

Articles of Confederation: Power and Limits

Use evidence to explain what the first national government could do, could not do, and what happened as a result.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 1 - Read the Evidence and Trace Results

Directions: Read the source cards. Then complete the table. For each card, decide whether the feature was mainly a strength or a weakness. Explain one likely result. Use careful words such as *could make it harder* or *could help*.

Source Card A - National action

Classroom paraphrase adapted from the Articles of Confederation, adopted 1777 and ratified March 1, 1781. Congress could conduct diplomacy with other countries and could declare war.

Source Card B - Money

Classroom paraphrase adapted from the Articles of Confederation. Congress could ask states for money, but it could not directly tax individuals. It depended on state contributions.

Source Card C - Voting

Classroom paraphrase adapted from the Articles of Confederation. Each state had one vote in Congress. Important decisions needed agreement from nine states.

Source Card D - Changing rules

Classroom paraphrase adapted from the Articles of Confederation. Changing the Articles required agreement from all 13 states.

Card	Claim: strength or weakness?	Evidence from the card	Likely outcome or consequence
A			
B			
C			
D			

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Part 2 - Explain the Big Picture

Synthesis: The Articles created a national government, but its powers were limited. Write one paragraph explaining:

1. one strength of the government,
2. one weakness, and
3. how that weakness could affect the nation.

Use evidence from at least **two** source cards. Name the card letters in your paragraph. Do not say that Congress had no powers.

Quick check: Complete the sentence with a qualified claim: Because changing the Articles required all 13 states to agree, changing the national rules could be _____.

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Answer Key and Teaching Notes

Materials and setup: Print and supply all student pages, keeping teacher-key pages separate. Students need pencils. Display or provide no additional sources; all needed evidence is on the student pages. Teach the task after students know that the Articles of Confederation were the first U.S. national framework. Students may work independently or with a partner for the reading, then write their own synthesis.

Teaching script: Say: “A weakness does not mean the national government had no power. Our question is: What could Congress do, what could it not do, and how might that matter? Read the exact feature first. Then make a claim and connect it to a careful result. A good result statement uses words like ‘could help’ or ‘could make it harder’ when the card does not describe one specific event.” Read Card A aloud only if needed. Say: “Now underline the words that show Congress had a power.” Do not tell students which table claims to select.

Observation method: While students work, listen for each student to (1) identify a feature accurately, (2) distinguish a national power from a limit, and (3) state a linked consequence without claiming certainty beyond the evidence. Mark a checklist: accurate evidence / reasonable strength-or-weakness claim / qualified consequence. Prompt only: “Which words on the card support that?”

Table answers:

1. A: Strength. Evidence: Congress could conduct diplomacy and declare war. Outcome: This could allow the states to act together in foreign relations or war rather than each state acting alone.
2. B: Weakness. Evidence: Congress could not directly tax individuals and depended on state contributions. Outcome: Congress could have difficulty collecting reliable money to pay national expenses or carry out plans.
3. C: Mainly weakness. Evidence: each state had one vote and important decisions needed nine states. Outcome: reaching agreement could be slow or difficult, especially when states disagreed. Accept that equal state voting could be described as a strength for state equality if the student explains it accurately.
4. D: Weakness. Evidence: all 13 states had to agree to change the Articles. Outcome: needed changes could be very difficult to make because one state could prevent an amendment.

2. Synthesis rubric and sample: Full response includes one accurate strength, one accurate weakness, evidence from two card letters, and a logical, qualified consequence. Sample: “The Articles of Confederation gave Congress some important powers. For example, Card A says Congress could conduct diplomacy and declare war, so the states could act together in some national matters. However, Card B shows that Congress could not directly tax individuals and had to depend on state contributions. This could make it harder for Congress to get reliable money for national needs. The government had powers, but some limits made it less effective.”

Quick check: Accept “difficult,” “slow,” “hard to accomplish,” or equivalent, with a reason such as “because every state had to agree.”

Source credit: National Archives, “Articles of Confederation” (1777), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation>. Student source cards are original classroom paraphrases based on this public historical document.