

Lesson 4

Freedom to Assemble and to Petition

Rationale

Students will learn that the First Amendment guarantees the right of people to peacefully assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. Students will learn that these rights cover a large spectrum of common political practices such as protesting, marching, demonstrating and lobbying, and apply this learning by developing a plan for organizing around a current issue of interest to them.

Objectives

- Students will learn about the freedoms of assembly and petition.
- Students will identify current issues of concern to them and learn how to organize around these issues.

Age Range

Grades 9–12

Time

2 or 3 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [*First Amendment: Freedom of Assembly and Right to Petition*](#)
- [*Youth Activism: Begin to Make Changes*](#) (one for each student)
- [*Activist Essay*](#) (one for each student)

Other Material:

- Smart board/board and markers, poster paper, color markers, masking tape, pens and pencils
- (Optional) Computer with Internet access and LCD projector or smart board

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Write the following quotes, each one on a separate sheet of poster paper and place around the classroom:

“Sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who have made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressed, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.” —Paulo Freire, Educator

“Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be an oppressor. But most of all, thou shalt not be a bystander.” —Yehuda Bauer, Jewish Historian

“What’s it going to take? That’s the question. We know we need some big changes, but how are we going to get them? I think it’s going to take the courage of people who refuse to stand silently by.” —Pete Seeger, Songwriter and Activist

“Action is an antidote to despair.” —Joan Baez, Singer and Songwriter

“Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.” —Audre Lorde, Poet, Writer and Activist

- Write the text from *First Amendment: Freedom of Assembly and Right to Petition* on the board or project for viewing.

Key Words

Activism
Assembly
Boycott
Coalition
Empowerment
Grievances
Injustice
Lobbying
Petition
Redress
Remedy
Slogan

Techniques and Skills

analyzing material, critical thinking, large-group discussion, presenting, small-group work

Procedures

1. Direct students' attention to the quotes posted around the room. Ask students what they think these quotes have in common. Answers will vary, but may include activism, action and empowerment.
2. Display the text from [First Amendment: Freedom of Assembly and Right to Petition](#) by either writing it on the board or projecting it on a screen, and highlight the phrase "...or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Remind students that the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and petition are collectively referred to as freedom of expression. Share that the focus of this lesson will be on freedom of assembly and petition.
3. Explain to students that when discussing the First Amendment, the rights of assembly and petition do not get as much consideration as the freedoms of religion, speech and the press, but they play vital roles for an active citizenry.
4. Ask students to brainstorm issues of social concern and injustice in the school or the local community. Write their issues on the board. After the class generates a list of about 8–12 issues, review the list as a class and ask students to vote or otherwise indicate which issues they are most interested in.
5. Ask students to join up with others interested in the same issue (e.g., by using a show of hands) and have them form groups (limit the number of groups and number of students per group to a manageable amount). Inform students that they aren't actually going to take action at this point, but rather plan for action. Explain that in their small group, they will go through the steps of assembling and petitioning for a redress of grievances and will present their work to the class.

NOTE: If students feel passionately about organizing around their topic, encourage them to join a local group or start their own non-curricular student group.

6. Distribute the [Youth Activism: Begin to Make Changes](#) handout to each student. While reviewing the steps, share that they have done step #1 together as a class. Further explain that they are to complete steps #2–5 in their small groups. In addition, on a separate piece of paper, instruct students to record a realistic goal for their proposed action and what they hope will result if they accomplish their goal. Go around the room and assist students as they go through the steps with their teammates.
7. After the groups have completed all steps on the planning sheet, instruct each group to present their plan, goal and the expected outcomes. After each presentation, focus the follow-up discussion on their chosen goal and outcomes (e.g., Are the goals and outcomes realistic? What other factors need to be considered in order for the goals to be accomplished?)
8. As a culminating activity, distribute the [Activism Essay](#) handout and instruct students to write a one-page essay reflecting on the importance of activism, using the quote from author/activist Alice Walker. Students can either share their essays with the entire class or in small groups.

Extension Activities

- Assign students to research historical and contemporary examples of social activism symbols, such as the peace symbol (both the drawing and the hand sign), clenched fist in the air (for Black Nationalist movement/Civil Rights), yellow ribbon (to support U.S. troops), wristbands (e.g., Lance Armstrong's LIVESTRONG yellow wristbands for cancer research), and ribbons (e.g., red for AIDS awareness and pink for breast cancer awareness). If students are working on a campaign, suggest that they devise a symbol to represent their cause.
- Encourage students to look into national campaigns that they may want to consider implementing in their community. Such campaigns include: Project Lemonade, Day of Silence, Mix It Up, No-Name Calling Week, Save Darfur, United Students Against Sweatshops, and Students Against Drunk Driving.
- Using a computer with an Internet connection, demonstrate to students how they can write to their Senators and Representatives about important issues by going to the following Web sites:
 - For U.S. Congress: www.congress.org/congressorg/home

- For U.S. House of Representatives: www.house.gov

Concluding Unit Activity

Now that students have a critical understanding of First Amendment rights, engage them in proposing an amendment of their own. Explain to students that they have been appointed to a new “Contemporary Constitutional Committee” that seeks to add a modern-day amendment to the Bill of Rights. Students should use the phrasing of the First Amendment as a model for drafting a new amendment. They can apply the amendment to the entire populace or select specific groups they believe need protection, such as children. Students should brainstorm protections they believe the group needs and draft their amendment based on those ideas. They can use grocery store paper bags as parchment to write their “Contemporary Constitutional Amendments,” and then hang them around the classroom.

First Amendment: Freedom of Assembly and Right to Petition

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Youth Activism: Begin to Make Changes

Name: _____ Date: _____

Instructions: Complete #1 in the “Begin to Make Changes” section below individually and in your small group, complete steps #2–5 together. Additionally, on a separate piece of paper, record a realistic goal for your group’s proposed action and what you hope will result if you accomplish this goal. After completing all the steps, prepare to present your group’s plan, goal and the expected outcomes.

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; **or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.**”*

Youth Activism

For decades, students have exercised their First Amendment rights in many different ways. In the 60’s African-American children in Birmingham, Alabama walked out of school to protest segregation. In the 60’s and 70’s youth popularized the slogan “serve the people” by going into their communities and organizing free breakfast programs and health clinics. Youth organized around issues such as AIDS in the 80’s. In the 90’s, organizations were formed to engage youth to work on various problems, including cleaning up trash in neighborhoods. Each successive generation adds their voice and actions to elicit change in their local communities and around the world.

First Amendment Right to Assemble and Petition

The First Amendment guarantees the right of people to peacefully assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. “Redress” means to “set right,” “remedy” or “balance.” The First Amendment right to assembly and petition is at the very core of political liberty. These rights cover a large spectrum of common political practices such as protesting, marching, demonstrating and lobbying.

The right to assembly and petition also covers freedom of association and the freedom of information. Freedom of association means that you have the right to join groups or organizations. The Freedom of Information Act enacted in 1966 was the first law that gave U.S. citizens the right to access the records of federal agencies.

Begin to Make Changes

You are going to follow in the footsteps of students who have exercised their First Amendment rights throughout history by developing a plan using the following steps as a guide.

1. Where do you see injustice in your own community?

Look around your school and local community and think about what problems and injustices you have seen, heard or experienced. What bothers you about what you see, hear and experience? After brainstorming a large list, choose which one concerns you the most.

2. Learn as much as you can about the issue.

Effective activists know their topic well and can address it from every angle. Who do you want to benefit from your work? What are the important publications or Web sites about your topic? Who in your community can come and speak with you or meet with you to teach you more? Come up with a list of “Most Important Points” about the issue you choose.

3. Who will not be happy that you’re taking on this issue?

There are usually at least two sides to an issue. You will want to know who feels differently from you. Why do they oppose your point of view? What are their arguments? Can someone from that group come and speak to you to help you understand their position? Even though people may feel differently from you, it is important to take the time to listen to their point of view. Make a list of common arguments that are different from what you believe, and think about how to respond to them.

4. Building Coalitions

You don't have to go it alone. Part of activism is building coalitions with those who will work beside you. Can you invite other young people and adults who believe in your cause? Are there national as well as local organizations that address your issue? Research these organizations on the Internet and write an email to them asking for their support. What do they have to offer you? What do you have to offer them?

5. Action

After all this preparation, you are ready to write an action plan with those who are a part of your coalition. What is your ultimate goal? What do you want to see change or happen? How will you get there? What strategies will you use? What steps can you take to bring attention to your topic? Will you enlist the aid of local television, radio and newspapers? Will you start a letter writing campaign? Who will you write to and why? Will you assemble with others and wave posters to protest for or against something?

6. Reflection

Every movement must reflect on its successes and struggles after each action is taken. What went well with your plan or action? Why? What didn't go well? Why? What did you learn about the issue? What did you learn about your group? What did you learn about yourself? If someone else were at the beginning stages of organizing on this issue, what would you share with them?

7. Do Differently or Begin Again

Taking one action is usually not enough. Because many activists find that their plans don't always go as smoothly as they hoped, they go back to the drawing board and find other ways to address the issues. Do you think there is still more to be done on the topic? Using what you learned in Step Six, start the process at Step Two again and think of new and more effective ways to challenge the injustice.

Sometimes, after working on one issue, you develop a passion for another topic that didn't originally spark an interest. Is there a local organization or group that is working towards justice on this topic? What do you think you can do to join them? Can you volunteer? Do you want to start again? Go back to Step Two to begin anew!

Activist Essay

Working for change is not always easy and does not always lead to the desired outcomes, but nevertheless brings many rewards. What have you gained from organizing around an issue with your classmates? Reflect on the quote below by author/activist Alice Walker, and write one page on the topic: Why is it important to act for social justice?

I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act. Every time we decide to believe the world can be better. Every time we decide to trust others to be as noble as we think they are. And that there might be years during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope. The alternative, however, not to act, and therefore to miss experiencing other people at their best, reaching toward their fullness, has never appealed to me.

— Alice Walker, author and activist