METHODS OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION

Judges use their reasoning skills to decide what particular laws mean when they rule on cases. Different judges sometimes use different methods to interpret the Constitution, meaning that judges do not always agree on the meaning of the Constitution. There are seven widely accepted methods of interpretation that shed light on the meaning of the Constitution.

Method	Definition
Text	A judge looks to the meaning of the words in the Constitution, relying on common understandings of what the words meant at the time the provision was added.
History	A judge looks to the historical context of when a given provision was drafted and ratified to shed light on its meaning.
Tradition	A judge looks to any laws, customs, and practices established after the framing and ratification of a given provision.
Precedent	A judge applies rules established by precedents—taking rulings in old cases and applying them to new cases.
Structure	A judge infers structural rules (power relationships between institutions, for instance) from the relationships specifically outlined in the Constitution.
Prudence/ Consequences	A judge seeks to balance the costs and benefits of a particular ruling, including its consequences and any concerns about the limits of judicial power and competence.
Natural Law/ Morality	A judge draws on principles of moral reasoning—whether embodied in the natural law tradition or drawn from a judge's own independent, present-day moral judgments.