents say this shows that the system is deeply flawed. When mistakes are so common, they say, the only way to prevent innocent people from being executed is to **prohibit** capital punishment or the death penalty. On the **contrary**, say death penalty **advocates**, these statistics prove that each defendant gets a fair trial, with safeguards to prevent mistakes. They point out that in most reversals, the defendant is not acquitted and **released**, but rather, is still found guilty, and sentenced to prison instead of death. What do you think? Do these statistics on death sentence reversals support death penalty advocates, or death penalty opponents?

Is the death penalty justified?

Debating the Issue



I. Get ready...

GO!

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these.

A The death penalty is justified because the threat of being put to death stops people from committing violent crimes.

B The death penalty is justified because it helps murder victims' families find peace.

C The death penalty is not justified because juries sometimes make a mistake and convict an innocent person.

D The death penalty is not justified because it is never right to kill another human being, no matter what he or she did.

E _____

TEACHER

» Many students will likely have, or develop, strong feelings about this issue. To provide some perspective, you might point out that most industrialized nations do not have the death penalty. Ask them to consider the issue from multiple points of view: what impact does the death penalty have on criminals? on the families of victims? on our society as a whole?

» Some students may need help defining their position on the weekly topic. Here are some examples:

...because...

I disagree with part of that...

An example might help convince me. Can you give me an example?

What part of the passage makes you think that?

2. Get set...

Be ready to provide evidence to back up your position during your class discussion or debate. Jot down a few quick notes:

Unit 1.13 - Is the death penalty justified?

Science Activity



This activity is designed to help you practice thinking like a scientist and to use this week's focus words. Sometimes the data are based on real research, but they should never be considered true or factual.

Professor Seemy and Professor Kahn read a press **release** that said that Illinois just became the 16th state to stop using the death penalty. Professor Seemy supports the death penalty. Like many other death penalty **advocates**, he believes it prevents crime. “On the **contrary**,” says Professor Kahn, “the threat of harsh punishment usually doesn’t improve behavior.”

Do harsh punishments work? Professor Seemy decides to find out. In his classroom, students are **prohibited** from chewing gum. Professor Seemy introduces a harsh new punishment for breaking the gum rule: a month of detention.

“This should put an end to gum!” says Professor Seemy. “If it doesn’t, I’ll have to think about **reversing** my support for the death penalty.”

Question:

Will the threat of harsh punishment stop students from chewing gum?

Hypothesis:

When a harsh punishment is introduced, fewer students will chew gum.

Materials:

- ▶ Classroom
- ▶ Students

TEACHER

Read to class at end of activity: “After the experiment was over, Professor Seemy thanked his students for their help and released the gum chewers from serving the rest of their detentions.”

Real Research

-In this short piece two distinguished researchers critique some contemporary studies on the death penalty, and conclude that the death penalty is not a deterrent:

Donohue, J. and Wolfers, J. (2006, April). The death penalty: No evidence for deterrence. *Economists’ Voice*. Retrieved on October 13, 2009 from <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/DonohueDeter.pdf>

-In this article the director of Yale’s Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic summarizes the research on one particular form of harsh punishment, corporal punishment, and claims that it actually encourages bad behavior:

Kazdin, A. (2008, September 24). Spare the rod: Why you shouldn’t hit your kids. *Slate*. Retrieved on October 13, 2009 from

<http://www.slate.com/id/2200450/>

Procedure:

1. For three weeks, keep track of the gum rule violations.
2. Introduce harsh punishment.
3. For three more weeks, keep track of the gum rule violations.

Data:

First 3 Weeks - No Punishment	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Gum Violations	1	3	2

Second 3 Weeks - Harsh Punishment	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Gum Violations	0	2	3

Conclusion:

Is the hypothesis supported or not by the data?

Not supported

What evidence supports your conclusion?

Answer: Effect of harsh punishment seems to be temporary.

How would you make this a better experiment?

Encourage students to consider sample size, number of trials, control of variables, whether the procedure is a true measure of the question, whether the experiment can be repeated by other scientists, data collection and recording systems, and other potential explanations for the outcome. Students should understand that these simple experiments represent the beginning of an exploration, not the end. If time permits, have students suggest how the experiment could be strengthened, emphasizing the use of the target words in the discussion.



Writing Prompt

Is the death penalty justified?

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

Focus Words

advocates | contrary | prohibit | release | reverse

TEACHER

Ask students to write a response in which they argue a position on the weekly topic.

Put the writing prompt on the overhead projector (or the board) so that everyone can see it. Remind students to refer to the word lists in their Word Generation notebooks as needed.

A tool to help you think about your own writing!

Remember you can use focus words from any of the WG Units.

Check off what you accomplished:

Good Start

- ☐ Stated my own position
- ☐ Included 1 focus word

Pretty Good

- ☐ Stated my own position clearly
- ☐ Included 1-2 arguments
- ☐ Included 1-2 focus words

Exemplary

- ☐ Stated my own position clearly
- ☐ Included 1-2 arguments
- ☐ Included 1 counterargument
- ☐ Used 2-5 focus words

[illegible]