

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Sit-In Movement

By USHistory.org
2016

The Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) was a social movement in the United States during which activists attempted to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. This movement employed several different types of protests. As you read, identify the tactics that civil rights activists used to oppose racial segregation.

- [1] By 1960, the Civil Rights Movement had gained strong momentum. The nonviolent measures employed by Martin Luther King Jr.¹ helped African American activists win supporters across the country and throughout the world.

On February 1, 1960, the peaceful activists introduced a new tactic into their set of strategies. Four African American college students walked up to a whites-only lunch counter at the local Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, and asked for coffee. When service was refused, the students sat patiently. Despite threats and intimidation, the students sat quietly and waited to be served.



"5 - The U.S. Civil Rights Movement" by U.S. Embassy The Hague is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0.

The civil rights sit-in was born.

No one participated in a sit-in of this sort without seriousness of purpose. The instructions were simple: sit quietly and wait to be served. Often the participants would be jeered and threatened by local customers. Sometimes they would be pelted with food or ketchup. Protestors did not respond when provoked by angry onlookers. In the event of a physical attack, the student would curl up into a ball on the floor and take the punishment. Any violent reprisal would undermine the spirit of the sit-in. When the local police came to arrest the demonstrators, another line of students would take the vacated seats.

- [5] Sit-in organizers believed that if the violence were only on the part of the white community, the world would see the righteousness of their cause. Before the end of the school year, over 1500 black demonstrators were arrested. But their sacrifice brought results. Slowly, but surely, restaurants throughout the South began to abandon their policies of segregation.²

1. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) was an American Baptist minister and leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement.
2. **Segregation (noun):** the enforced separation of different racial groups

In April 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. sponsored a conference to discuss strategy. Students from the North and the South came together and formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Early leaders included Stokely Carmichael³ and Fannie Lou Hamer.⁴ The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) was a northern group of students led by James Farmer,⁵ which also endorsed direct action. These groups became the grassroots⁶ organizers of future sit-ins at lunch counters, wade-ins at segregated swimming pools, and pray-ins at white-only churches.

Bolstered⁷ by the success of direct action, CORE activists planned the first freedom ride in 1961. To challenge laws mandating segregated interstate transportation, busloads of integrated black and white students rode through the South. The first freedom riders left Washington, D.C., in May 1961 en route to New Orleans. Several participants were arrested in bus stations. When the buses reached Anniston, Alabama, an angry mob slashed the tires on one bus and set it aflame. The riders on the other bus were violently attacked, and the freedom riders had to complete their journey by plane.

New Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered federal marshals to protect future freedom rides. Bowing to political and public pressure, the Interstate Commerce Commission⁸ soon banned segregation on interstate travel. Progress was slow indeed, but the wall between the races was gradually being eroded.

The Sit-In Movement by USHistory.org is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

-
3. Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) was a prominent activist during the Civil Rights Movement, and was a leader of several groups in support of the rights of black people.
 4. Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977) was an activist for civil rights and African-American voting rights.
 5. James Leonard Farmer Jr. (1920-1999) was a civil rights activist and a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, working alongside Martin Luther King Jr.
 6. "Grassroots" are the most basic level of an activity or organization, relying on local support and volunteerism to effect change. Grassroots tactics include fundraising, registering voters, and merely encouraging political conversations among the public
 7. **Bolster (verb):** to support or strengthen
 8. The Interstate Commerce Commission regulates railroads and common carriers, such as interstate bus lines, to prevent rate discrimination.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Despite the violence civil rights activists endured, the sit-in movement influenced desegregation and inspired other protests.
 - B. Civil rights activists did not believe the sit-in movement would reverse segregation, but they wanted to draw nationwide attention to racial prejudice in the South.
 - C. Although Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights activists used nonviolent means of resistance, they were considered weak by white racists.
 - D. The sit-in movement was a brave attempt to end segregation in the South, but it was not as effective as the freedom riders.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "In the event of a physical attack, the student would curl up into a ball on the floor and take the punishment." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "But their sacrifice brought results. Slowly, but surely, restaurants throughout the South began to abandon their policies of segregation." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Sit-in organizers believed that if the violence were only on the part of the white community, the world would see the righteousness of their cause." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Bowing to political and public pressure, the Interstate Commerce Commission soon banned segregation on interstate travel." (Paragraph 8)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "reprisal" in paragraph 4? [RI.4]
 - A. attention
 - B. behavior
 - C. movement
 - D. retaliation

4. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 4 best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "In the event of a physical attack"
 - B. "jeered and threatened by local customers"
 - C. "provoke fights that never came."
 - D. "police came to arrest the demonstrators"

5. How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Consider other forms of protesting, such as marching and rioting. In your opinion, are sit-ins the most effective form of protest? Why or why not?
2. What forms of protest do you see occurring today? In your opinion, is it more common to see violent or peaceful protests?
3. In the context of the article, how do people create change? What was required of civil rights activists in order to achieve their goals? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. Why does promoting equal rights promote peace? Do you believe that the protestors of the sit-in movement were successful in promoting peace?