An important right for which the colonists fought was freedom of the press. One thing this means is that newspapers and books have the right to criticize public officials. In the colonial period, however, the governor of a colony had the power to censor the press. This meant that he could regulate the newspapers of the colony. Often governors punished and put into prison the people who published articles that criticized the government. The governors feared the power of the newspapers. Newspapers might unite the people and encourage them to rebel against the king’s government.

In 1733 there was only one newspaper in the entire colony of New York, and it was controlled by the governor. This meant that the people could read only what the governor wanted them to read. This bothered Peter Zenger, the son of an immigrant from Germany. Zenger and a group of his friends decided to publish a newspaper that would print the truth, no matter what the consequences to themselves might be. They called their paper the New York Weekly Journal.

As might be guessed, not long after Zenger printed criticisms of the governor, he was arrested and put in jail. His newspapers were burned by the order of the governor. Zenger did not let being in jail stop him. Even while he was there waiting for his trial, he smuggled articles out of jail to be published in his paper.

Most people thought that Zenger would be given a jail sentence because he had criticized the government. But Zenger obtained the help of the most able and most famous lawyer in the colonies—Andrew Hamilton of Philadelphia. Hamilton was eighty years old at the time. But, he agreed to work for Zenger when he learned that many other lawyers in the colonies had refused to help him. This was because of their fear of the governor.

Hamilton’s body was weak from old age, but his mind was keen and sharp. In defending Zenger, Hamilton argued that what Zenger had done was not a crime. Hamilton said that the articles Zenger wrote were true. No man should be punished for writing the truth. In a stirring speech to the jury, he said “...the question before...you, gentlemen of the jury, is not of small nor private concern, it is not the cause of a poor printer, nor of New York alone....No! It may...affect every freeman that lives under a British government....It is the cause of liberty....the liberty of speaking and writing the truth.”

What was the decision of the jury? Let Zenger himself tell it: “The jury withdrew and in a small time returned, and being asked....their verdict....answered....Not Guilty. Upon which there were three huzzas (cheers) in the hall which was crowded with people, and the next day I was discharged from my imprisonment.”

The Zenger case was important in the history of freedom for several reasons. For one thing, it showed how one determined freemen could stand up against the power of an unjust government and win. It encouraged other newspaper publishers to print the truth as they saw it. When people can read different points of view about an issue, they can make more-informed decisions.
Study this photograph of one of Peter Zenger’s newspapers. Do not allow the spelling of some of the words or the formation of some of the letters confuse you.

1. In the first few lines of the column Zenger explains why his paper wasn’t published the previous week. What was his excuse?

2. How does Zenger spell the following words in his column? Headline: Monday? _______  
   Jail? _______  City? _______

3. Zenger tells his readers there are certain things he was not allowed to do while in jail, including having pen, ink or paper. What else wasn’t he allowed to do?

4. Complete the following sentence: In the article, Zenger explains that he was able to gain the right to speak to his ________ and ________ through a ________ in his prison door.

5. According to the article, what does Zenger plan to do about future issues of his paper?