

Directions: The following notes have been written to be used as a lecture. You may want to make an outline of the lecture for students to copy and have them listen and take notes on the details.

What does government do?

All governments in the world do many things. They build roads, they regulate trade, they wage war and they provide varying amounts of social assistance to their populace. Basically, everything that government does can be categorized into three broad activities:

1. Government solves problems that people cannot solve alone. No single person can provide public transportation for everyone. No single person can build an adequate water distribution system. In order for people's wants and needs to be met, there needs to be an organizing presence that can coordinate, manage, and complete projects or activities that are too large for a single individual.
2. Government distributes resources. Although governments vary in this activity tremendously (some distribute little and others distribute much), all governments must determine ways to distribute its resources (usually money gained through taxes). This can be done in a variety of ways and can be fairly complicated. However, some examples of distributing resources would be providing health care (including the building of public hospitals), social security, and public safety (Why do urban areas have more police officers than rural? Why does California get more water than Nevada?)
3. Government balances competing interests. This is usually most evident in the court system, but it can be equally evident in the determining of tax rates (How much? Who?) and even environmental protection (Where? Why?). Government must constantly balance competing interests and make a decision based on these various lobbying groups.

Teacher Note: Be aware that none of these are mutually exclusive. That "providing educational opportunity" can easily fit into all three categories. The goal is only to provide a rough structure and understanding of what government is trying to do. When students become confused or are struggling in their categorizing encourage them to move onto another item and to choose the activity that best fits.