# Unit 1: Current Connection

# Directions: 1) Read and Annotate the Text. 2) Identify the Author’s Thesis in #1 of your summary

# 3) After reading the article answer the question the article is asking you to think about as your Essential Question in #2 of your summary.

# Should There Be Limits on Freedom of Speech?

- Ben Wizner is director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s Speech, Privacy & Technology Project.2013

The first time the Supreme Court sided with freedom of speech was in 1930. Have we gone too far in claiming rights not **enumerated** in the Constitution? Or have we simply been following in the spirit of the document? In episode two, It's a Free Country, Peter Sagal learns more about the right to free speech. Watch the clip below, read the statement from the [American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)](http://www.aclu.org/) , and then tell us what you think!

 *“What is freedom of expression?” asks author Salman Rushdie. “Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist.”*

Rushdie himself very nearly ceased to exist for exercising his “freedom to offend.” His 1998 novel The Satanic Verses included passages considered **blasphemous** by some Muslims, sparking violent protests around the world. In 1999, Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a “fatwa,” or religious edict, calling for Rushdie’s death. Rushdie was forced into hiding for nine years. He escaped harm, but one of his translators was stabbed to death and another was seriously injured in an attack. Dozens of people died during riots in protest against the book. Was Rushdie’s freedom of expression, protected in America by the First Amendment, worth so high a cost? It’s a question that arises all too frequently in a world full of people eager to **offend.** In Gainesville, Florida, an evangelical Christian pastor sets fire to a Koran. At funerals for U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, **religious extremists** picket with signs that say “God hates fags” and “Thank God for dead soldiers.” In Illinois, a **neo-Nazi** group announces its intention to march with swastikas through a neighborhood of elderly Holocaust survivors.

Such repellent speech would be illegal in many countries – and calls to impose limits on offensive speech here in the United States have come from all sides of the **political spectrum.** Some have **advocated** restrictions on speech that [**demeans** vulnerable **minority** groups](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jun/07/should-hate-speech-be-outlawed/?pagination=false). Others have advocated restrictions on speech by minority groups that calls for [violence against the **majority**](http://www.humanevents.com/2006/12/04/the-1st-amendment-is-not-a-suicide-pact-blocking-the-speech-that-calls-for-our-death/). But virtually every proposal to limit offensive speech shares a common attribute: its **proponents** are confident that if we give the government the authority to prohibit the speech they disfavor, the government will use that authority in the manner the proponents intended. They are almost certainly wrong. The truth is that when the government gets to decide which speech is **permissible**, its exercise of that authority is almost always driven by political considerations, not principled distinctions. And those who proposed the restrictions often come to regret it.

Would-be government censors have sought to prohibit speech [hostile to gays and lesbians](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/09-751.ZO.html) – and speech [supportive of gay rights](http://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights_hiv-aids/aclu-and-gsa-network-clear-way-gay-straight-alliance-club-madera-california). They have sought to interfere with speech [promoting religion](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/319/105) – and speech [attacking religion](http://www.aclumich.org/node/1549). They have barred anti-abortion protests [near abortion clinics](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/95-1065.ZO.html) – and barred doctors from providing patients with [information about legal abortion](http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2012/07/proposed_state-funded_womens_h.php). They have prosecuted citizens for [burning flags](http://www.aclu.org/free-speech/background-flag-desecration-amendment) – and for [displaying flags](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0418_0405_ZO.html).

Indeed, the only thing predictable about giving the government the power to censor speech is that it will use that power unpredictably. The founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, Roger Baldwin, put it well when he said, *“In order to defend the people you like, you have to defend the people you hate.”*

It would be dishonest to deny that permitting grossly offensive speech can exact a high cost. As Georgetown Law School Professor David Cole has written, “*free speech is not free.”* When, as in the case of Rushdie, that cost includes the death of innocents, it’s understandable that some people question the price. But the alternative – empowering the government to suppress speech because of its potential to provoke violent reactions – is far more dangerous. A society in which provocative speech could be punished would be a society without controversial politics, or art, or ideas. It would be a society in which citizens feared expressing dissident thoughts. In short, it would be a society wholly alien to America’s founders who, after all, had some pretty provocative ideas of their own.

**Summary:**

1. **Author’s Thesis**
2. **Your Answer to EQ**