How do cases reach the Court? How do the justices proceed to select and decide them? ‘The Court at work (1)’ looks at how the Court operates, and the sorts of cases that get heard by the Court. There are no typical Supreme Court cases; there is a typical range of cases during a given term. One category consists of cases of constitutional interpretation, usually involving a claim that a federal or state statute or policy violates a provision of the Constitution. The second consists of cases requiring the justices to decide the meaning or application of a federal statute. A third category consists of suits between states.

The judicial article of the Constitution (Article III) does not mention a chief justice. However, the role is vital and the office has grown considerably over the years. That said, ‘The chief justice’ argues that the single most important power the chief justice exercises may still be to cast one of the nine votes that determine the outcome of a Supreme Court case. Looking from a 21st-century perspective, it is more accurate to think of the chief justice as a chief executive of the Supreme Court and the entire judicial branch. It is a job that it is difficult to prepare for. Prior service on the Court is useful, but uncommon. The chief justice has a symbolic purpose as well as a practical one.

The U.S. Supreme Court: A Very Short Introduction

The U.S. Supreme Court: A Very Short Introduction tells the Court's story by drawing on its history and its written and unwritten rules to show how it really works. The Supreme Court
today, housed in a majestic building on Capitol Hill, bears little resemblance to the ill-defined institution the Constitution's Framers launched. Their expectation was that it would be the weakest of the three branches of government. The Court put the independence the Framers gave it to use, and in many ways has continued to define itself. How do cases get to the Supreme Court? What special role does the chief justice play? How does the Court relate to the other branches?

1. Origins
Linda Greenhouse

What does the Supreme Court do? How does that differ to the original intentions of the Framers in 1787? ‘Origins’ looks at the beginnings of the Supreme Court to see if this helps with understanding how it operates today. From the beginning, the Court has filled in the blanks contained in Article III by defining its own power. Article III announced a national court with the authority to decide cases ‘arising under’ the country's Constitution. This is quite vague. The role of the Supreme Court has been a matter of dispute ever since. How has the modern Court come to be able to exercise its great power?