



Australian  
Human Rights  
Commission

*everyone, everywhere, everyday*



Human rights  
education resources  
for teachers



Photo: Shutterstock

# Understanding human rights

# Understanding human rights



Human rights  
education resources  
for teachers

**Subjects:** Civics and Citizenship, History, Geography, Legal Studies, International Studies

**Level:** Year 9 and up (14 years and up)

**Time needed:** 1–4 lessons

## Introduction

Human rights are basic to humanity. They apply to all people everywhere. An understanding of human rights is an important part of our individual status as human beings and of our collective status as members of the global community of humankind.

To understand how human rights affect us in our daily lives and to acknowledge our responsibilities in recognising the need to balance those rights with the rights of others, we require an understanding of what human rights are.

So what are human rights? Where did they come from? How do they impact on humanity? How do they affect me?

## Aim

**Understanding human rights** includes activities that are designed to help students clarify human rights concepts and provide an opportunity to explore the effect of human rights in their own lives.

They can be photocopied for class use and used individually or as an entire resource.

The resources provide students with:

- basic information about the concepts encompassed by the term ‘human rights’
- an historical context for the development of human rights laws and the establishment of the United Nations
- the processes involved in the drafting and publication of international documents and treaties that support human rights
- an overview of how human rights are incorporated at a national level in Australia
- an understanding of how human rights are relevant in every day life.

## Learning outcomes

In this topic students will:

- develop an understanding of what human rights are
- understand the origins of modern human rights
- appreciate the meaning and significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments
- appreciate the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- understand the forms human rights can take, legally and morally
- understand how human rights instruments are applied in Australian law and society
- analyse the relationship of human rights to daily life
- apply the concepts of human rights to their own lives.

## Activities/resources

### 1. What are human rights?

- Resource sheet: What are human rights?
- Key questions: Human rights
- Activity sheet: What are human rights?

### 2. The origins of modern human rights laws

- Resource sheet: The origins of modern human rights law
- Key questions: The origins of human rights
- Activity sheet: The origins of modern human rights law

### 3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments

- Resource sheet: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments
- Key questions: Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Activity sheet: Identifying human rights

### 4. Human rights in Australia

- Resource sheet: Human rights in Australia
- Key questions: Human rights in Australia
- Activity sheet: Australian perspectives
- Key questions: My community

## Teaching strategies

### 1. What are human rights?

- Resource sheet: What are human rights?
- Key questions: Human rights
- Activity sheet: What are human rights?

This stage introduces some of the important terminology used to discuss human rights. It also explains the concept of human rights in a way that will set the context for the ideas explored in the later stages of the unit.

The activity associated with this stage helps establish the level of knowledge students already have about human rights. Of course, it is likely that the term is not completely new to many of them; however, the depth and accuracy of each student's understanding may vary widely. It may be interesting to compare the difference in students' levels of understanding by looking at their responses to the activity both before and after the delivery of the unit. This activity may be most effectively completed individually, rather than as group work, so that students can see their own levels of knowledge and understanding in the first instance.

In addressing the key questions put forward at the end of this unit, students should be encouraged to identify the relevant issues.

**Some of the issues raised may include:**

- **Who has responsibility for acknowledging human rights?**
  - governments (get students to think about how this might work in a totalitarian state)
  - organisations, such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, etc.
  - communities, such as school communities, town communities, club communities, etc
  - individuals, such as you and I.
- **What are some terms that describe what human rights are concerned with?**
  - dignity, respect
  - responsibility
  - values systems
  - moral and legal rights
  - justice, tolerance, equality
  - interaction between people and their community.
- **Where do human rights come from?**
  - philosophies put forward by thinkers of the ancient world (e.g., Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, St. Augustine)
  - religious principles from a range of world religions
  - philosophical positions from thinkers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods (e.g., Locke, Bacon, Descartes, Voltaire)
  - political struggles, such as the French Revolution, the American Civil War, women's suffrage, collapse of apartheid system in South Africa.
- **Do you think human rights are important? Why?**
  - unique value of each person and their common humanity
  - the importance of recognising every individual's dignity

- the need for freedom of thought, movement, ideas
- the need to operate as part of a community
- the value of mutual respect between people
- a system of values by which individuals and communities can interact together constructively
- need for balance between rights, our duty to acknowledge and respecting rights of others.

## 2. The origins of modern human rights laws

- Resource sheet: The origins of modern human rights law
- Key questions: The origins of human rights
- Activity sheet: The origins of modern human rights laws

This stage places the concept of 'human rights' within a specific historical context. It looks at the role of World War II in focusing the will of nations to establish a universal system to define, protect and promote human rights. By thinking about the human rights abuses that occurred during World War II, students will more fully appreciate the importance of the decision taken by the international community to establish the United Nations.

This stage provides the opportunity for the class to discuss what they know about World War II, drawing on history studies they have already undertaken; films or television programs about World War II that students have seen; books they have read; or even stories of the War that they have heard from elderly friends or relatives.

Such a discussion, in conjunction with working through the information provided, will keep the focus on the serious human rights violations that occurred during World War II. The Activity sheet: Origins of modern human rights is suitable for use either in pairs or small groups.

The key questions are designed to clarify students' understanding of the main issues. In the case of the first question, it may be useful to draw a timeline with some significant dates on it to prompt students to think how human rights are related to historical events.

The question 'How and when was the United Nations formed?' gives students an opportunity to explore the extent of the human rights abuses perpetrated in a time of war and the international reaction to those abuses.

In answering the question think about **what aspects of some of the wars that took place before World War II had an influence on the development of human rights**. Students may think about issues such as:

- rebellion to combat monarchic oppression, e.g. the French Revolution
- rebellion to combat foreign power, e.g. the Boxer Rebellion
- development of statements about rights in the aftermath of war or revolution (e.g. the Magna Carta (UK), the Declaration of the Rights of Man (France)).

Issues to consider when responding to the question – **what issues of human rights abuses in WWII may have prompted the formation of the United Nations**, could include:

- discrimination against particular groups of people (e.g. Jews, people with disabilities, homosexuals, communists etc.)
- torture, cruel and inhuman treatment (e.g. starvation, subjection to 'experiments', rapes, beatings etc.)
- genocide (e.g. the systematic destruction of races of people)
- contravention of the Geneva Convention of 1929 regarding treatment of prisoners of war.

### 3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments

- Resource sheet: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights instruments
- Key questions: Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Activity sheet: Identifying human rights

This activity is another group learning exercise, focusing on the development of the documents and treaties that support human rights and inform national and international human rights law. It may be useful to look at the full transcript of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (available from the website of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>).

At this point, other resources may also be useful by way of comparison between human rights and other 'types' of rights. Through exposure to dramatised representations in film and television, some students may have a concept of 'rights' having to do with what happens when you have a 'run in with the law'. Phrases like 'Did you read him his rights?' or 'He took the fifth amendment' are a product of American media and, of course, refer specifically to the American legal system. Some clarification of these points may be necessary for students, depending on how and when you present this unit and in what cross-curricular context.

The **Activity sheet: Identifying human rights** may be completed individually, in pairs, in small groups or as a whole class. It provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of the difference between human rights and other issues that might have rights implications but are not 'human rights' as such. It is an important distinction that differentiates the inherent moral power of human rights and the legal and social implications of other sorts of rights, entitlements and assertions.

The key questions seek to ensure students have acquired an understanding of the instruments of human rights.

In discussing the key questions, points that students may find useful in clarifying the terms might include: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an internationally agreed statement that acknowledges the inherent dignity of each person

- the UDHR is a series of 'articles' that defines universal human rights
- the UDHR is recognised as a statement of powerful moral force and is often quoted in defence of those for whom human rights organisations may advocate (e.g., political prisoners)
- the acknowledgments made in the UDHR are useful for individuals to apply to their definitions of how to show respect for others' humanity
- treaties are agreements between different countries
- treaties are solemn agreements, entered into with an understanding that they are binding.

Note that further activities around the UDHR are available as part of the *Commemorating Human Rights Day* activities/resources. For more detailed background information on human rights laws, refer to *Human Rights Explained* fact sheets, and the *Let's talk about rights* Consultation Toolkit.

### 4: Human rights in Australia

- Resource sheet: Human rights in Australia
- Key questions: Human rights in Australia
- Activity sheet: Australian perspectives
- Key questions: My community

This activity looks at how human rights, which have been incorporated into international law, are translated in the Australian context.

It would be pertinent in working through the information in this unit to consider some of the human rights issues in Australia that have attracted international attention and drawn comment from the UN. To read about these issues visit the UN News (web link at <http://www.un.org/News/>) and do an advanced search for 'Australia'. Alternatively, you could check the latest Human Rights Council Periodic Report on Australia.

The activities give the opportunity to use teaching strategies such as: structured debate, role-plays and dramatisation of the issues. Teachers could provide a range of newspapers and magazines or ask students to bring some in; or you could direct them to watch particular current affairs programs.

Narrowing the focus from the international setting to the Australian community, the key questions encourage students to enquire into the human rights conditions in their own environment. While students explore various answers, it may be useful to mention race discrimination law, sex discrimination law, age discrimination law and disability discrimination law in Australia. Information regarding these laws is provided on the Commission's website at [www.humanrights.gov.au](http://www.humanrights.gov.au).

Identification of issues currently in focus will depend on the types of human rights issues being covered in the media at the time that you are presenting this topic. How the students feel about issues that are raised is an important aspect in allowing students to engage personally with the concepts that have been dealt with.

*Some issues that may evoke a response from students could include:*

- treatment of people in Australia's immigration detention centres
- treatment of Arab Australians and Muslim Australians
- reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians
- paid maternity leave, and other issues facing women in the workplace
- any cases of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, age or disability that may be current.

*The key questions posed could focus on scenarios such as students' responses to:*

- witnessing of physical abuse or verbal harassment of someone because of clothing they may wear in religious observance
- behaviour that is unreasonable and disrespectful to people because of some single characteristic (e.g. road rage against people from a particular racial groups)
- sexual harassment where someone is being 'hassled' for how they look or the clothes they wear.

It would be useful to clarify students' level of understanding by asking them to discuss in each case which human rights they think are being infringed.

*Some of the sorts of ideas students may like to think about in terms of promoting human rights could include:*

- actively attempting to show respect to all the people they deal with day to day
- with others where they see human rights abuses occurring
- joining organisations that promote human rights (such as Amnesty International, or any of a range of charitable humanitarian organisations)
- developing fundraising drives at the school to donate money to human rights organisations.

Note that the human rights consultations in 2009 have raised some interesting questions about human rights protection in Australia. For further details on the limitations of human rights protections in Australia, as well as the submissions made to the consultation process, refer to the *Let's talk about rights* resources.