When Laws Clash

Read how the Supremacy Clause guides federal and state authority.

8.C.4.2.F "Explain how the Supremacy Clause establishes the Constitution of the United States as the "supreme law of the Land" laying the foundation for the relationship between federal and state levels of authority."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline what the Supremacy Clause makes supreme, circle the sentence that limits Congress's lawmaking power, and write 1 beside the state rule that conflicts with the federal light law and 2 beside the state rule that can coexist with it.

A Light Across State Lines

1. Imagine a train crossing a state line at dusk. Congress passes a law requiring trains that travel between states to display a red safety light. One state later passes a law banning red lights on those trains. Which rule must a state judge follow? Article VI of the U.S. Constitution contains the Supremacy Clause. It calls the Constitution, federal laws made under it, and U.S. treaties the "supreme Law of the Land." This rule sets a national starting point when state and federal rules clash.

2. The Constitution stands above both federal and state laws. Congress may make laws only within powers the Constitution grants, such as regulating commerce among states. The federal light law concerns trains crossing state lines, so it falls within that power. A state judge would apply the federal requirement instead of the state ban because a train cannot obey both rules. The Supremacy Clause binds state judges even when a state constitution or state law says something different. Federal authority takes priority in this conflict because the federal law was made under the Constitution.

3. This does not mean federal officials decide every issue. States still make rules in areas where they have authority, such as setting parking limits on streets near train stations. A parking rule can operate alongside the federal light law because drivers can follow it without breaking the federal rule. If Congress passed a law beyond its constitutional powers, calling it federal would not make it supreme. The clause creates a relationship: valid federal rules win actual conflicts, while states continue to govern many matters without such conflicts.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why would a state judge apply the federal light requirement instead of the state ban?

2. Suppose the state's constitution also permits its ban on red train lights. How does the Supremacy Clause affect the judge's decision?

3. Why can the state's parking rule remain in effect alongside the federal light law?

4. Why would a law passed by Congress not always take priority over a state law?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Congress uses its power over interstate commerce to require labeled emergency exits on buses crossing state lines. A state bans those labels on the same buses and requires trash cans at bus stops. Write three or four sentences explaining what happens to each state rule and why, including how the Constitution limits federal authority.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 8 · 8.C.4.2.F

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline what the Supremacy Clause makes supreme, circle the sentence that limits Congress's lawmaking power, and write 1 beside the state rule that conflicts with the federal light law and 2 beside the state rule that can coexist with it. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why would a state judge apply the federal light requirement instead of the state ban?	**The federal law was made within Congress's constitutional power, and a train cannot obey both rules. The Supremacy Clause gives the federal requirement priority.**
2	Suppose the state's constitution also permits its ban on red train lights. How does the Supremacy Clause affect the judge's decision?	**The judge must still follow the valid federal requirement. The clause binds state judges even when a state constitution says otherwise.**
3	Why can the state's parking rule remain in effect alongside the federal light law?	**The rules do not conflict. Drivers can follow the parking rule without breaking the federal light law.**
4	Why would a law passed by Congress not always take priority over a state law?	**Congress must act within powers granted by the Constitution. A law beyond those powers does not become supreme merely because Congress passed it.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The state's ban on exit labels conflicts with the federal requirement because buses cannot obey both rules. The federal requirement takes priority under the Supremacy Clause because Congress made it using a power granted by the Constitution. The state can still require trash cans at bus stops because that rule does not conflict with the federal law.

Accept answers that distinguish a direct conflict from rules that can coexist. Students should explain that federal priority applies to laws made under the Constitution, not to every law Congress might pass.