SS.7.C.1.7
Describe how the Constitution limits the powers of government through separation of powers and checks and balances.

This material is adapted from resources developed by the Center for Civic Education.

SS.7.C.1.7 Benchmark Clarification 2: Students will describe and distinguish between the concepts of separation of powers and checks and balances.

The writers of the U.S. Constitution, known as Framers, acted to protect Americans against governmental abuse of power. In order to set limits on power, the Framers divided the federal government into three branches. This separation of powers sets up three branches with their own distinct powers and responsibilities. Influenced by French thinker Baron de Montesquieu, the Framers believed that in order to protect the people’s liberty, each branch would have different tasks. This separation of powers, the Framers believed, would limit the ability of any one branch from gaining too much power.

This system was set up to limit the authority of the government. However, the Framers still feared that one branch of government could gain control of the other two. In order to ensure no one of the three branches would become too powerful, they established checks and balances. The principle of checks and balances allows each branch of government to limit the power of the other branches.

**checks and balances** - a principle of the federal government, according to the U.S. Constitution, that allows each branch of government to limit the power of the other branches

**separation of powers** - the structure of the federal government, according to the U.S. Constitution, that sets up three branches with their own distinct powers and responsibilities

Source: