

How to Use the Doing Democracy Toolkit

Doing Democracy: A Toolkit for Civic Action offers flexible, easy-to-use resources that will help your students practice the skills and develop the confidence that they need to become active, engaged, and informed citizens. The toolkit is divided into six sections that together encompass the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are essential elements of active citizenship in a democratic society.

- Gathering, Analyzing, and Assessing Information
- Researching and Communicating Positions
- Understanding and Respecting Diverse Points of View
- Influencing Policy by Engaging with Public Officials
- Participating in Elections
- Working Cooperatively to Take Action in the Community

The “tools” in each section are reproducible handouts. The first page of each handout introduces the student to the “doing democracy” activity—describing its purpose and explaining how to do it. The remaining page or pages serve as a guide for action to help students navigate through the activity. Some are note-taking templates. Others are step-by-step directions, sample writing formats, or planning documents.

The tools can be used in a variety of ways. One approach is to begin with “doing democracy” activities that students can carry out relatively easily and then move on to more demanding ones. The tools can also be used to support semester-long service learning projects. However you choose to use these tools, most activities can be completed by students working as individuals or in small groups, or by the class as a whole.

At the beginning and end of your social studies course, you may wish to measure your students’ levels of civic engagement. *Assessing Students’ Level of Civic Engagement* is a survey instrument that was developed by researchers working with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning (CIRCLE). You and your students can use their responses to see where they fit in CIRCLE’s typology of civic engagement, which ranges from *disengaged* to *civic specialist*, *electoral specialist*, and *dual activist*. See the suggestions on pages 67 and 68 for using the survey with your students to maximize their interest in “doing democracy” by the time they finish this course.

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Section One

Gathering, Analyzing, and Assessing Information

“Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

—James Madison (1751–1836)

To be effective at “doing democracy,” students need to be skilled at gathering information from a broad variety of sources, ranging from public meetings to the news media. The tools in this section are designed to help your students acquire and analyze information about public affairs.

Attending a Public Meeting

Attending a Court Trial

Analyzing News Media

Contacting and Interviewing Experts

Attending a Public Meeting

A public meeting is a scheduled gathering of a governing body. These include meetings of school boards, utility districts, city councils, boards of supervisors, state legislatures, and Congress.

Why attend a public meeting?

Representative democracy happens in your community in public meetings. By attending such meetings or watching them on your local access television station, you can find out what is going on in your community, who is in charge, and who does or does not represent your views and interests. By attending a public meeting in person, you may participate in decision making by providing information and feedback to public officials. You might even decide to run for office yourself or choose a career in public service.

How can you get the most out of attending a public meeting?

On the next page you will find a Public Meeting Observation Log to use when you attend a public meeting. It will help you analyze the meeting and make observations you might otherwise miss. Review the log sheet before you arrive at the meeting. Add any additional questions you have. Then follow the tips below.

- 1 Find out what, where, and when.** Public meetings must be advertised and announced in public locations. You can find out dates, times, and locations of public meetings in local newspapers and on the Internet.
- 2 Be respectful.** Show up on time. Turn off your cell phone. If you are with a friend, keep side conversations to a minimum and at a whisper. Dress appropriately.
- 3 Prepare for the meeting.** You are likely to get more out of the meeting if you do some advance work. A little preparation can give you greater insight into the group's issues and decisions.
 - Explore the Web site of the governing body whose meeting you plan to attend. What are some issues they face or past decisions they have made?
 - Look for newspaper items and Internet postings about your chosen governing body. What kinds of issues are they dealing with currently?
 - Get the agenda for the meeting you plan to attend in advance and familiarize yourself with it. You should find it posted on the governing body's Web site.

Public Meeting Observation Log

Use this sheet to help you analyze the meeting process, participants, and issues.

Name of governing body:

Meeting place:

Date and time:

Explain the function of this governing body. What do its members do? What are they in charge of?

On a separate sheet, sketch and label the meeting space and the meeting participants. Include names and titles when possible.

What does your drawing tell you about this governing body? Make at least three observations. (For example, who runs the meeting? How formal or informal are their meetings?)

1.

2.

3.

List four topics that were discussed at the meeting. (Attach the meeting agenda to your notes.)

1.

2.

3.

4.

Describe one issue that was discussed at the meeting. What perspectives were expressed on the issue? With which perspective did you most agree? Explain.

What did you learn by attending this meeting? What might motivate you attend more public meetings in the future?

Attending a Court Trial

A court trial is a formal proceeding held in a court of law during which two conflicting parties present evidence on an issue to a judge or jury. In a criminal trial, the government initiates the case. In a civil trial, a private party (an individual or corporation) files the lawsuit at issue. A judge or jury makes a decision that both parties must abide by.

Why attend a court trial?

At court trials, you can watch justice happen. Attending a court trial will help you understand the legal system more fully than by reading about it or watching a court drama on television. The majority of trials are open to the public, so you can walk into a local court at any time and see lawyers, judges, defendants, juries, bailiffs, and many others in action.

How do you find a court trial to attend?

Call your county circuit court clerk (find the number online or in the telephone book), and ask which days and times the court schedules jury trials. If you live in a big city, civil and criminal trials may be held in different locations, so choose the type of case that interests you most.

What do you do at a court trial?

Prepare to attend a court trial by reading the following guidelines. As you observe the trial, use the Court Trial Observation Log to help you analyze what you see.

- 1 Dress appropriately.** You don't need to dress up, but dress respectfully. By doing so, you show respect for the rule of law.
- 2 Travel lightly.** Leave bulky jackets, backpacks, and cell phones in the car. Bring a notebook, your Court Trial Observation Log, and a pen.
- 3 Enter and leave the courtroom quietly.** Since you are unlikely to stay in a courtroom for a full proceeding, use discretion when coming and going.
- 4 Be courteous.** Do not talk, whisper, giggle, pass notes, or make faces during a proceeding. Do not bring any food, drink, or chewing gum into the courtroom. Also, make sure your cell phone is turned off. Judges take this very seriously.
- 5 Stand at the right time.** The bailiff will bang the gavel to begin the court proceeding. He or she will then instruct you to stand while the judge enters and the court is called to order. Remain standing until the bailiff or the judge tells you to sit down. You are also required to stand when court is called into recess.
- 6 Be an observer.** Courtrooms are fascinating places—take it all in! Watch how the lawyers interact with one another and with their clients. Note what the judge says to the jurors. Listen carefully to the arguments on both sides. You might develop strong opinions and reactions about the subject, but remain an observer. During recess, do not approach anyone involved in the proceeding. Save your comments and observations until you leave the courthouse.
- 7 Follow the rules of the court.** If the judge thinks you are not following these rules for observing a trial, he or she could find you in “contempt of court.” Contempt of court is punishable by ejection from the court, a fine, or even imprisonment.

Court Trial Observation Log

Use this log to summarize what is at issue in the trial and to describe what occurred during the trial.

Date and time:

Name and location of courthouse:

Name of presiding judge or magistrate:

Name of trial (such as *State of Tennessee v. John Simms*):

On a separate sheet, sketch the layout of the courtroom and label the key participants (*judge, lawyers, clients, jurors, bailiff, court reporter*). Include names when possible.

Make three observations based on your sketch. What is interesting about how the courtroom is structured? For example, where does the jury sit in relation to the judge and defendant? Why might the court reporter sit where he or she does?

1.

2.

3.

Summarize the central issue of the trial, and describe the position of each side.

Describe three specific things that occurred during the trial, such as the opening statement by the prosecutor or the examination of a witness.

1.

2.

3.

What did you learn by attending this court trial?

Analyzing News Media

Analyzing news media means being a critical viewer and consumer of the news stories you see, hear, and read every day. It involves not only digesting the information in news stories, but also evaluating how different news outlets may shape their reporting to influence their audience.

Why analyze news media?

As citizens we have the responsibility to become informed on public issues. The news media help Americans meet that responsibility by providing a wide range of information sources. On a typical day, 57 percent of Americans watch television newscasts. Another 40 percent read a newspaper, and 23 percent use the Internet to read news accounts online. However, there is more to the news than what meets your eyes and ears. To become a fully informed citizen, you need to understand some of the characteristics of the news you consume.

How can you critically analyze the news media?

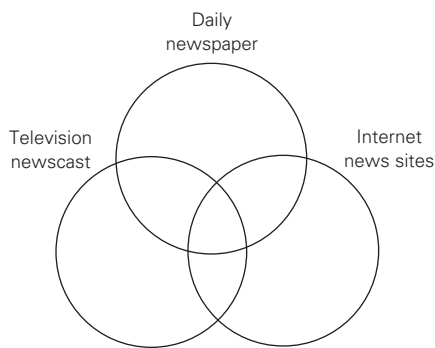
The next time you read a newspaper or news magazine, search for news online, or listen to a radio or television newscast, think about what goes into a news story. Consider how the following characteristics of news reporting shape the stories you read and hear.

- 1 People write the news.** As much as reporters and broadcasters may attempt to be objective, they cannot escape the biases and prejudices inherent in human nature.
- 2 Every story is told from someone's point of view.** What happened last Friday night depends on who you ask. News professionals try to gather as many sources as possible, but in the end, the stories they write depend on the sources they consult and, to some extent, on their own particular perspectives.
- 3 All reporting is biased in some way.** No matter how objective reporters try to be, what gets reported each day is biased in some way. *Bias* is a slant or perspective on the news that can surface in a variety of ways. For example, someone has to decide *which stories* are important to report and *where* those stories will be placed. Someone must decide *how much coverage* to give a story. Someone decides *how to present* the story by choosing which facts, quotations, images, graphics, statistics, or other information to include or exclude. These decisions shape what you see and hear and what you don't.
- 4 Some news features focus on opinions, not facts.** Opinion pages, political cartoons, editorials, letters to the editor, and debates among experts on television are not intended to be objective news reporting. They focus on how people react to and think about the news of the day.
- 5 Most news media outlets are businesses.** They make their money by selling advertising. How much advertisers influence news content is an ongoing debate. But advertising dollars may sometimes affect which stories get covered and in what manner. Who runs ads on the newscasts, on the Web sites, or in the newspapers and news magazines you rely on to stay informed?

Analyzing News Media Task Sheet

Practice analyzing your news media outlets by completing the tasks below.

Task 1 Compare news reporting in newspapers, television newscasts, and Internet news sources. Spend 20 minutes on the same day with three different news sources: a television newscast, a daily newspaper, and Internet news sites. Then draw and label a three-part Venn diagram like the one below on a separate sheet of paper. Use the diagram to record your observations about how each news source is distinct (in the outer circles) and how they are similar (in the overlapping areas).



After completing your observation, answer the following questions under your Venn diagram:

1. Which news source provided the most complete coverage of the day's news?
2. Which news source seemed least biased to you? Which seemed most biased?
3. Given a choice, which news source would you turn to most often in the future? Why?

Task 2 Compare news coverage around the world. Examine news coverage on the same day in newspapers from three countries. You will find many choices by searching for “foreign newspapers” online. Consider looking at newspapers you *know* will have differing perspectives. For example, you

might compare the reporting in three English language newspapers from the Middle East, such as the *Jerusalem Post*, the *Lebanon Daily Star*, and the *Tehran Times*. Or you might choose papers from three continents, such as the *China Post*, the *London Telegraph*, and the *South African Mail and Guardian*. After browsing the three newspapers, answer the following questions on another sheet of paper:

1. Which newspapers did you examine?
2. What did each paper consider to be the top story? Why do you think the top stories were different?
3. In what other ways were the news sources different? Consider tone, images, graphics, and other aspect of the newspapers.
4. What can Americans learn about perspective and bias by reading foreign newspapers?

Task 3 Keep a current events journal. Each week, find one article from a newspaper, news magazine, or Internet news site to analyze. The article should cover an important and possibly controversial political issue or event. Tape the article into a notebook, and answer the following questions:

1. What is the subject of the article?
2. What is the article's source? Who wrote it? How might the source affect the way the story was reported?
3. What is your overall impression of the coverage of this new story? Do unanswered questions remain? What is missing? Is there any detectable bias?
4. What is your opinion about the issue or event covered in the article?

Contacting and Interviewing Experts

Contacting and interviewing experts is an essential skill for gathering information. If you want to accomplish something in your community, you might contact experts in government offices, businesses, nonprofit agencies, or academic institutions for help or advice.

Why contact and interview experts?

From novice activists to veteran political operatives, people on the front lines of politics have insider perspectives. Getting written information from books or the Internet is important, but interviewing a live human being can often yield more current information. This process can also lay the groundwork for creating a list of allies who might help you with your cause. For example, if you are concerned about crime in your neighborhood, talking with a local police officer or city council member could help you get an up-to-date and accurate picture of what is going on with this issue.

How can you best contact and interview experts?

Finding the right expert to interview can be difficult. But with persistence, you can usually get the information you want, as well as answers to questions you did not even know to ask.

1 Find the right expert to contact. What problem are you trying to solve? More than likely, someone is already working on it and has expertise from which you could benefit. Brainstorm a list of people and organizations you think might be helpful. You may need to talk with administrative assistants and a number of other people to identify the expert you need to talk to.

- 2 Find the expert's contact information.** Look for contact information in the government pages of your local phone book or on the Internet.
- 3 Call or write to set up a meeting.** Contact your expert by mail, e-mail, or telephone to ask for a meeting. Introduce yourself and clearly state the problem you are trying to solve and the information you are seeking. Ask when it might be convenient to meet by telephone or in person.
- 4 Prepare for your meeting.** Decide what you want to get out of the meeting. Prepare your interview questions and comments in advance.
- 5 If possible, try to meet in person.** During your interview, be pleasant, to the point, and professional in dress and demeanor. Once you have your expert's attention, keep asking questions.
- 6 Thank the expert.** Send a card or an e-mail thanking the expert for his or her time and effort.

Contacting and Interviewing Experts

Use this task sheet to help you find and prepare for a successful meeting with an expert on an issue you care about.

1. Describe the issue or problem you trying to understand or solve.
2. List the kinds of information you need to help you do this.
3. Identify people or groups who might be able to provide this information or who might help you find an expert who can.
4. Once you have located your expert, list his or her contact information below.
Name:
Address:
Telephone number:
E-mail:

5. Contact your expert by telephone or in writing. Use the following template as a guide.

My name is _____.

I am a student at _____.

I am very interested in _____.

I am hoping you might find time to meet with me to discuss this important issue. Would it be possible to set up a telephone or face-to-face meeting in the near future? If so, what time would be most convenient for you?

Thank you for your time.

6. Prepare a list of questions to ask your expert during your interview. Be as specific and thorough as possible. The more you ask, the more you will learn.

Section Two

Researching and Communicating Positions

“A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both.”

—James Madison (1751–1836)

If we want students to be fully engaged in civic life, they must both be informed on public issues and be able to share their information with others. The tools in this section are designed to help your students conduct research on public issues and communicate their ideas on those issues effectively.

Researching a Public Issue

Writing a Letter to the Editor

Writing and Circulating a Petition

Writing a Press Release

Testifying Before a Public Body

Researching a Public Issue

Researching a public issue means gathering information on that topic from the Internet, books, newspapers, magazines, and knowledgeable people. Conducting research on a familiar issue is a good way to check that your assumptions are accurate. Research is essential to understanding unfamiliar issues and to ensuring that the positions you advocate are supported by facts.

Why do research?

Researching issues that concern you is often the first step toward taking action on them. If you want to make a difference in the world, knowing the scope of the problem you want to address and alternative solutions is an essential starting point. Research will also help you to verify that the information you want to act on is based on facts rather than unsupported opinion.

How can you conduct research most effectively?

Effective research requires curiosity about your issue and a plan for finding the information you seek.

- 1 Be specific about the issue you want to research.** Start by noting what you already know and then listing what you want to find out. Make a list of keywords to help you in your search.
- 2 Search a variety of sources.** Look for information from various sources, including people in your community, the Internet, books, newspapers, and periodicals.
- 3 Organize the information you find.** Find a system that works for you. You might keep notes in a notebook or on note cards. Or you might highlight or write margin notes in materials you print out or photocopy. If you are using a computer, consider setting up folders to organize the information you find on the Internet. Be sure to make a record of the sources you consult. You may want to refer back to them later to reread portions or verify information.
- 4 Analyze the information.** Look at the data you have gathered carefully. For each important fact, ask yourself: Is this information relevant, accurate, and current? Does it come from reliable, unbiased sources? Can I cross-check its validity against other sources? How does it relate to other data I found in my research?
- 5 Communicate your findings.** The best way to summarize and synthesize your research results is to share your findings with others. Decide first with whom you most want to communicate your research results. Then consider how best to reach that audience. Options include a written or oral report, a newspaper article, a speech, or an online presentation.

Evaluating Information and Sources

Use these questions to help you evaluate the information you find in your research.

Is the information relevant?

- How closely is the information related to the topic you are researching?
- Does the information help you prove or defend your position on the issue?
- Is the information complete, with nothing important left out?

Is the information accurate?

- Is the information fact or opinion?
- If it is fact, can you verify it elsewhere?
- If it is fact, does it contradict anything else you have read?
- If it is opinion, is it supported with facts?
- If it is opinion, is it an authoritative, or expert, opinion?

Is the source current?

- When was the source written or published?
- Are there more recent sources on the topic?
- Is the source appropriate for your research, or would a newer source be more relevant or accurate?

Is the source of the information reliable?

- Does the source have a reputation for accuracy?
- Does the source appear to include all relevant facts?
- Does the source include statements of opinion?
- Does the source use questionable claims as supporting evidence?
- Does the source make broad generalizations that are not supported by facts?
- Does the source acknowledge other points of view?
- Does the source provide a bibliography of sources?

Writing a Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor is a brief statement of your opinion on an issue about which you feel strongly. If the editor of a newspaper or magazine accepts it, your letter is published in the “Letters to the Editor” section for all to read.

Why write a letter to the editor?

The “Letters” section is often the most widely read feature in a publication. Politicians, business leaders, public officials, and members of the media read this section to gauge public opinion. Getting your letter to the editor published is a great way to get attention for your issue.

How can you write an effective letter to the editor?

Anyone can write a letter, but to get it published, you need to make it stand out. Use the tips below and the following sample letter and template to help you draft a letter that will appear in print.

- 1 Follow your passion.** Choose an issue about which you care deeply. Your name will be associated with this topic in print—make it something that you believe in.
- 2 Do your research.** If you want the editor and readers to take you seriously, you need to know your material. Understand your topic and support your statements with solid facts.
- 3 Choose the right publication.** Where you choose to send your letter will depend on your intended audience. Consider smaller publications, where your letter is more likely to be published, as well as larger publications.
- 4 Check the requirements of your chosen publication.** Every publication has different length and formatting requirements for letters to the editor. You can usually find the guidelines on the editorial page.
- 5 Start strong.** First impressions do matter. Make your first sentence catchy by being dramatic, playing on words, or using a comparison. Grab the editor’s attention so that later you can grab the attention of the reader.
- 6 Cut to the chase.** Less can be more. Most editors want short and concise letters (no more than 250 words).
- 7 Make it personal.** Provide a human focus. Explain how this issue affects you or how it will affect others. Offer personal and compelling examples.
- 8 Be tasteful.** Provide solutions instead of pointing fingers. Resist the temptation to criticize other people or organizations.
- 9 Fire up your readers.** Tell readers exactly what you want them to do. Do you want them to vote a certain way? Join a demonstration? Introduce a new policy? Be specific.
- 10 Make your letter look polished and professional.** Editors sift through many letters a day. Make sure yours looks its best—well written and typed.

Drafting a Letter to the Editor

Read this sample letter to the editor. Then use the outline below to help you draft your own letter to the editor.

July 30, 2009

Dear Editor of the Eaton Daily News,

Lake Augusta is terribly sick. She was recently diagnosed with “toxic contamination” after doctors found high levels of poisonous chemicals in her waters. This year alone, she has been forced to take seven “sick days” and close her beaches. Augusta is a treasured part of our community—we cannot let her die.

Lake Augusta’s contamination is in part a result of chemicals we use in our own gardens and farms. Fertilizer and pesticide residues are washed into the lake by runoff water when it rains. These chemicals wreak havoc on the lake’s wildlife. Recent studies show that the fish population has decreased by 40 percent since 2005 alone!

You and I can do something about this. We can STOP using toxic chemicals in our yards, gardens, and farm fields. We can instead use natural fertilizers and pesticides, if we need to use any at all. I pledge to start today. Will you join me? If we don’t change how we care for Lake Augusta, we may all be meeting soon at her funeral.

Sincerely,
Jane Livingstone,
Eaton community member

Start off strong.

Take a position.

Provide relevant background information.

Include facts that support your position.

Give the reader a specific action to take.

Keep it short and concise.

Include your name and relation to the issue.

Use the following outline to collect information for your own letter to the editor. Then write a rough draft, revise it, type or print it, and send it to your editor.

Issue:

Brief background:

My position:

Writing and Circulating a Petition

A petition is a request to someone in a position of power, such as a school principal, local city council, school board, Congress, or even the president. You might send a petition to a school principal to challenge a dress code, for example.

Why use a petition?

Petitions can bring about change. For example, when young people in Detroit, Michigan, found out that a community park was about to be developed as a commercial space, they collected thousands of signatures in protest. Soon afterward, city officials revoked the building permit and told the developers that the park was off-limits.

How can you write and circulate an effective petition?

An effective petition states the issue and desired action to be taken simply and concisely. Use the tips below and the model petition on the next page to help you write a petition that gets people's attention.

- 1 **Stick to one issue.** Don't get carried away. Decide on one issue per petition.
 - 2 **Identify your target.** Choose the recipient of the petition by figuring out who has the authority to enact the change you are trying to create.
 - 3 **Do your research.** Learn as much as you can about your issue. Educate yourself on the issue so you can convince others to sign your petition.
 - 4 **Begin with a strong title.** When people glance at your petition, what do they see? Be sure your title tells them what your petition is intended to accomplish. Begin with a strong verb such as *save*, *stop*, *preserve*, *block*, or *end*.
 - 5 **Provide a well-written summary.** The official who receives your petition will read this part carefully.
- Be clear about *what* you want and *why* it is necessary. Make sure the summary is typed clearly and without grammatical mistakes.
- 6 **Check local guidelines for circulating a petition.** Contact local authorities to find out the procedures you need to follow when circulating your petition. If your petition involves a recall, initiative, or referendum, determine out how many signatures you will need for your petition drive to succeed. Also find out what information you need from each signer for a signature to be considered valid.
 - 7 **Prepare your materials.** Make several copies of your original petition and secure them to a clipboard. Have lots of pens handy for signers to use.
 - 8 **Write a script.** Prepare and memorize a short script of what you want to say to people who might sign your petition.
 - 9 **Determine where to gather signatures.** Choose a place with high pedestrian traffic where people have a vested interest in your topic. If there are several signature gatherers, divide into pairs and stand in different locations.
 - 10 **Gather those signatures!** Approach people politely, using your prepared script. Do not let people goad you into a long argument. Your goal is to collect as many signatures as possible, not debate people with opposing views.
 - 11 **Submit your petition.** If possible, hand deliver your petition to the person or governing body that has the power to grant your request. Indicate that you expect a response.
 - 12 **Follow up.** Contact the person or governing body that received your petition after a set amount of time, and ask about the status of your petition.

A Model Petition and Talking Script

June 2007

Addressed to: President of Dexter Community College

Agreed upon by the following people:

Stop Dexter Community College’s Tuition Hike!

We, the undersigned, ask that Dexter Community College (DCC) abandon its plan to raise student tuition again this year. This is the fourth year in a row that DCC has increased its tuition rates. The purpose of a community college is to provide affordable education to the community, but continual hikes put the cost of education out of the reach of many of our residents. While we understand that there are many costs to running a community college, we believe that DCC should find ways to increase its funding without penalizing the students it was created to serve.

	Name	Signature	Phone Number	Address
1				
2				

Include the month and year.

Address the petition to a specific group or person.

Make your demand obvious in your title.

Explain what you want done.

Explain why it should be done.

Number each line.

Leave enough room for the address.

Model Talking Script

Hi, my name is Casey, and I’m collecting signatures to stop the tuition hikes at Dexter Community College. I promise not to take much of your time, but hope you can support my cause by signing this petition. Please read the petition and let me know if you have any questions.

Writing a Press Release

A press release is a statement prepared by a group for distribution to the media—newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet. It might announce an event, a fundraising effort, the results of a survey or study, or the founding of an organization.

Why use a press release?

If you want other people to help your cause, consider getting the media involved. If the local community sees reports of your efforts in the paper or on television, many people will learn what you are trying to accomplish and may want to assist. A well-designed press release can help you raise funds or other donations, recruit volunteers, or heighten awareness of an issue.

How can you write an effective press release?

An effective press release convinces the news media to report on your issue. Use the tips below and model on the next page to help you write an outstanding press release of your own.

- 1 Plan ahead.** You want the press release to reach the news media sources well in advance of your planned event whenever possible.
- 2 Craft a story that will attract journalists.** The journalists who review press releases are looking for stories that will engage readers or viewers. Releases that reveal new information, that focus on a compelling story, that reveal conflict, or that relate to other big news stories are more likely to get press attention.
- 3 Start strong.** Leading with an interesting title or “hook” at the beginning will lure people into reading more.
- 4 Answer the five W’s.** Provide complete information on your event by including *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*.
- 5 Include an action step.** Decide what you want your audience to do. Make a donation? Attend an event? Contact a public official? Include at least one clear action step in your release. For example, *Donations may be sent c/o Save Our Lake, 520 A Street, Point Blue, CA 95246.*
- 6 Make the press release look professional.** Proof-read your work and have someone else give you honest feedback. Type or print your release in an easy-to-read font on official letterhead stationary if possible.
- 7 Send your release to the right place.** Select the news sources that are most likely to carry your story. Local newspapers will probably be more interested in your story than a regional or national news outlet. If you identify a specific journalist to send it to, you will probably have more success in getting it printed.
- 8 Follow up with a telephone call.** This may prevent your press release from being ignored.
- 9 Prepare for press queries and interviews.** Expect to receive calls from reporters asking for more information. Be prepared with a “grabby” quote that they could use in their story. Also think about how you might accommodate reporters, camera operators, and news vans at your event.

A Model of a Press Release

Use letterhead if possible. Ask permission if you need to.

Lincoln High School
425 Tenth Avenue
Warm Springs, NM 83323

Use all capitals here.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Maria Mendez
(123) 456-7890
mmendez@localserver.com

October 12, 2008

Include essential contact information.

Lincoln High Students Set for "Change Tables at Lunch Day"

Use a catchy title.

Do you remember your high school cafeteria? There were no assigned seats, but everyone seemed to know where to sit. Seniors at one table, the drama kids at another. Freshmen? They were lucky even to have a table. Cliques reigned supreme, and people didn't dare sit in the wrong place.

Include the date.

Many students at Lincoln High School are tired of cliques, and they are taking action. On Friday, November 8, students at Lincoln are launching their first "Change Tables at Lunch Day." On that day, students will be encouraged to sit at a different lunch table and eat with someone new. In short, they will have the opportunity to break down the invisible barriers that divide them. They might even make a new friend.

Capture your audience's attention in your opening.

Maria Mendez, a Lincoln High School senior, suggested "Change Tables at Lunch Day." Maria says she got the idea from a friend in another state. The friend said a similar event at her school was a big success. Maria convinced the student council at Lincoln to adopt the event as part of this year's Spirit Week. If successful, more "Change Tables at Lunch Days" will be planned throughout the school year.

Your body paragraphs should cover the five W's: *what, who, when, where, and why.*

Lincoln High principal Kevin Moore says, "I am 100 percent behind this project. What better way can you think of for our students to break out of their tight groups and get to know each other than by sharing a meal together? I urge all of Lincoln High students, parents, and teachers to support 'Change Tables at Lunch Day.' My hope is that changing table days will become a new Lincoln High tradition."

Include a call to action.

###

Use three number symbols to signal the end of the press release.

Testifying Before a Public Body

Testifying means speaking before a public body such as a school board, neighborhood association, or city council regarding an issue about which you feel strongly.

Why testify?

Your testimony can influence the action of a public body. It will also become part of its permanent record and could be used in future research. Elected officials want to hear from you—speak up!

How can you effectively testify before a public body?

The more prepared you are, the more comfortable and persuasive your testimony will be. Use the tips below and the template on the next page to deliver dynamic, effective testimony.

- 1 **Research the issue.** Make it your goal to know more about your issue than the elected or appointed officials who will hear you speak. Gather relevant and reputable facts to use in your testimony.
- 2 **Know your audience.** Do a background check on the public body you will be speaking to. Look for answers to these questions: *What does this group do? Who are its chair and members? Which members have the most influence on its decisions? How large a budget does it have? How has it ruled on similar issues in the past?*
- 3 **Get the meeting specifics.** Call ahead to find out the location and time of the public body’s meeting. Ask if you need to sign up in advance or be placed on the meeting agenda in order to speak. Better yet, attend a meeting beforehand to become familiar with the process and room layout.
- 4 **Prepare talking points.** Identify the main points you want to make. Prioritize these from most important to least important since you may not have time to get to all of them. Include relevant facts. Jot down enough to jog your memory, but not so much that you will be tempted to read from your notes.

Sample talking points:
Speed bumps are needed on Lynn Rd. because:

 - Many cars exceed the speed limit
 - 15 accidents in one year
 - Street is a major school route
 - No sidewalks for pedestrians
- 5 **Anticipate questions.** Think about what questions committee members will likely ask, and prepare sample responses.
- 6 **Practice your testimony aloud.** Stand in front of a mirror or ask a friend or family member to listen to you. Begin your presentation by addressing the committee members by name: *Chair _____, members of the committee . . .* Maintain eye contact with each member. Project your voice. When you are done, say, *Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.*

Preparing to Testify Before a Public Body

Use this template and the tips on the previous page to help you prepare a dynamic testimony.

Name of public body:

Meeting date and time:

Location:

Name of chairperson:

Name of committee members:

Talking points:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Questions I might be asked and my responses:

1.

2.

3.

Section Three

Understanding and Respecting Diverse Points of View

“Civility costs nothing and buys everything.”

—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762)

As students begin to take an interest in public affairs, they will inevitably encounter controversial issues, sensational news reporting, and mudslinging election campaigns. With so much diatribe and acrimony in the public square, many students lack good models of civil dialogue. The tools in this section are designed to help your students learn how to listen to, understand, and respect diverse viewpoints.

Engaging in Civil Dialogue

Planning and Hosting a Community Forum or Debate

Creating and Conducting an Opinion Survey

Posting Opinions on the Internet

Engaging in Civil Dialogue

Civil dialogue is a serious discussion of public issues that emphasizes thoughtful reflection, finding common ground, respect for differing views, and a search for solutions.

Why engage in civil dialogue?

Sometimes individuals who want to make a difference feel the need to shout. Generally, however, listening to the views of others and reasoning together can actually advance a cause more effectively than loud words. Learning and practicing civil discourse will make you a better advocate.

When is dialogue more effective than debate?

The chart below outlines differences between dialogue and debate. Examine the differences to determine which is more likely to produce a solution to a community issue or global problem? Under what circumstances might dialogue be more useful than debate? When might debate be better? Which might you use to advance your cause?

People engaged in civil dialogue . . .	People engaged in a debate . . .
work together with opponents to reach common understandings.	argue against opponents to persuade others to agree with their positions.
listen carefully to opponents' views to understand how they see the issue.	listen carefully to opponents' views to find weak points in their arguments.
ask and answer questions to increase understanding of the issue.	answer only those questions that help support their positions.
are open to multiple answers or solutions.	focus on only one answer or solution.
respect different viewpoints.	look for ways to disprove differing viewpoints.
sometimes change their minds.	rarely change their minds.
believe many heads are better than one in finding solutions to difficult problems.	believe they know the "best" solution without listening to others.
try to learn from each other.	are sure that the other side is wrong.
try not to offend or hurt others.	may be more concerned about winning the argument than about others' feelings.
are willing to rethink and test their assumptions.	are more likely to defend than test their assumptions.
are open to the possibility that they might be wrong.	are determined to prove they are right.

Examining Contemporary Political Culture: Dialogue or Debate

Follow the steps outlined below to seek out examples of discourse and debate in today's political culture.

Step 1 Spend an hour examining three discussions of political issues or candidates. You will find such discussions on radio talk shows, television newscasts and talk shows, or in political blogs on the Internet. As you listen or read, watch for examples of dialogue and debate.

Step 2 On another sheet of paper, write a short description of the political discussions you examined. In each description, answer the following questions:

- Where did you hear or read the discussion?
- What was the topic of the discussion?
- Who participated in the discussion?
- Was the discussion an example of civil dialogue or a heated debate?
- What did you learn from the discussion?

Step 3 Based on your examination, discuss when you think dialogue is more useful in political discussions and when debate is more effective.

Planning and Hosting a Community Forum or Debate

A community forum or debate provides an opportunity for people to share their views with interested members of the community. A forum is an informal discussion of an issue or topic. Often it involves a panel of knowledgeable participants who speak for a set amount of time and then respond to questions from each other and the audience. A debate is a more formal discussion involving two or more candidates for office or experts with contrasting views on an issue. Forums and debates can be used to explore almost any subject from the next election to global warming.

Why hold a community forum or debate?

Community forums and debates are great ways to raise awareness about public issues. They can also be starting points for forming community partnerships, recruiting volunteers, and getting action on an issue.

What is involved in planning and hosting a community forum or debate?

Hosting a community forum or debate is a large undertaking. These tips and the planning checklist on the next page will help you proceed in an organized fashion.

- 1 Start early.** Planning a public event involves many tasks including identifying and inviting speakers, finding a location, choosing a date, and creating publicity. You will make better decisions if you start work on these tasks well in advance.
- 2 Identify and delegate tasks.** Hosting a public forum or debate is a job for many people. Make a list of all the large and small tasks that need to get done. Get others involved and put them in charge of one or several aspects of the event.
- 3 Select your forum or debate topic.** Choose a forum or debate topic that will appeal to a variety of people. Create a title that will catch the public's attention while communicating what your event is about.
- 4 Identify your target audience.** Who are the best people to attend your event? Students? Parents? Members of the general public? Once you have identified your target audience, keep it in mind as you plan speakers, time, location, and publicity campaign.
- 5 Invite speakers others will want to hear.** The more recognized and respected the speakers you enlist to participate in your forum or debate are, the better the public response is likely to be. Besides speakers, you will need someone to moderate the discussion or debate.
- 6 Find a sponsor.** Look to a local business, school, government agency, or nonprofit organization to endorse your forum or debate. Having such a group co-sponsor the event will give it more credibility and help boost attendance.
- 7 Choose a convenient time and place.** Evening hours work best for most people. Avoid holidays and check the community calendar for conflicts with other events. Look for locations that are centrally located and can accommodate the audience you anticipate. School auditoriums and public libraries are good candidates.
- 8 Develop a publicity campaign.** Get the word out as widely as possible. Send a press release to local newspapers, radio and television stations. Post flyers in public places.
- 9 Create an agenda.** Plan how you want your forum or debate to run. Decide what questions you want to ask the participants, how long each participant should speak, and how much time to allow for questions from the audience.
- 10 Take care of your speakers and audience.** Post signs and have helpers available to show your speakers and audience where to park, enter the building, and sit. Have water available for your speakers. Pay attention to the lighting and temperature in the meeting room.

Planning Checklist for a Community Forum or Debate

Use this form to plan an effective community forum or debate. If you are working with a team, you may want to assign tasks and due dates right on this planning sheet.

Forum or Debate Topic: _____

Planning Considerations

What is the target audience for the event? How many people do you expect to attend?

When is the best date and time to hold the event?

Where is the best place to hold the event? What alternative locations could also work?

From whom do you need to get permission to use the preferred meeting space?

Is there a facilities cost? If so, how will that be covered?

Who will secure any needed equipment (tables, microphones, podiums, and so on)?

How will the room be arranged? Who will set it beforehand?

Who will moderate the event?

Who will the speakers be? Who will invite them?

Who might act as a sponsor for the event? Who will arrange that?

How will you publicize the event? Who will be responsible for publicity?

How will the forum or debate be organized? Who will communicate the agenda to the moderator and speakers in advance so that they can prepare?

How will you encourage audience participation?

How will you thank your panelists? Who will do it?

Creating and Conducting an Opinion Survey

An opinion survey is a set of questions designed to gather information about what a group of people are thinking about a given topic or issue. The size of the group will depend on the purpose of the survey.

Why create and conduct an opinion survey?

You might conduct an opinion survey to get more information about an issue, to find out whether your concerns match those of others, or to publicize a cause. What the majority of people believe or care about matters in a democracy. The results of a well-designed survey can help place pressure on people in power to respond to requests they might otherwise ignore.

How can you write a well-designed survey?

Writing an opinion survey can be tricky. If not done well, the results may be easily dismissed as inaccurate or biased. The tips below and the task sheet on the next page will help you craft a well-designed survey.

- 1 Keep it short.** People are far more willing to respond to a short survey than a long one. Also, compiling the results will be easier. Make your questions short and keep them few in number.
- 2 Use simple, clear language.** Word questions in simple language that people can understand without explanations. Avoid terms, like *always* or *never*, that are likely to muddy the issue. Also avoid questions with one or more negative words. Example: *Do you agree or not agree that no candy bars should be sold in school vending machines?* Instead, word your questions in positive terms when possible. Example: *Do you agree that candy bars should be banned from school vending machines?*
- 3 Include only one topic per question.** Avoid a question like, *How concerned are you about acid rain and global warming?* It will not yield reliable results because people may have very different levels of concern about the two topics. Ask about only one topic at a time: *How concerned are you about acid rain?*

4 Choose the type of question that fits your needs.

Surveys use different types of questions to gauge public opinion. Each type has its own purposes.

- Multiple-choice questions force people to choose among clearly worded alternatives.

Example: Which of the following public issues matters most to you?

- A. combating global warming
- B. providing universal health care
- C. improving public schools
- D. expanding public transportation

- Open-ended questions invite people to express opinions that otherwise might not be heard.

Example: What do you care most about in choosing a college to attend?

- Scale questions work well for measuring attitudes on an issue and are easy to compile.

Example: On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the overall performance of the student council?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
(not satisfied) (somewhat satisfied) (very satisfied)

- Ordinal questions force people to rank their concerns in order of importance to them.

Example: Which of the following ten issues most concern you? Rank them from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most important to you and 1 the least.

- 5 Avoid loaded questions.** A loaded question suggests something that has not been proven is an accepted fact. Example: *How corrupt do you think the government is?* The way this question is worded implies that corruption is a proven fact.

- 6 Use the Internet.** You will find more tips for writing good survey questions online. Some sites will even help you to create and administer your survey online.

Designing Your Own Opinion Survey

Prepare

Brainstorm a list of problems or issues to focus on in your opinion survey.

Choose one problem or issue for your survey.

Define the primary purpose of your survey. Are you mainly looking for information or seeking to raise awareness on an issue?

What questions might you ask to suit your primary purpose? Write three to five questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Practice

Practice writing one of your questions in these four different ways. Use the example below as a guide.

Multiple-choice question

Which of the following is the most important issue facing the United States today?

- A. fighting crime
- B. improving education
- C. combating homelessness
- D. providing universal health care

Open-ended question

What do you think is the most important issue facing the United States today?

Scale question

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is combating homelessness to the future of the United States?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
(not very important) (important) (very important)

Ordinal ranking

Rank the following issues in order of their importance to you, with 4 being the most important and 1 being the least :

- ___ fighting crime
- ___ improving education
- ___ combating homelessness
- ___ providing universal health care

Posting Opinions on the Internet

The Internet allows anyone with opinions on an issue to post those views for others to read and respond to. There are several easy ways to get your views onto the World Wide Web for others to see. The easiest is to respond to a blog (short for Web log) that someone else has posted. You might also consider posting a video online, building a Web site around your issue, or starting your own blog.

Why post opinions on the Internet?

More and more people today are looking for information about public issues online. The Internet provides an inexpensive way for you to reach a potentially huge audience with your views.

How can you most effectively post your opinions on the Internet?

The Internet can seem overwhelming. These tips and the task sheet that follows will help you find your on-line community and communicate effectively with it.

Tips for Blogging

- 1 Begin on established blogs.** Learn the ins and outs of blogging by seeing how the pros do it. Several Web sites (for example, *townhall.com*, *uspoliticsguide.com*, and *politicsforumpoliticalworld.com*) will connect you with well-established blogs across the political spectrum.
- 2 Be informative.** Many bloggers post comments that are all opinion and no facts. That is a bit like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich but leaving the peanut butter out—there is not much substance. Knowing what you are talking about and including solid evidence to support your views will impress your fellow bloggers.

- 3 Be respectful.** Some bloggers feel free to “flame” people they don’t agree with. That may sound like a great way to let off steam or have a little fun, but it is unlikely to help you promote your cause. You are far more likely to attract readers to your postings if you don’t set out to offend them.
- 4 Use good judgment.** Recognize that anyone with Internet access will be able to read your postings. That includes friends, strangers, parents, teachers, and current and prospective employers. Use good judgment about what you reveal. Otherwise, it may come back to haunt you.

Tips for Posting Videos Online

- 1 Begin on established video-sharing Web sites.** Visit some of the larger video-sharing Web sites to see how other people use video to share their views on current issues. You will also find information on how to register and upload your own videos.
- 2 Entertain while you inform.** Political commentary in video form is more likely to be watched if it is also entertaining. The most-watched videos are creative, funny, or compelling in some way.
- 3 Take the time to do it right.** Don’t rush to get your work online. If people see that you have invested time and effort in your video, they will be more likely to care about the message you are trying to convey.

Investigating and Posting Political Opinions on the Internet

Hone your Internet skills with the tasks below.

Task 1 Visit at least three political blogs, two that match your political point of view and one that does not. Then record the following information on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Identify the blogs you visited. Characterize each one in terms of its political position.
2. Briefly describe the issues you read about.
3. List five observations about political blogs now that you have viewed these sites.

Task 2 Post a comment on a political blog following the guidelines on the previous page. Attach a printed copy of your posting and two surrounding posts from others to this sheet. Then record the following information on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Identify where you posted your comment. Why did you choose that blog?
2. Describe the responses, if any, to your post. Did you get the responses you expected?
3. Reflect on what you learned by completing this task.

Task 3 Watch three political videos that have been posted on the Internet. Then record the following information on a separate sheet of paper.

1. List the titles of videos you watched.
2. Reflect on what you learned by watching each of these videos.
3. Write a brief description of a video you would like to make and post on the Internet, using what you have learned.

Task 4 Make and post a video online. Your video should be

- related to a current political or social issue.
- clever, creative, funny, or compelling.
- high quality and purposeful.
- at least 30 seconds long.

Print pictures of your video and attach them to this sheet. Include the Web address where others can find your video.

Section Four

Influencing Policy by Engaging with Public Officials

“Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have . . . a right, an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean that of the character and conduct of their rulers.”

—John Adams (1735–1826)

For most students, the chasm between their own lives and the actions of their elected officials is huge. If democracy is to thrive, the bridge between the representative and the represented must be strong and flexible. The tools in this section are designed to help students communicate effectively with public officials.

Being a Government Watchdog
Communicating with a Public Official
Organizing a Letter-Writing Campaign
Lobbying on an Issue

Being a Government Watchdog

A government watchdog monitors elected officials to ensure that they are acting in the best interest of the people they are serving. You can be a government watchdog by keeping up with what your elected officials are doing—what meetings they attend, how they vote, and with whom they network.

Why be a government watchdog?

Most public officials work hard to represent you, your family, and your community. But unless citizens like you watch what public officials are doing and provide feedback on their decisions, they have no way of knowing how well they are meeting your needs.

How can you be an effective government watchdog?

Being a watchdog means paying attention to what goes on in government. Use these tips and the accompanying log sheet to get started on this lifelong activity.

- 1 Choose one public official or governing body to start with.** Begin with who or what interests you most. This might be a specific officeholder such as your mayor, a state legislator, or a member of Congress. Or you might choose a public body such as your school board or city council.
- 2 Find out who's who.** If you chose a specific officeholder, find out all you can about that person's position on issues and voting record. Many elected officials have personal Web sites with this information. If you chose a public body, identify who serves on it and their position on issues. Information about local officials can usually be found on city and county government Web sites.
- 3 Find out what your official or public body does.** If you chose an elected official, learn what that person does, the responsibilities of his or her office, and how that official spends most of his or her time. If you cannot find this information online, call your official's office directly. If you chose a public body, find out what its areas of responsibility are and who is most affected by its decisions.
- 4 Follow the issues.** Read about the issues that are likely to come before your elected official or public body. Choose the ones that most interest you to follow over the next few weeks. Watch the news media closely for stories on those issues.
- 5 Read what others have to say.** Chances are your elected official or public body has been the subject of news stories. Check the online archives of your local newspaper to learn what others are saying about that person or body.
- 6 Communicate.** If possible, attend a public meeting, hearing, or political event in person to see your elected official or public body in action. Ask questions or speak up on the issues you care most about. Or contact your elected official or public body in writing about issues of interest to you. Communicating with public officials is the best way to let them know that you are paying attention to what they are doing.

Government Watchdog Log Sheet for an Elected Official

Choose an elected official to watch, such as a mayor, governor, or city council member.
Use this log sheet to keep track of what you learn.

Name of elected official:

Position:

Primary responsibility:

Years in office:

Party affiliation (if applicable):

Membership in professional organizations or caucuses (if applicable):

Committee assignments (if applicable):

Recent votes, initiatives, and positions taken on issues:

Do you agree with these votes and positions? Why or why not?

What did you learn about this elected official that surprised you?

Would you consider this official to be effective? Why or why not?

Communicating with a Public Official

Communicating with a public official is easier than you might think. Most officials are eager to hear about their constituents’ needs and positions on issues. You can communicate your views by writing a letter, sending an e-mail, or telephoning the official’s office.

Why communicate with a public official?

Public officials rely on constituents like you to educate them about what is happening in their districts as well as to tell them how you want to be represented. Making a telephone call or writing an e-mail to an official takes little time yet carries tremendous power. Why? Because so few people take the time to do it. Most offices receive only a handful of letters, calls, or e-mails on any given issue. Direct communication is an effective way to get your voice heard.

How can you effectively communicate with a public official?

Determine whether you want to write, e-mail, or phone your official. E-mails are the quickest, letters tend to elicit the most personalized responses, and calling is the most direct if you can talk to your official. Once you have chosen your form of communication, use these tips and the model that follows to communicate your position most effectively.

- 1 **Research the issue.** Determine what issue you want to communicate about. Gather background information and collect relevant and reliable facts to use in your communication.
- 2 **Find out where your official stands.** If possible, determine what has already been done about this issue and what position this official has taken on it.
- 3 **Craft your message.** Whether calling or writing, take the time to shape a clear and compelling message.

Tips for writing an e-mail or letter	Tips for telephoning a public official
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start off strong and get right to the point. • Tell your representative exactly what you want him or her to do. • Include relevant examples or facts. • Stay focused—address only one issue per letter or e-mail. • Keep it short—no more than one page. • Be polite but firm. Avoid offending your official. • State that you expect a response, either in writing or by telephone. • Include your contact information so that the official knows you are a constituent in his or her district and can get back to you. • If possible, say something nice. It never hurts to share something positive that your official has done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before calling, prepare a talking script with the same elements you would include in a letter. Read it aloud to yourself or a friend a few times to become comfortable with it. There is no need to memorize or read from your prepared script. You want to sound natural. • When you call, ask to speak directly with your elected official. If you cannot get through, ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue you are calling about. If the aide is unavailable, leave your contact information and ask when you should expect a return call. • Be persistent but polite. Call again and again until you speak with the right person. • Request a written response to your call. • Thank your contact.

Sample E-mail to a Public Official About an Issue

To: schwarzbetty@frederick.gov
cc: daveyjoe@jmail.com
Subject: Ordinance 77

Councilwoman Betty Schwarz
Frederick City Council
Frederick, TN 37224
schwarzbetty@frederick.gov

July 7, 2009

Dear Honorable Councilwoman,

I urge you to oppose Ordinance 77, an ordinance that would cut funding for the Frederick Public Library. If this ordinance passes, the library will have to eliminate its evening hours. This will place a particular burden on students who use the library in the evenings to complete their coursework.

Our library has been a cornerstone of learning in our community for 50 years. Nevertheless, library funding has been reduced three times in the past five years. These reductions have resulted in staff layoffs as well as cuts in library programming. Further program cuts will be devastating.

Although you supported library budget cuts in the past, I hope you will consider alternative solutions to this year's funding crisis. One idea is to initiate a volunteer program to help staff the library at peak hours. I have several ideas on how this could work and would welcome an opportunity to share them with you.

I applaud your support over the past year of projects aimed at improving local parks. Now I urge you to continue to improve our community by voting no on Ordinance 77.

I look forward to your response to this issue. Feel free to contact me via e-mail, letter, or telephone.

Your constituent,

Nicole Johnson
7369 Devonshire, Frederick, TN 37224
(615) 499-8321
johnson_nicole@jmail.com

Include the official's title and contact information.

State your position right away.

Mention any ordinance or bill by number.

Include facts.

If applicable, refer to the person's past legislative history.

Say something nice.

State that you expect a response.

Include your contact information.

Organizing a Letter-Writing Campaign

A letter-writing campaign encourages people to send individual letters to a person in a position of power urging action on an issue. Organizing a letter-writing campaign is easy and inexpensive and increases awareness of your cause among the public.

Why organize a letter-writing campaign?

When a public official is flooded with letters about an issue, he or she takes notice. Officials often keep track of how many letters they receive on an issue. The more they get, the more seriously they take it.

How do you organize an effective letter-writing campaign?

The goal of a letter-writing campaign is to send as many letters as possible about an issue to the right person. These tips and the planning guide that follows will help you meet that goal.

- 1 Know your issue.** Not only will you need to write a sample letter, you will also need to convince others to support your campaign. Gather relevant background information and reliable facts.
- 2 Choose the right recipient.** Who is in a position of power on this particular issue? What can he or she do to help your cause? Once you identify the right person, find out whether he or she has supported your cause in the past. This information will be useful to you when you write a brief biography of the recipient.
- 3 Create support materials.** Make the job easy for fellow letter writers by creating the following: a *sample letter*, a *fact sheet* about the issue, and a *brief biography* of the recipient. The bio should tell letter writers who the recipient is, what his or her position on the issue is, and why that person's support is important. Make copies of all three to give out to possible letter writers.
- 4 Prepare to recruit.** Create a banner or sign that will attract people to your recruiting station. Gather pens and paper for your letter writers to use.
- 5 Set up a recruiting station in a strategic location.** Find a high-traffic area in your school, mall, or park and set up your recruiting station. You may need to ask for permission to use the space. Hang your banner or sign where it will attract attention. Set out your support materials and writing supplies on one or more tables.
- 6 Recruit letter writers.** On the day of your campaign, approach people politely and unobtrusively. Explain the purpose of your letter-writing campaign and answer any questions. Tell people the process will be quick since you have a sample letter for them to follow. Do not waste your time debating with people. Your goal is to send as many letters as possible.
- 7 If possible, stamp and send the letters yourself.** This will ensure that the recipient gets them in a timely manner. If purchasing stamps is too expensive, try to get a sponsor to supply the stamps. Or bundle all of your letters in one large envelope to send.
- 8 Follow up with the recipient.** After a few days, call to check whether the recipient received your letters. Offer to answer any questions, and inquire about how he or she plans to respond.

Planning Guide for a Letter-Writing Campaign

Use this guide to help you organize your own letter-writing campaign.

Identify the issue you want to address.

State your position on the issue.

List three to five facts that support your position.

Identify the recipient of the letters.

Write down the exact address of the recipient.

To-Do List

Task	Assigned Person	Done
<p>Two to Six Weeks in Advance</p> <p>Write a sample letter. Write a fact sheet. Write a brief bio of the recipient. Choose location of recruiting station. Secure permission if necessary. Set time and date. Create banner or poster. Find volunteers and educate them on the issue. Obtain tables. Make copies of all support materials. Gather pens and paper. Get stamps and envelopes donated.</p>		
<p>Day of the Campaign</p> <p>Set up tables. Distribute support materials. Recruit letter writers.</p>		
<p>After the Campaign</p> <p>Address and stamp envelopes. Send letters. Call recipient.</p>		

Lobbying on an Issue

Lobbying involves speaking with policymakers in order to convince them to support your position on an issue. The word originated from people who waited in the lobbies of legislatures in hopes of speaking with lawmakers. *You* may also have to wait in a lobby to lobby!

Why should you lobby?

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who are silent.” Citizens who speak out have a lot of influence. When you go out and lobby on your issue, you may be surprised at how powerful your voice really is.

How can you lobby most effectively?

Your goal is to talk to policymakers to persuade them to support your position on an issue. These tips and the planning sheet that follows will help you prepare to lobby successfully.

- 1 Research your issue.** Know your subject well. Make sure you understand both sides of the issue. Then find facts from reputable sources to support your views. Be prepared to articulate your position on the issue in a clear and compelling manner.
- 2 Specify an action.** Be clear about what you want policymakers to do. Do you want them to sponsor a new bill, vote a certain way, or speak out against a public policy?
- 3 Write a set of talking points.** Policymakers are busy, so you need to be able to explain your position efficiently. Create a set of talking points outlining your position and describing the action you want your policymaker to take. You may also want to leave a copy of your talking points behind for your policymaker to refer to. So make sure they are well written and contain facts that support your position.
- 4 Prepare and practice a talking script.** Write a short talking script to use with your talking points. Practice it until you feel confident enough to talk with policymakers without looking at it.
- 5 Develop a game plan.** Identify the policymakers you want to speak with and determine the best way to contact them. Meeting one-on-one is best. If you cannot get an appointment, call and try to get an aide on the line who will share your views with the policymaker. Alternatively, wait for policymakers after a public meeting and approach them as they emerge.
- 6 Ask for a commitment.** After delivering your message ask, *Do I have your commitment to support my position?* Request a yes or no answer. Don’t let the policymaker get away with an ambiguous response.
- 7 Find supporters in unusual places.** A supporter is a supporter. Stay open to all who will listen to you on your particular issue even if they belong to a different political party or have cast votes with which you disagree. At the same time, do not waste your time lobbying those who strongly oppose your ideas.
- 8 Send a thank-you note.** Handwrite a thank-you note to anyone who has taken the time to listen to you, even if he or she does not support you. You never know when you might be lobbying that person for another cause.

Preparing to Lobby on an Issue

Use this planning sheet to prepare for your lobbying campaign.

Identify the issue you want to address.

List the policymakers you plan to lobby.

Name	Telephone number	Office location

Write your talking points.

- Choose three or four points to use in support of your position. Give each point its own paragraph.
- Support each point with relevant facts and arguments.
- Keep your talking points sheet brief, no more than one page.
- Title your talking points and include your contact information.

Prepare a talking script using the model below.

Hi, my name is _____ and I would like to talk to you about the issue of _____.

I'd like to briefly explain my position on this issue. (Use your talking points as a guide here.)

I would like you to (tell the policymaker what you want him or her to do) _____.

Do you have any questions for me about this issue?

Can I count on your support? If not, what would it take for you to support me?

May I leave this sheet of talking points with you? It includes my contact information in case you would like to talk more about this issue later on.

Thank you so much for your time.

Section Five

Participating in Elections

“Inside the polling booth every American man and woman stands as the equal of every other American man and woman. There they have no superiors. There they have no masters save their own minds and conscience.”

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945)

Elections are the building blocks of democracy, yet voter turnouts in U.S. elections remain surprisingly low, especially among young Americans. In *Is Voting for Young People?*, political scientist Martin Wattenberg argues, “Many young people don’t vote simply because they don’t follow politics.” When students learn how to participate in the electoral process, they are more likely to become lifelong voters. The tools in this section are designed to help your students get engaged in the election process *now* in the hope of making them lifelong voters.

Registering and Preparing to Vote
Evaluating Candidates for Political Office
Volunteering in a Political Campaign

Registering and Preparing to Vote

Registering to vote means signing up to become a legal voter. Preparing to vote involves educating yourself about the candidates and issues on the ballot. Both are essential responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

Why should you vote?

If you were the member of a team, you would respect your teammates by warming up for a big game. Voting also requires preparation, but with bigger stakes. You are making decisions that will affect your fellow citizens, your community, and your country.

How do you register to vote?

Registering to vote is simple. If you are 18, you can do so now. If you are not yet 18, you can get everything ready to submit near your 18th birthday.

- 1 Find out your state’s voting requirements.** If you are a U.S. citizen and will be 18 by Election Day, you are eligible to register to vote. Beyond that, every state has slightly different residency requirements and registration procedures. For example, some states require you to register at least a month before the next election. Others will allow you to register at the polling place on Election Day. Contact your Division of Elections by telephone or online for details on how to register in your state.
- 2 Complete and submit a voter registration form.** Get a voter registration form from your county election board or download one from a Web site like rockthevote.com. It will ask for basic information including your age, name, address, and social security number. If you want to vote in primary elections, you must register as a member of a specific political party. However, you can change your party affiliation as you wish. Submit your form to the address indicated at least a month before the next election. If instead you plan to register on Election Day, bring a completed registration form and any required identification with you to your polling place.

- 3 Keep your registration current.** Once you are a registered voter, keep your registration current by voting. If you move, you will probably need to register again at your new address. If you leave home to attend college, you will still be able to vote in your home district by mail by asking for an absentee ballot.

How can you prepare to vote intelligently?

Registering to vote is the easy part. Preparing to cast your vote intelligently takes more work. But it is also essential to the health of our democracy. As President John F. Kennedy once warned, “The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.”

- 1 Learn all you can about the candidates.** Most candidates are eager to communicate with you. Read their ads and brochures. Attend candidate forums and campaign events. Read about candidates’ backgrounds, community involvement, and policy positions on their Web sites. Pay attention to who contributes to their campaigns and which interest groups endorse them.
- 2 Study the ballot measures.** In some states, the Division of Elections has lots of information about ballot measures. In others, look to sources like those listed in the following task sheet for information. Newspapers and newscasts are other good sources of information about ballot measures. Study this material to find out who sponsored each measure, which groups support it, who will pay for it, and how much it will cost.
- 3 Obtain and fill out a sample ballot.** In most states you will receive a sample ballot in the mail before Election Day. Fill it out and bring it with you to the polling place. This will make voting faster and easier.
- 4 Find out where to vote.** You should receive information before Election Day telling you where to vote. If not, call your local voting commission. Some states require voters to identify themselves with a picture ID at the polling place. If your state is one of them, be sure to arrive with the proper identification.

Evaluating Sources of Voter Information

To be an informed voter, you will need information about the candidates and measures on the ballot. Use this chart to locate and evaluate voter information resources in your area. To locate each source, check your local telephone book or search by name online. Download any information offered, or ask to have it mailed to you.

Voting information resource	Does this resource have information on elections in my area?	How will this information help me prepare to vote?	On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful is this resource to me?
County elections office			
State Division of Elections			
Local party headquarters			
League of Women Voters (lww.org)			
Project Vote Smart (vote-smart.org)			
National Constitution Center (constitutioncenter.org)			
Local newspaper			
Friends and family members			

Evaluating Candidates for Public Office

Evaluating a candidate for public office means deciding whether you want that person to represent you at some level of government. As drama critic George Nathan once observed, “Bad officials are elected by citizens who don’t vote.”

Why evaluate candidates for public office?

Public officials are elected to make decisions that affect you directly—such as whether to raise tuition at public colleges, whether to declare war, or whether to raise the minimum wage. If you want to be represented by people who make wise choices, then you need to choose wisely when you vote.

What is the best way to evaluate candidates?

Voters are inundated with campaign messages and advertisements during election season. Although evaluating candidates is time consuming and complex, there is no substitute for diligent research and thought. These tips and the evaluation sheet that follows will help you make good decisions.

1 Decide what is important to you in choosing candidates to support. Think about the following list of characteristics when evaluating candidates. Decide which ones are most important to you.

Candidate Characteristics

Personal story	Age
Education	Ability to compromise
Political philosophy	Charisma
Gender	Speaking ability
Stand on issues	Preparation for job
Public record	Character
Supporters	Political insider/outsider
Physical appearance	Party affiliation
Physical stamina	Family characteristics

2 Find the candidates that best match your values. The Internet has made researching candidates easier than in the past. Most candidates publish Web sites as part of their campaigns. Project Vote Smart provides information on thousands of candidates’ positions and will tell you who donates money to them. The National Constitution Center’s Web site has a Citizen Action Center with information on issues and candidates. You can also find biographical information, public speeches, and other relevant information about candidates by plugging their names into search engines. As each campaign heats up, you will be able to gather still more data from political ads, televised debates, radio talk shows, mailers, newspapers, and magazines, as well as from friends, family, and neighbors. As you get to know candidates better, look for those that best match your values.

Evaluating Candidates for Public Office

Americans consider a variety of characteristics in evaluating candidates for public office. Follow these steps to evaluate the candidates in one political race.

Step 1 Identify the political race you are focusing on.

Step 2 Identify the two candidates in that race to evaluate.

Step 3 Select five characteristics from the list on the preceding page to use in your evaluation. Write your selections in the first column below.

Step 4 Collect relevant information regarding your chosen characteristics for both candidates. Record it in the chart below. (If you run out of space, use a separate sheet of paper.)

Step 5 Rate both candidates on a scale of 1 to 5 on each characteristic.

Step 6 Identify the candidate you think would best represent you in public office. Explain why.

Five characteristics of candidates	Relevant information on Candidate 1	Relevant information on Candidate 2	Rating of Candidate 1 on a scale of 1 to 5	Rating of Candidate 2 on a scale of 1 to 5
<i>Example:</i> Speaking ability	Flat speaking style	Tells good jokes	2	4

Volunteering in a Political Campaign

A political campaign refers to all the activities that go into getting a candidate elected to political office. These activities include mailings, telephone calls, meet-the-voter events, television and radio advertisements, and fundraisers. Political campaigns are usually headed by the candidate and staffed by a limited number of paid employees and many unpaid volunteers.

Why volunteer in a political campaign?

Being part of a campaign can be exhilarating, energizing, and inspiring. During the course of a campaign, you will meet a lot of interesting people, attend parties and social events, and have fun working with a dedicated team. You may also help your candidate get elected.

How can you contribute to a political campaign effectively?

Follow the steps below to get the most out of your experience volunteering in a political campaign. Throughout the process, document your experience in a journal as described on the following page.

- 1 Choose your candidate carefully.** Look for a candidate you would feel proud to support. You will be representing this person in public, so make sure you support the candidate's views on a majority of issues.
- 2 Set aside time to work.** To make a substantial contribution to a campaign, you need to be willing to devote a few hours a week.
- 3 Meet with the campaign's volunteer coordinator.** Call the candidate's local campaign headquarters and ask to speak with the volunteer coordinator. Explain that you would like to volunteer, and set up a time to meet. This will ensure that someone is expecting you and can introduce you to the campaign operation.

- 4 Share your strengths.** There are a variety of tasks in a political campaign. A number of them are listed below. When you meet with the volunteer coordinator, discuss your strengths (for example, writing, drawing, organizing) so that your talents can be put to good use.
- 5 Be positive and professional.** Take every task seriously and do your best. Once you demonstrate that you are a valuable asset to the campaign, you will likely be given more responsibility.

Examples of Campaign Tasks

- Sending out mailings
- Designing and distributing flyers, signs, or placards
- Door-to-door canvassing
- Organizing and setting up events (debates, fundraisers, speaking engagements)
- Making phone calls
- Registering voters
- Writing press releases
- Giving speeches

My Life on the Campaign Trail

Document your experiences as a campaign volunteer by keeping a journal. Use a small notebook to record your day-to-day activities. Be sure to include the following information:

- whom you chose to campaign for and why
- how you felt when you first met with someone from the campaign
- what tasks you undertook during the campaign
- the challenges each task presented
- whom you met during the campaign and what they were like
- whether your perception of the candidate changed
- whether you would volunteer again
- anything else you think was interesting

Include campaign memorabilia, such as a picture of you volunteering or a flyer or bumper sticker from the campaign, in your journal.

August 16, 2008

Today was the first day of my political career! I met State Representative Joe Politico at campaign headquarters, who welcomed me with a handshake and a smile. I was so nervous getting to the office! I left for the bus a half hour early so I wouldn't be late for my appointment and ended up walking around the block 5 times to try to relax and wait until the right time.

I never thought I would meet Representative Politico himself, but while I was meeting with the volunteer coordinator, he came right up, introduced himself, and thanked me for helping get him re-elected. Thanked me! I was too nervous to tell him how much admire the work he's done in the past term.

November 1, 2008

Well, we find out the results of all our work today. I'm going to be at the office well after the polls close tonight waiting to hear whether we won. I don't mind staying up . . . I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway.

We are all at headquarters waiting it out over pizza. I don't know what I'm going to do when this campaign is over. But I definitely want to do this again . . . I feel like a part of history!

Section Six

Working Cooperatively to Take Action in the Community

“You must do the things you think you cannot do.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962)

The essence of politics is collective action to solve problems and address common issues. To engage in civic affairs effectively, students need to learn how to work cooperatively with others to achieve shared goals. The tools in this section are designed to help your students discover how a small group of thoughtful citizens can indeed change the world.

Organizing a Public Demonstration

Organizing a Fundraiser

Starting a Civic Organization

Organizing a BUYcott

Conducting an Effective Meeting

Organizing a Public Demonstration

A public demonstration is a display of shared sentiment on an issue. People demonstrate for all sorts of reasons—against legislation, in support of a candidate, or to raise awareness of an issue like homelessness or global warming. Demonstrations are often actions of last resort. They usually take place when other methods of influencing public opinion have been tried and found wanting.

Why organize a demonstration?

People organize demonstrations to get attention from public officials, the media, and community members. Demonstrations can help build public awareness of an issue. They can also convince policymakers that there is significant public support for a particular position on an issue.

How can you organize an effective demonstration?

First, determine whether a demonstration is a good way to advance your cause. While a demonstration may generate media attention, it can also backfire if it offends elected officials and the public. Be sure you have exhausted all other options, such as phone calls, letter-writing campaigns, and public forums before planning a demonstration. If you decide a demonstration is indeed the best way to meet your objective, these tips and the following planning sheet will help you get organized.

- 1 Craft your message.** You are about to go public on an issue. Before doing so, you need to be very clear about what you want to say and how. Become an expert on your issue. Know what you want to say in support of your position and what you will say to people who disagree with your views.
- 2 Choose your time and place.** Determine where you will demonstrate and when in order to be seen by influential policymakers or the media. Set a start and end time. Limit the event to two hours.
- 3 Get the necessary permits.** Every city and county has specific guidelines for *how*, *when*, and *where* citizens can hold public demonstrations. Obtain guidelines from your local police department or city government. Arrange all necessary permits in advance.
- 4 Drum up support.** You want to attract as many supporters as possible to your demonstration. Let them know where to show up by posting signs, handing out flyers, contacting the media, and making announcements.
- 5 Make signs and placards to carry.** Make large, legible, colorful signs and placards for demonstrators to carry. People will feel more a part of your demonstration if they are carrying a message.
- 6 Create an information sheet to hand out.** This sheet should clearly outline your message and explain why you have chosen to demonstrate here and now. Make enough copies to hand out to demonstrators, passersby, and members of the press.
- 7 Develop a demonstration plan.** Think about what you want your demonstrators to *do* at your event. Will they congregate in one area or walk around carrying signs? Will you have some sort of program with speeches or will demonstrators simply chant slogans? If the latter, think about your slogans carefully. You do not want to sound angry or belligerent. Run these by a few people of different ages and backgrounds before you use them at the demonstration. Make copies of the plan to share with demonstrators.
- 8 Assemble peaceably.** The First Amendment guarantees the “right of the people peaceably to assemble.” Make sure your demonstration does not get out of hand. Have adults on hand to enforce appropriate behavior. End the demonstration immediately if you feel uncomfortable with the behavior of some participants.

Planning Your Demonstration

This planning sheet will help you organize an effective demonstration.

Identify the issue you want to address.

Explain why a demonstration is the best way to address this issue.

Define the main objective of your demonstration.

Summarize the guidelines for demonstrations in your city or county.

BEFORE PROCEEDING FURTHER, HAVE AN ADULT SIGN OFF ON YOUR DEMONSTRATION.

Use the form below.

I plan on holding a demonstration at _____ (place) on _____
_____ (date) from _____ (time) to _____ (time). I have obtained all necessary
permits from my city/county office.

Signed by: _____ Relation to student: _____

Assign volunteers to the tasks on the to-do list below, and note when they are completed.

To Do	Assigned Person	Date Completed
Advertise demonstration.		
Contact media.		
Create information sheet.		
Make signs and placards.		
Develop demonstration plan.		
Create slogans.		
Organize speeches, if any.		
Find adults to monitor the event.		

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet after your demonstration:

1. What were the highlights of your demonstration?
2. How effective do you think your demonstration was? Explain.
3. If you were to organize another demonstration, what would you do differently? Why?

Organizing a Fundraiser

A fundraiser helps raise money for a cause, person, or organization. Fundraisers can take a variety of forms. You can sell something, put on an event, or provide a service.

Why organize a fundraiser?

Let's face it, sometimes you need money—lots of it—to address a community problem, start an interest group, or run an effective political campaign. Fundraising is more than raising money. It can also be a way to bring public awareness to your cause and to unify a group.

How can you organize a successful fundraiser?

Money is said to be “the mother’s milk of politics.” These tips, along with the planning forms that follow, will help you to organize a successful fundraiser.

- 1 Be creative.** People ask for money all the time. To set your fundraiser off from all the rest, you need a “hook”—the more interesting, the better! Create a buzz around your fundraiser so that people will want to be part of it and will remember it.
- 2 Keep it real.** Be sincere and passionate when communicating your cause. Draw people in by sharing real stories and pictures. Show people how much you care. Explain exactly what you will do with the money they give you.
- 3 Seek out local sponsorship.** Whether you are hosting a karaoke night or organizing a walk-your-pet-a-thon, ask local businesses to sponsor you by donating items or money. Offer to provide sponsors publicity by adding their names to a flyer or acknowledging them during a speech. Businesses often set aside some part of their profits to donate to local causes. Go after that money.
- 4 Plan, plan, plan.** Fundraisers usually succeed or fail based on the strength of the planning. Plan well in advance, ideally three months ahead of time. Plan everything from logistics, to sponsorship, to publicity. Assign lead people and divvy up tasks. Also, create a budget and stick to it. Plan to spend no more than 15 percent of your projected earnings from the event.
- 5 Empower your volunteers.** Make sure your volunteers feel respected and well used. Capitalize on their strengths and give them important jobs. Save menial jobs, like cleanup crew, for dedicated organizers.
- 6 Say thanks!** Take the time to thank everyone involved in your fundraiser. If possible, handwrite thank-you cards and send pictures. Be sincere and heartfelt. You might be asking these same people for additional support down the road.

Planning Your Fundraiser (page 1 of 3)

Use this planning sheet to organize an effective fundraiser.

Planning

Identify the purpose of your fundraiser.

- To make money for _____.
- To raise awareness about _____.
- Other:

Determine how much money you want to make.

Identify your target audience (for example, students, community members, or businesses).

Determine the date and place of your event.

Describe your fundraiser (include *what*, *when*, *where*, and *who*).

Establish a detailed budget. When complete, attach a copy to this document.

List the tasks for which you will need volunteers. Estimate how many people you will need for each one.

Identify people you can enlist as volunteers. Consider recruiting friends, family members, neighbors, teachers, government officials, local businesspeople, and members of local religious groups and nonprofit organizations.

Planning Your Fundraiser (page 2 of 3)

Logistics

List tasks relating to the logistics of your fundraiser on the to-do list below. These might include finding a venue or place, recruiting volunteers, buying supplies, setting up, taking money, and writing thank-you cards to volunteers.

Logistics To-Do List			
Lead person	_____		
Task	Assigned Person	Target Date	Date Completed
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			

Publicity

List tasks relating to publicizing your fundraiser on the to-do list below. These might include sending invitations, putting up flyers, writing a press release, and making announcements.

Publicity To-Do List			
Lead person	_____		
Task	Assigned Person	Target Date	Date Completed
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			

Planning Your Fundraiser (page 3 of 3)

Sponsorship

List tasks relating to finding sponsors for your fundraiser on the to-do list below. These might include writing letters, meeting with sponsors, picking up donations, advertising sponsorship, and writing thank-you cards to sponsors.

Sponsorship To-Do List

Lead person _____

Task	Assigned Person	Target Date	Date Completed
------	-----------------	-------------	----------------

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Starting a Civic Organization

A civic organization brings people together and helps them organize around a common mission. You might start a new organization or you might start a new chapter of an existing organization, such as Students Against Drunk Driving, Habitat for Humanity, or Do Something.

Why start a civic organization?

Whatever your concern, other people probably share it. Joining with others will greatly amplify your efforts to make a difference in the world. You will also benefit from the emotional support, new ideas, and complementary talents that others will bring to your cause.

How can you start a civic organization?

Whether you start from scratch or start a new chapter of an existing organization, take the time to assess your interests, the community's needs, and the resources available. These tips and the brainstorming guide that follows will help you get your new group off to a strong start.

1 Decide what organization to start. Take the time to research whether the organization you want to start already exists. Starting a local chapter of an existing organization will be simpler than starting from scratch.

2 Decide whether this group will be an official campus organization. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of being a campus organization before you make this decision.

Some advantages:

- Your school most likely has a defined procedure for establishing new groups.
- You might receive support from faculty members.
- Your organization should be able to hold meetings at school.

- Events could be publicized at school.
- You can pass leadership on to younger students when you graduate.

Some disadvantages:

- A campus organization may be more complicated to set up.
- Activities may require administrative approval.
- You may not be permitted to include community members who are not students.

3 Set up a launch meeting. Advertise your interest in starting a new civic organization through word-of-mouth, flyers, e-mail, and school announcements. Invite all who show an interest to a launch meeting. At that meeting, recruit a core group to get the ball rolling.

4 Write a mission statement with your core group. A mission statement is a sentence or paragraph that states your organization's purpose. Defining your mission helps you focus your efforts and communicate your intentions to others.

5 Write bylaws. Bylaws are the basic rules for how your organization will function, such as number of officers, meeting times, and meeting process. Use bylaws of other similar groups as models.

6 Set goals. Be realistic in setting initial and long-term goals.

7 Decide what actions to take to meet your goals. Consider what your group needs to do to move forward. Begin small but think big.

8 Build your organization. Find strength in numbers by recruiting new members and joining with other community organizations. Building your organization is an ongoing goal that begins with your first meeting and continues as long as the organization exists.

Starting a Civic Organization: A Brainstorming Guide

Use this guide to help you evaluate the merits of forming an organization around an issue that concerns you.

Describe the social problem or issue that concerns you most.

Identify other organizations, if any, that are already working on this issue.

Find out if any of these organizations will work with you to help set up a student-led chapter on your campus. If so, which ones?

List the steps you would need to take to form a civic organization on campus. Check with your school administration for guidelines.

Decide whether it makes more sense to start a school-based organization or a community-based one. Explain your decision.

Decide whether you will start a new organization or not. If yes, list your next steps below.

Organizing a BUYcott

In a BUYcott, people intentionally buy things from a business to show their support of the business's practices. That is just the opposite of a boycott, where people refuse to purchase items from a business. BUYcotts reward companies that support popular positions on issues like labor practices and the environment. You may choose to BUYcott a store that sells "fair trade" clothes, conducts eco-friendly practices, or contributes money to a good cause.

Why BUYcott?

Consumers have tremendous power, especially when they band together to support a good business practice. By BUYcoting one business, you may in turn influence other businesses to follow suit. This can create a "win-win" situation. The business you choose to BUYcott will love getting your business. At the same time, the BUYcott may generate positive publicity for your cause.

How do I organize a BUYcott?

A BUYcott can be fun to organize. The following tips and the planning sheet that follows will show you how. However, planning may involve visits to stores in the community. For your safety, plan to travel in groups of two or three when meeting with business personnel. Be sure to go over your route with a parent or faculty adviser before you take off.

- 1 Hone in on the issue.** Determine first what issue you want to address. Poverty, fair trade, labor discrimination, childhood obesity, child labor, and global warming are all issues that business practices can affect.
- 2 Find a business to BUYcott.** Talk to business managers to find out whether they are *already doing something* to support your issue or whether they are willing to *start doing something*. For instance, a local grocery store might be willing to reward customers who bring reusable bags to carry their purchases. Or a clothing store might agree not to buy and sell clothing made with child labor.
- 3 Establish a partnership.** Work with the manager to organize your BUYcott. Brainstorm ways in which you can collaborate.
- 4 Develop a publicity plan.** Your goal is twofold: to highlight the particular good practice of the business and to encourage people to shop there. Consider the following ways to advertise: creating flyers, sending e-mails, taking out a newspaper ad, writing a press release, creating a Web site, making school announcements, or hosting a "BUYcott day" at the business. Before you get started, run all your plans by the business manager to ensure the store's agreement and cooperation.
- 5 Keep track of and celebrate your success.** Work with the business to keep track of sales for a certain time period. Share your success with others through press releases, a thank-you sign at the store, or e-mails. Consumers will want to know that their choices have made a difference.
- 6 Build an alliance.** Once your BUYcott is up and running, consider asking other businesses to adopt similar practices and join your BUYcott. You may be surprised how quickly other businesses will change their practices to share in your publicity. Before you know it, you may have changed the practices of scores of businesses!

Organizing a BUYcott

This planning sheet will help you organize a successful BUYcott.

Identify the issue you want to address.

.

State your position on the issue.

List up to three local businesses that might share your position on this issue.

Describe the practices that these businesses have adopted or might be willing to adopt that would promote your issue. Be specific, such as “sell fair-trade clothing” or “use biodiesel fuels in delivery vans.”

Outline how you would publicize this practice and the business.

Decide which business to approach first. With whom will you meet? Who will accompany you? Be sure to consult with a parent or teacher before proceeding with your plan.

Respond to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper after your BUYcott is up and running.

1. What business did you BUYcott?
2. What specific practice did you highlight?
3. How did you promote your BUYcott? Attach a flyer, Web site printout, or press release.
4. Was your BUYcott successful? How can you tell?
5. If you were to organize another BUYcott, what might you do differently? Why?

Conducting an Effective Meeting

Effective meetings are well-organized and focused gatherings. They allow all participants to share opinions without feeling pressured or threatened. At the same time, they get work done in an efficient and orderly manner.

Why learn how to conduct an effective meeting?

You have probably participated in plenty of meetings in your life, for teams, clubs, and student government. You know by now that some meetings are more effective than others. Conducting a productive, orderly meeting is a valuable skill, especially if you want to be a leader in your community.

How do you conduct an effective meeting?

Whatever the purpose of your meeting, everyone who attends will benefit from some advance planning. These tips and the planning sheet that follows will help you make your next meeting a success.

Prior to the Meeting

- 1 Determine your objectives. What do you hope to accomplish in this meeting? Limit your objectives to three, and make sure these goals are attainable.
- 2 Set the meeting time and place. Find a place that is centrally located as well as quiet and private. Schedule your meeting at a convenient time. Plan for no more than two hours. The day before the scheduled meeting, visit the meeting place *at the time you have scheduled*. Make sure that the room is unlocked, that there are enough seats, and that all equipment (such as lights, presentation software, projector, and microphone) works.
- 3 Prepare an agenda that meets your objectives. The agenda should include the meeting date and time as well as the main topics to be discussed. For each agenda item, allocate a time for discussion. Type out the agenda and distribute or post it a few days

prior to the meeting. Make extra copies and distribute them at the meeting so that everyone has a copy of the agenda for reference.

During the Meeting

- 1 Start on time. This shows respect for your participants' time.
- 2 Welcome attendees, thank them for attending, and review the agenda. Ask someone else to take minutes and to post them at a designated location after the meeting.
- 3 Have participants briefly introduce themselves.
- 4 Establish ground rules for who can speak when and stick to them.
- 5 Be energetic and positive at all times.
- 6 After each agenda item, summarize any decisions.
- 7 Have someone else keep track of time. If you are running over time on an agenda item, call for a decision or table the item for a future meeting.
- 8 Close the meeting on time and on a positive note.
- 9 Get feedback on the meeting. Pass out simple evaluation forms that ask, *What was effective or ineffective about this meeting?*

Planning an Effective Meeting

Use this planning sheet to help you conduct an effective meeting.

Define the objectives for the meeting.

Determine when and where you will hold the meeting. How will you notify the participants about the time and place?

List the equipment you need for the meeting (such as chairs, tables, or a projector). Where and when will you get what you need?

On a separate piece of paper, sketch the meeting room and how you will arrange the furniture.

Create an agenda for the meeting. How much time will you allocate for each agenda item? Where and when will you post the agenda? (Attach a printed copy to this sheet.)

List at least five ground rules. Examples: *Raise your hand and be recognized by the chair before speaking.* *Avoid making negative comments about other participants' ideas.*

After the meeting, answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper:

1. What went well during the meeting?
2. What aspects of conducting the meeting were challenging?
3. What would you do differently next time?

Assessing Students' Level of Civic Engagement

Many teachers would love to know that their students are more engaged in civic matters at the end of their course than they were at the start. But how can you really know that this has happened?

CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, has developed a civic engagement assessment tool that will help you measure changes in student behavior and attitudes over time. Researchers at CIRCLE scrutinized different ways civic engagement has been measured, talked with top experts in the field, and convened focus groups to design the best possible measurement tool. The resulting survey has been used with thousands of young people across the country since 2002.

CIRCLE's Civic Engagement Quiz asks students to answer questions about their involvement in 19 specific civic actions, such as volunteering, voting, contacting the media, and signing e-mail petitions. Once students have completed the survey, they can use the results to find out where they fit in CIRCLE's typology of civic engagement. The typology divides respondents into one of four categories: *Disengaged*, *Civic Specialist*, *Electoral Specialist*, and *Dual Activist*.

You can use the survey in many ways to suit your own student population. For example, you might just survey one category. Or you might remove actions that students could never have completed, such as voting in local or national elections. You might also add other categories of civic engagement that students do have access to, such as voting in school elections.

The national survey results are included at the end of the quiz. These results are based on telephone surveys. Your results are likely to vary.

Possible Ways to Use the Civic Engagement Quiz

- Use it as a pre- and post-test to measure your students' progress.
- Use it to compare your students' responses with the national averages.
- Use it to help students categorize their civic engagement into one of the four typologies. Discuss each typology and its implications for the students and for society.
- Use it at the beginning of your course to open a discussion about civic engagement. Consider using some or all of the following questions after you have administered the survey and examined the results: *Given the results of the survey, how would you assess your own level of civic engagement? How did your results compare with the national averages for people your age? How well do you think the survey assesses civic engagement? What civic actions might it have missed? Why should we care about these survey results?*

Civic Engagement Quiz

Please mark an "X" in the appropriate place or places. Once completed, use the tables on pages 72–74 to compare your responses to those of a nationally representative sample.

Civic Indicators

Community Problem Solving

1. Have you ever worked together with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live?
- Yes, Within the last 12 months
 - Yes, But not within the last 12 months
 - No, Never

Volunteering

2. Have you volunteered or done any voluntary community service for no pay?
- Yes, Within the last 12 months
 - Yes, But not within the last 12 months
 - No, Never

Indicate whether you have volunteered with any of the following types of organizations or groups:

2A. Religious group

- Yes, I have volunteered within the last 12 months
- Yes, I volunteer once a month or more
- Not within the last 12 months

2B. Environmental organization

- Yes, I have volunteered within the last 12 months
- Yes, I volunteer once a month or more
- Not within the last 12 months

2C. Civic or community organization involved in health or social services

- Yes, I have volunteered within the last 12 months
- Yes, I volunteer once a month or more
- Not within the last 12 months

2D. An organization for youth, children, or education

- Yes, I have volunteered within the last 12 months
- Yes, I volunteer once a month or more
- Not within the last 12 months

2E. Any other group: _____

- (describe the group)
- Yes, I have volunteered within the last 12 months
 - Yes, I volunteer regularly—once a month or more
 - Not within the last 12 months

Group Membership

3A. Do you belong to or donate money to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally, such as charities, labor unions, professional associations, political or social groups, sports or youth groups, and so forth?

- Yes
- No

3B. Are you an active member of this group or any of these groups, a member but not active, or have you given money only? Mark all that apply.

- Active member of at least one of them
- Member, but not active in at least one of them
- Given money only
- No

Participate in Run/Walk/Ride

4. Have you personally walked, run, or bicycled for a charitable cause—this is separate from sponsoring or giving money to this type of event?
- Yes, Have done it within last 12 months
 - Yes, But not within last 12 months
 - No, Never

Donate to a Charity

5. Besides donating money, have you ever done anything else to help raise money for a charitable cause?
- Yes, Have done it within last 12 months
 - Yes, But not within last 12 months
 - No, Never

Electoral Indicators

Voter Registration

- 6A. Many people are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Are you currently registered in your election district, or not?
- Yes, Definitely
 - I think so
 - No

Voting

- 6B. We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Do you vote in both national and local elections?
- Yes, Always
 - Yes, Usually
 - No

Volunteer for a Candidate or Political Campaign

7. Have you volunteered for a political organization or candidate running for office?
- Yes, Within the last 12 months
 - Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
 - No, Never

Persuade Others to Vote for a Candidate or Party

8. When there is an election taking place, do you try to convince people to vote for or against one of the parties or candidates, or not?
- Yes, Always
 - Yes, Usually
 - No

Display Campaign Button or Sticker

9. Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house?
- Yes, Always
 - Yes, Usually
 - No

Contributing to a Campaign, Party or Group

10. Have you given money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported candidates?
- Yes, Within the last 12 months
 - Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
 - No, Never

Indicators of Political Voice

Have you done any of the following to express your views?

Contacted a Public Official

11. Contacted or visited a public official—at any level of government—to express your opinion?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Contacted a Newspaper

12. Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion on an issue?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Contacted a Radio or Television Talk Show

13. Called in to a radio or television talk show to express your opinion on a political issue, even if you did not get on the air?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Protested

14. Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Signed an E-mail Petition

15. Signed an e-mail petition about a social or political issue?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Signed a Written Petition

16. Have you ever signed a written petition about a political or social issue?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Boycotted

17. Have you ever NOT bought something from a certain company because you disagree with the social or political values of the company that produces it?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Buycotted

18. Have you bought something because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Canvassed

19. Have you worked as a canvasser—going door to door for a political or social group or candidate?

- Yes, Within the last 12 months
- Yes, But, not within the last 12 months
- No, Never

Classifying Individuals by Type of Engagement

According to CIRCLE, the organization that created the Civic Engagement Quiz, most people fall into one of four civic engagement categories.

Electoral Specialists: This category includes those whose main engagement is through the election process.

Civic Specialists: People in this group focus on improving their communities and helping others.

Dual Activists: This category is made up of people who engage in both electoral and civic activities.

Disengaged: This group is made up of people who are not significantly engaged in civic life.

To find out where you fit into this typology, place a check in each box to which you gave a positive answer. Then total the boxes you checked in each category.

Typology of Engagement Checklist

Civic Activities		
Number	Activity/Question	Yes?
1	Worked to solve a community problem	
2A	Volunteered regularly for a religious group	
2B	Volunteered regularly for an environmental group	
2C	Volunteered regularly for a civic or community organization	
2D	Volunteered regularly for an organization for youth, children or education	
2E	Volunteered regularly for any other group	
3B	Active member of a group	
4	Personally walked, ran, or bicycled for a charitable cause	
5	Besides donating money, done anything else to help raise money for a charitable cause	
	Total number of activities (add number of affirmative responses)	

Electoral Activities		
Number	Activity/Question	Yes?
6B	Always vote in elections (regular voting)	
7	Volunteer for a political campaign or candidate	
8	Persuade others to vote	
9	Wear a campaign button or put a sticker on your car	
10	Work or contribute money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported candidates	
	Total number of activities (add number of affirmative responses)	

Political Voice Activities		
Number	Activity/Question	Yes?
11	Contacted/visited a public official	
12	Contacted a newspaper or magazine	
13	Contacted a radio or television talk show	
14	Protested	
15	Signed an e-mail petition	
16	Signed a written petition	
17	Boycotted a company	
18	Boycotted or bought something to support the values of a company	
19	Canvassed—going door to door for a social or political group	
	Total number of activities (add number of affirmative responses)	

Use this information to find your classification:

Disengaged: 0 or 1 checks in both the civic and electoral categories

Civic Specialist: 2 or more checks in the civic category and 0 or 1 in the electoral category

Electoral Specialist: 2 or more checks in the electoral category and 0 or 1 in the civic category

Dual Activist: 2 or more checks in both the civic and electoral categories

National Survey Results

The results of CIRCLE's 2006 national survey show that levels of engagement in most areas increase with age. There are exceptions to this, however. High school students are more likely than older adults to participate in fundraising runs and walks or to take part in protests. Older Americans, in contrast, are more likely to vote and to contribute to political campaigns.

National Survey Results for 19 Measures of Civic Engagement from 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation					
Civic Indicators	15+	15–18	19–22	23–25	26+
Community problem solving.	20%	23%	16%	18%	20%
Regularly volunteering.	22%	23%	15%	16%	24%
“Active” member in group or organization.	24%	22%	20%	18%	26%
Participating in fundraising run/walk/drive.	34%	21%	18%	12%	15%
General fundraising for charity.	27%	28%	24%	19%	29%
Electoral Indicators	15+	15–18	19–22	23–25	26+
Always vote (for age 21 and older).	50%	—	23%	29%	56%
Regularly volunteer for a candidate or political organization.	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Persuading others to vote for a particular candidate or party.	38%	38%	31%	36%	40%
Displaying campaign buttons, signs or stickers.	27%	27%	20%	23%	28%
Contributing to a campaign, party or group.	8%	8%	3%	9%	14%
Indicators of Political Voice	15+	15–18	19–22	23–25	26+
Contacting officials.	18%	11%	10%	10%	22%
Contacting the print media.	10%	8%	5%	6%	11%
Contacting the broadcast media.	8%	9%	8%	8%	8%
Protesting.	7%	13%	11%	10%	5%
Signing e-mail petitions.	15%	15%	18%	15%	21%
Signing written petitions.	17%	17%	18%	20%	26%
Boycotting.	28%	28%	30%	33%	38%
Buycotting.	29%	29%	30%	28%	33%
Canvassing.	4%	4%	2%	4%	2%

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