

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964: 7 Ways to Commemorate the Anniversary



President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act as Martin Luther King, Jr., and others look on.

As we commemorate the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, we have an opportunity to teach and learn more about the history of discrimination and racism in the United States, the struggle for civil rights, the Civil Rights Act, and the strides we have made as well as the work that remains to be done. The Anti-Defamation League presents these seven ideas for teaching about the Civil Rights Act in your classroom.

Grade Level: grades K-12

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Language, Speaking and Listening

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964. The Act prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities and made employment discrimination illegal based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Some of your students may not know that, despite the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that school segregation was unconstitutional, in the 1960s, in many communities in the United States, African American and white people were still segregated in schools, public transportation and restaurants. Discrimination prevented many African Americans from receiving equal consideration for employment and education. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 sought to legally prohibit and punish these injustices. And while many leaders at that time reminded the public that laws alone cannot shape "the hearts and minds" of people, the power of government through laws is critical to bring about change.

See also the following ADL Web resources:

- [Curriculum Connections "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today and "Looking Back...Reaching Forward: Exploring the Promise of Brown v. Board of Education in Contemporary Times"](#)
- [Brown v. Board of Education: 60 Years Later, the Legacy Unfulfilled](#) (Infographics and teaching materials)

- [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Racism](#)
- [Anti-Bias Curriculum Resources](#)
- [Anti-Bias Education Programs and Services](#)

Below are a variety of teaching strategies and resources to help you commemorate the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act with your students.

1 WATCH, LISTEN TO AND READ IMPORTANT SPEECHES (GRADES 6–12)

There were many great speeches leading up to and during the passage of the Civil Rights Act that focused on the importance of the bill and highlighted the work that still needed to be done. Below are some of the most famous speeches related to the Civil Rights Act. Students can also research and watch others (see [Voices for Equality: NY Times Speeches on Civil Rights](#)). Also included is President Obama's speech commemorating the 50th anniversary.

Speeches

- [John F. Kennedy Civil Rights Address](#)
- [Lyndon Johnson Remarks upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill \(July 2, 1964\)](#)
- [Martin Luther King Jr. I Have a Dream Speech](#) (audio and written) and [video](#)
- [President Obama Speaks About Civil Rights Act](#)

1. Have students read, listen to and/or watch the speeches.
2. Analyze each speech and respond to the following questions about each one either in a class discussion or as a writing assignment:
 - Who is the audience?
 - What is the purpose and primary message of the speech?
 - What aspect(s) of the Civil Rights Movement does the speech address?
 - What does the speaker encourage the audience to do and/or consider?
 - What sentences or passages stood out for you?
 - What type of language does the speaker use to convey his or her message?
 - What anecdotes and evidence does the speaker use?
 - What do you think the impact of the speech was?
 - What was particularly compelling or convincing in the speech and not so persuasive?
3. As an alternative, divide students into small groups and have each group review one speech to discuss amongst themselves and present back to the rest of the class.

4. As a follow-up activity, have students write and deliver their own speeches about a civil rights issue that is important to them, integrating strategies from the speeches they listened to and watched.

2 UNDERSTAND HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW (GRADES 9–12)

1. Help students explore and understand about how a bill becomes law. Explain to students that for federal legislation, as in the Civil Rights Act, the process goes through six basic steps, although there is much activity in between and included in each step. You may need to teach and/or review the legislative branch of government for them to understand the process in a more meaningful way.

The six steps include:

- a. Member (or members) of Congress introduces a bill.
 - b. Committees review and vote on the bill.
 - c. The Senate and House of Representatives debate and vote on the bill.
 - d. A conference committee is formed by members of the Senate and the House to work out the differences between the two bills (if there are differences).
 - e. The President signs or vetoes the bill.
 - f. The bill becomes a law and is assigned an official number.
2. Have students work individually or in small groups to learn more about how bills become laws at the state level and in their local towns, cities or counties. They can do internet research and, if possible, interview local politicians and legislators to find out more.
 3. After understanding how a bill becomes a law, have students create a visual representation of the process as if they were explaining it to a younger student. They can draw it using art supplies or use graphics and word.

RESOURCES

- [How a Bill Becomes a Law](#) (Fact Monster—for younger students)
- [How a Bill Becomes a Law](#) (Project Vote Smart—for older students)
- [The Battle to Pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) (Vanity Fair—for older students)

3 DEVELOP A SURVEY ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT AND CURRENT DAY ISSUES (GRADES 6–12)

1. Have students develop a survey to determine what their classmates know about the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights Act and what they think are the most important civil rights issues today.

2. As a class, brainstorm possible questions. Instruct students to decide which questions they are going to ask (10 is a good amount) and they should include all multiple choice questions or a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The steps in the process are as follows:
 - Step 1: Decide on the questions to ask and sample size.
 - Step 2: Ask the questions to the people you survey.
 - Step 3: Tally the results.
 - Step 4: Create data graphs.
 - Step 5: Present the results with data graphs.
3. Explain that they will need to decide on what questions to ask, their sample size and how they will collect the responses.
4. After they collect and analyze their results, have them write an essay that summarizes their methodology, findings, and their analysis of the results. Use [Create a Graph](#) to collect and analyze the results. [How to Create a Survey About an Important Issue](#) (Do Something) is a useful resource.
5. When students have completed their projects, have them present their findings to the whole class.

4 REWRITE THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT IN YOUR OWN WORDS (GRADES 9–12)

1. Have students do an in-depth study of ten of the eleven sections (called “Titles”) of the Voting Rights Act. Divide students into small groups of 3–4 students each.
2. Instruct each small group to take one of sections of the Act (except Title XI) listed below and read the original document in the [Transcript of the Civil Rights Act \(1964\)](#).
 - Title I: Voting Rights
 - Title II: Public Accommodations
 - Title III: Desegregation of Public Facilities
 - Title IV: Desegregation of Public Education
 - Title V: Civil Rights Commission
 - Title VI: Nondiscrimination in Federally Assisted Programs
 - Title VII: Equal Employment Opportunity
 - Title VIII: Registration and Voting Statistics
 - Title IX: Intervention and Removal of Cases
 - Title X: Community Relations Service
 - Title XI: Misc. (you can skip this Title)
3. Explain that in order to understand the meaning of each section, they will need to (1) circle unknown vocabulary words and look them up, (2) cross out extraneous information and language, (3) break their

Title into smaller sections, read those and discuss amongst themselves to understand the point of each section and (4) use other internet resources to make meaning of their Title. A useful resource is [Major Features of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) (The Dirksen Congressional Center) and they should look for others.

4. After dissecting each section, explain to students that they should be able to describe in their own words the main points of each of their sections of the Civil Rights Act. As a group, they will summarize the Title in writing and create a picture, illustration or collage that goes along with it. All of the sections will be put together in a book about the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

5 LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (GRADES K-12)

Words, language, music and images were important parts of the Civil Rights Movement. In order to learn more about civil rights and the need for the Civil Rights Act, use children's literature, songs and photographs to give students a window into the thoughts and feelings of people involved in the struggle. If your students don't know anything about the Civil Rights Movement, give them an overview using ADL's *Curriculum Connections* "[Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today](#)." As you introduce students to music, photos and children's literature, ask the following questions:

- How did the book (poem, song, photograph) make you feel and what did it make you think about?
- What is going on in the book (poem, song, photograph)?
- What was the message of the book (poem, song, photograph)?
- What are the people thinking and feeling?
- What does the book (poem, song, photograph) convey about civil rights?

You can also engage your students in an oral history project about the civil rights movement. First, invite a guest speaker to come into your classroom who was alive during that period (1950s and 1960s) to talk about their experiences. Students can develop interview questions, conduct the interview and write up a summary of the interview about the person's life and their experiences during that period in history. Afterwards, brainstorm ideas for other potential oral history interviewees including neighbors, grandparents, teachers, etc. Have each student identify one person they can interview about that time in history, write them up and create a booklet or blog oral history of the civil rights movement. Possible questions include:

- Back then, what kinds of segregation and racial discrimination did you observe, experience or hear about?
- What do you remember about the civil rights movement?
- Is there one experience or moment that stands out for you during that time period?
- Did you participate in the civil rights movement? In what way?
- What was your impression of the hopes and aspirations of the movement?
- What issues were most important to you during that time period?

- What were others around you saying, thinking and feeling?
- What do you think has changed as a result of the civil rights movement?

RESOURCES

Children's Book Resources

- [15 Excellent Civil Rights Books](#) (Children's Books Review)
- [A Guide to Teaching and Talking about the Civil Rights Movement with Books for Children and Teens](#) (Scholastic)
- [ADL Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Racism](#) (ADL)
- [Best Children's Books About the Civil Rights Movement](#) (Amazon)
- [Top Mighty Girl Books on Civil Rights History](#) (A Mighty Girl)

Music Resources

- [Top 10 Civil Rights Songs](#) (The Nation)
- [Songs Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement](#) (NPR Music)
- ["People Get Ready": Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s](#) (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History)

Photograph Resources

- [The U.S. Civil Rights Movement](#) (America.gov)
- [Civil Rights Battles in Black and White](#) (New York Times)
- [Integration of Central High School](#) (History)
- [Time of Change: Photos of the Civil Rights Movement](#) (CBSNews)
- [The Civil Rights Movement in Photos](#) (CNN)

Poetry Resources

- [Black History](#) (poets.org)
- [Poems of the Freedom Movement](#) (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)
- [Poems by Langston Hughes](#) (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)
- [African American Poets/Black Poets](#) (Poetry Soup)

6 RESEARCH OTHER IMPORTANT CIVIL RIGHTS LEGISLATION AND SUPREME COURT CASES (GRADES 6-12)

1. Have students learn about other important civil rights legislation.

In 1954, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case which desegregated America's schools. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is federal legislation that prohibits literacy tests and other discriminatory voting practices. The Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the

“Fair Housing Act,” prohibits discrimination on the sale, rental and financing of housing in the United States. The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1980, prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications and governmental activities.

2. Have students investigate these important decisions and legislation and paper with research and analysis. They should also research the extent to which these laws changed things and the ways in which discrimination in these areas still exists. (For example, the [Brown v. Board of Education](#) Supreme Court decision 60 years ago, which promised equal access to quality education, remains unfulfilled. School expulsions and suspensions are among the best predictors of who will drop out of high school and African American students are three more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers; the academic achievement gap persists.)
3. Explain to students their research on these areas of civil rights should include: (1) the intention and main components of the law, (2) what problem the law intended to solve, (3) data that supports the impact of the law and (4) data that reveals there is still more work to be done.

RESOURCES

[Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today](#) (ADL)

[Brown v. Board of Education: 60 Years Later, the Legacy Unfulfilled](#) (ADL)

[Civil Rights and Fair Housing Today](#) (The Leadership Conference)

[The Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act: Assessing the Progress Toward Achieving the Goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (National Council on Disability)

7 INVESTIGATE CURRENT CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUES (GRADES K–12)

1. Using the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement as a starting place, have students brainstorm what civil rights issues are important to them today. These could include: LGBT rights including marriage equality, affirmative action, religious freedom, economic inequality, school-to-prison pipeline, voting rights, women’s wage disparity, racial profiling or a local issue in their school or community.
2. After brainstorming, narrow down the ideas to a few that students will investigate further. Working in pairs or small groups on a common issue, have students research their chosen topic and develop a project to demonstrate what they learned about the issue under investigation. Some ideas include:
 - Develop a social media advocacy and education campaign
 - Write and perform a skit
 - Create an infographic to educate other students and the public
 - Get involved in service learning/social action projects
 - Write letters to newspapers
 - Create a survey and write a report
 - Create a PSA (public service announcement)

- Create art or a song that expresses something about the issue
- Write and deliver a speech about the issue (see #1)
- Identify advocacy efforts on the topic (see ADL's [Advocacy Center](#))

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading

Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Writing

Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Standard 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Standard 6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

Standard 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Language

Standard 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Standard 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Standard 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Speaking and Listening

Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Standard 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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