



# COLONIAL COURTROOM CHAOS!

## *Guilty Until Proven Loyal? Mock Trial Activity*

**Student Question Prompt:** How does a jury protect ordinary people from unfair government power?

**Instructions:** Students will be chosen to play a part in a mock trial activity. Students will be handed a card from the [Guilty Until Proven Loyal? Mock Trial Activity Cards](#) document. There are 4 cases to choose from, and teachers can do all 4 or mix and match as needed.

More background on the specific court cases and roles are provided after the following general information.

The Accused Colonist, Defense Lawyer, and Crown's Lawyer (also known as the prosecutor or accuser) should be given 3–5 minutes to “prepare their case” and discuss how they will either defend or accuse the Colonist, all in their specific case roles. They can add to the background story as desired and bring some creative license into their story.

The case will be “tried” twice—the 1st time with only the Judge making the decision and then again with the Jury making the decision. Each role (Accused Colonist, Defense Lawyer, and Crown's Lawyer) should have up to 1 minute to speak. Then either the Judge or the Jury should have 1–2 minutes to issue their verdict. If the verdict is guilty, a punishment should be decided.

The Accused Colonist, Defense Lawyer, and Crown's Lawyer should consider how they will prepare their argument differently when speaking to only the Judge and when speaking to the Jurors.

**\*Note:** The teacher should remind the Judge (privately if possible) to always find the Accused Colonist guilty and to be harsh (even unreasonable) in the reason for that decision and the punishment. The teacher should remind the Jury that they need to consider the situation and the arguments provided and can still find the individual guilty if the Crown's Lawyer makes a strong enough case for guilt. If the jury finds the individual guilty, then a punishment should be recommended.

### Case #1: Tea Smuggling

**Charge:** A merchant is accused of smuggling tea into the colony without paying British taxes.

**Background Story:** Thomas Belling, a respected Boston merchant, has been bringing tea

into the colonies for years. After Parliament passed the Tea Act, the tax on tea skyrocketed, making legal tea far more expensive. Many colonists boycotted British tea in protest. Thomas secretly purchased Dutch tea from traders in the Caribbean and sold it at a cheaper price to his neighbors. The King's customs officers caught wind of his shipments and seized his cargo. Now Thomas stands accused of smuggling and refusing to pay taxes to the Crown. His neighbors see him as a hero for resisting unfair taxes, but British officials call him a criminal.

**Role-play Individuals:**

- Accused Colonist (Tea Smuggler)
- Crown's Lawyer (Prosecutor)
- Defense Lawyer
- Judge (King's Appointee)
- Jurors (Colonists from the Community)

## Case #2: Seditious Speech

**Charge:** A farmer is accused of criticizing the King in public, calling him "unfair" and "greedy."

**Background Story:** Samuel Green is a small farmer in Virginia. One day in the town square, after paying a high tax on his crops, he shouted to the crowd, "This King is unfair and greedy! He takes from hardworking colonists while giving us nothing in return!" Several loyalists reported him to the local magistrate, saying his words stirred rebellion against the Crown. Samuel insists he was only speaking his mind. Colonists argue that Englishmen have the right to free speech, but British officials see his remarks as dangerous sedition, which is considered a threat to royal authority.

**Role-play Individuals:**

- Accused Colonist (Seditious Speech)
- Crown's Lawyer (Prosecutor)
- Defense Lawyer
- Judge (King's Appointee)
- Jurors (Colonists from the Community)

## Case #3: Illegal Assembly

**Charge:** A tavern owner is accused of allowing a meeting in his tavern to discuss resistance to British laws, and the owner didn't have permission for the meeting.

**Background Story:** In Massachusetts, a group of shopkeepers and blacksmiths gathered secretly in the back room of a tavern. Their meeting was to discuss how to resist the new taxes and support merchants who refused to import British goods. Elijah Whitfield, the tavern owner, was overheard by a loyalist neighbor giving permission for this group to meet in his back room,

who then informed British officials. According to royal law, gatherings to discuss politics or government had to be approved by the governor. Now, the entire group is accused of meeting illegally, threatening peace and order, and Elijah has been arrested. He claims the colonists were only exercising their right to petition and assemble, while the King's men insist they were plotting rebellion.

**Role-play Individuals:**

- Accused Colonist (Illegal Assembly)
- Crown's Lawyer (Prosecutor)
- Defense Lawyer
- Judge (King's Appointee)
- Jurors (Colonists from the Community)

## Case #4: Unlawful Search

**Charge:** A ship captain is accused of refusing to let British customs officers search his ship.

**Background Story:** Captain Elias Turner, a sailor from Rhode Island, returned from a trading voyage with goods from the West Indies. British customs officers boarded his ship, demanding to search every crate for smuggled items. Elias, furious at their intrusion, shouted, "This is my ship, not the King's warehouse! You have no right!" He ordered the sailors to block the officers from opening the cargo. The customs officials reported his defiance as open disobedience to British authority. Colonists sympathize with Elias, believing searches without proper cause are an abuse of power. The British say he is guilty of obstructing the law.

**Role-Play Individuals:**

- Accused Colonist (Unlawful Search)
- Crown's Lawyer (Prosecutor)
- Defense Lawyer
- Judge (King's Appointee)
- Jurors (Colonists from the Community)