

**Guiding Question:** How did ordinary Americans, including many teenagers, play a role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s?

## Document-based Writing Activity

# Students Activists & Non-violence

## Document Analysis

*Why did the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) practice non-violent protest?*

To answer this question, read the excerpt from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) handout below, and then answer the Analysis Questions that follow it.

## Writing

Once you have completed the document analysis questions use your answers to write *three short paragraphs*:

- **Paragraph 1:** What is non-violent protest? What are its goals?
- **Paragraph 2:** What are some specific ways that one practices non-violence?
- **Paragraph 3:** What do you think might make non-violent protest difficult to practice?

Be sure to cite details from the documents to support your statements.

## Source: “Nonviolence”

*A group of student leaders in North Carolina founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. SNCC (pronounced “snick”) was the central organization of student activism efforts during the civil rights movement. Hundreds of SNCC field secretaries, such as Sam Block whom you meet in the game, organized civil rights activism in communities across the South. The organization adopted the philosophy of nonviolence, which required their activists to be prepared to endure violence from others—being shoved, hit, kicked, etc.—without retaliating. The document below is from a handout the SNCC gave to its volunteers in 1964.<sup>1</sup>*

NONVIOLENCE

**Time:** 60 minutes

## Goal/Intent

To deepen their understanding of the historical context of the game, as well as the people and organizations that Verna comes into contact with, students will read and analyze a handout about non-violent protest that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) distributed to student protesters in 1964. Students will consider the goals of non-violence, the guidelines that non-violent protestors followed, and the difficulty of putting non-violence into action.

## Instructions

### Activity Introduction (3 min)

Briefly review with students what the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was. Founded in 1960, it was the central organization of student activism efforts during the Civil Rights Movement. Remind students that Sam Block, who they met in the game, was a real person who led SNCC’s work in Greenwood. He was 20-years old when he led the voter registration project there.

You might take a moment both to reflect on SNCC’s name. What does the presence of the word “nonviolent” in the name suggest? What do students already know about non-violence, in the American civil rights movement, or in other moments in world history?

### Document Analysis (20 min)

The excerpt from the SNCC handout might be challenging for some students. You might introduce the document to the whole group by reading it aloud and answering

<sup>1</sup> Document’s author is identified as SNCC in the Wisconsin Historical Society’s [Freedom Summer Digital Collection](#). It’s distribution to volunteers in 1964 is noted on the page [“Nonviolent Resistance as Practiced in the Civil Rights Movement”](#) on the website of the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement.

Non-violence is a deliberate way of securing social change and of reaching others...

Practicing non-violence requires discipline in order to keep control in the face of provocation. If we retaliate with violence, we convert our struggle into a test of physical strength. But our whole purpose is to make society behave in a more responsible – which means a more moral – way. Thus we exert moral force in order to bring about a moral response in others, and thus a more moral society. If we act irresponsibly, we confirm the prejudices of those who want to deny our rights because they claim we are incapable of exercising them morally and responsibly. If we act responsibly, we do more than to repudiate that argument, and to persuade others that we do have the capacity to act justly and correctly. We also strengthen ourselves – we confirm by our actions, our belief in ourselves and our values, and our readiness to put our legitimate rights and privileges to proper use.

Non-violence is a way of speaking to others and to ourselves. We must continue to speak while we act, and never close the door to a dialogue with the rest of the community. Non-violence testifies to our readiness always to speak in a spirit of constructive conciliation and cooperation. There are six maxims of non-violent behavior.

1. Our attitude toward officials and others who may oppose us will be one of sympathetic understanding of the burdens and responsibilities they carry.
2. No matter what the circumstances or provocation, we will not respond with physical violence to acts directed against us.
3. We will not call names or make hostile remarks.
4. We will adhere as closely as we are able to the letter and spirit of truth in our spoken and written statements.
5. We will always try to speak to the best in all men, rather than seeking to exploit their weaknesses to what we may believe is our advantage.
6. We will always attempt to interpret as clearly as possible to anyone with whom we are in contact – and especially to those who may oppose us – the purpose and meaning of our actions.

*Language adapted for student readability.*

### word bank

provocation (n.) – an action or statement that someone makes on purpose in order to harm or harass another person	testifies to (v.) – demonstrates
moral (adj.) – just, ethical, and principles	constructive (adj.) – helpful or useful
repudiate (v.) – reject	conciliation (n.) – the settling of a conflict
capacity (n.) – ability	maxims (n.) – rules
	adhere (v.) – follow
	interpret (v.) – explain

### Analysis Questions

1. What is the philosophy of non-violence? According to the document, what are some specific ways that one can practice non-violence?
2. What impact did SNCC hope to have by using nonviolent strategies in their efforts?

any initial clarifying questions students may have.

Then have students work individually or in pairs to re-read the document and respond to the four analysis questions that follow it.

### Writing (20 min)

Have students use their responses to the four analysis questions to write three short paragraphs.

### Four Corners Discussion (optional) (10-20 min)

You might deepen the students' exploration of the philosophy of nonviolence with a "Four Corners" class discussion after they have completed their writing.

Set up the classroom by hanging four signs in different corners of the room: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." Then, read each of the statements below (or additional statements that either you or students write).

After you read each statement, students will stand up and move to the sign that best matches their level of agreement with it. Call on volunteers to explain why they chose to stand where they are, making sure that at least one representative from each corner is heard. Tell students that they may change their position if they are persuaded by any of the explanations offered by their classmates. Repeat the process for each statement.

### Four Corners Discussion Statements:

- Teenagers were too young to risk their lives and safety to challenge Jim Crow.
- Today, nonviolence is still an effective way to fight back against injustice, discrimination, and persecution.
- Even if it works, it is not fair to ask someone to sit there and accept people's insults, harassment, and even physical attacks.
- Young people have more power to change society for the better than older generations.

3. What do you think the authors mean when they say that by practicing non-violence they “exert moral force in order to bring about a moral response in others”?
4. What do you think makes non-violent protest difficult to enact and keep up?

## Teaching Suggestions

- Before transitioning into the writing phase, give students the opportunity to discuss the answers to their analysis questions either in small groups or as a whole class in order to strengthen and consolidate their ideas.
- If you want to reduce the volume of text students are reading and analyzing, break the document apart. Students can analyze Parts A, B, and C separately, or you can leave out one or more sections from the activity.
- Provide sentence starters like the following to students who need additional writing support:

*The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee practiced non-violent protest. Non-violent protest is \_\_\_\_\_. According to the SNCC, one goal of non-violent protest is \_\_\_\_\_. [Optional] Another goal of non-violent protest is \_\_\_\_\_.*

*Practicing non-violent protest requires that activists follow several rules. Perhaps the most important rule of non-violent protest is that protestors do not \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_. Some other rules for protesting non-violence include \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.*

*There are multiple reasons that practicing non-violent protest would be difficult. One reason is that \_\_\_\_\_. Another is that \_\_\_\_\_.*