

The Power of Nonviolence: Rosa Parks: A Quest for Equal Protection Under the Law

Teacher’s Guide

Lesson Overview

This lesson asks students to revisit the well-known story of a figure in the civil rights movement—Rosa Parks—through the primary source documents associated with her arrest in 1955. The arrest occurred in the shadow of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and had a powerful impact on the public policy of segregation and the application of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

This lesson can be used to either introduce or enhance a unit on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment or the civil rights movement. For teachers not currently using the School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program (SVPDP), the lesson can be used as is. For those who are using the SVPDP curriculum, this lesson allows students to apply the concepts of authority and issues of distributive, corrective, and procedural justice to a historical event. It also demonstrates the concepts taught in the *We the People: the Citizen & the Constitution* lessons on equal protection of the law. Specific references to individual lessons in the curriculum are found at the end of this guide.

Students will examine the documents at pre-designed stations and complete a journal (provided) using their observations. The class will then discuss findings and apply what they have learned about the Fourteenth Amendment, Jim Crow laws, and civil rights.

Suggested Grade Level

Elementary/Middle School (grades 5–8)

Estimated Time to Complete

Approximately 50–90 minutes

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to do the following:

- use primary source documents to make observations and take notes
- correct possible misconceptions about events on the day Rosa Parks was arrested
- apply what they have learned about the Fourteenth Amendment
- evaluate the actions of the three key players (Rosa Parks, the bus driver, and the arresting officer) on the day of Rosa Parks’s arrest, based on the standards set by the Municipal City Code of 1955 and the Fourteenth Amendment

Materials Needed

- Montgomery City Code (five to ten copies)
- Diagram of the bus (five to ten copies)

- Arrest Report, page 1 (five to ten copies)
- Arrest Report, page 2 (five to ten copies)
- Student Journal: The Arrest Records of Rosa Parks (one copy for each student)
- [“Teaching with Documents: An Act of Courage, The Arrest Records of Rosa Parks”](#) (one copy for each student)
- A copy of the Fourteenth Amendment

Before the Lesson

Review this guide and all materials provided.

Set up four stations around the room. At Station One, place several copies of the Montgomery City Code; at Station Two, place several copies of the diagram of the bus; at Station Three, place several copies of the first page of the police report; and at Station Four, place several copies of page two of the police report (students will likely need help deciphering the handwriting on this page). For large classes, set up two sets of four stations, or complete this lesson in the school library, where you may have more room to move around.

For SVPDP teachers: Read or review *We the People: The Citizen & the Constitution*, Level 1, Lesson 19, or Level 2, Lesson 26.

Lesson Procedure

1. *Beginning the lesson.* Ask students to share aloud everything they know about Rosa Parks. Write their answers on a chalkboard or chart paper. This should be done fairly quickly and conducted similar to a brainstorm activity, where there are no right or wrong answers. Simply list the responses, and then set them aside to return to later in the lesson.

2. *Working with primary source documents.* Tell students that they will examine the experience of Rosa Parks on the day she refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white. Explain to students that they will be looking at copies of the actual papers pertaining to her arrest.

Help students differentiate between primary and secondary source documents.

Give each student a journal and ask them to go to each of the four stations to look at the documents and write about what they see, answering the questions provided. (They do not need to go to the stations in order. Students may disperse to view the documents individually, or you might choose to have them visit the various stations in assigned groups.)

3. *Sharing their findings.* After students have visited all four stations and returned to their seats with their journals completed, distribute copies of “Teaching with Documents: An Act of Courage, The Arrest Records of Rosa Parks.”

Read the first paragraph of “Teaching with Documents,” then have students look at their answers from Station One.

- What does Section 10 require bus drivers to do? (Answer: Keep the races separate on the bus.)

- What kind of authority does Section 11 of the Montgomery City Code give bus drivers? (Answer: The same authority as police officers.)
- How is the bus driver supposed to use his authority according to Section 11? (Answer: The bus driver is supposed to use his authority to keep the races separate.)

Read the second paragraph of “Teaching with Documents,” and direct students’ attention to the diagram of the bus. Show students the first ten seats that were designated as the white section of the bus. Point out that Rosa Parks was not in the white section of the bus.

Ask the following questions:

- Which rule in the Montgomery City Code that you just read support Rosa Parks’s position that she should not have to move? (Answer: She wasn’t in the white section; the races were still separate.)
- What language in the Montgomery City Code supports the bus driver’s position? (Answer: The bus driver has the authority of a police officer. It is unlawful for “any passenger to refuse or fail to take a seat among those assigned to the race he belongs.”)

Read the third paragraph of “Teaching with Documents.”

Remind students that Rosa Parks was charged with “refusing to obey orders of bus driver,” which was against the city code at the time. Remind them that there was a higher law, however: the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the highest law in the land. Ask students to review or apply what they have learned about the Fourteenth Amendment to this situation.

- How was Rosa Parks’s arrest seemingly a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment? Was there a good and fair reason for her not to sit anywhere she liked on the bus?
- Why were states able to have laws upholding segregation when the Constitution said that people were entitled to “equal protection under the law?”
- Rosa Parks’s mother asked her, “Did they beat you?” How does her question demonstrate that the Fourteenth Amendment was not being upheld in Montgomery, Alabama?
- From what you have learned from this account and others, does it seem like “separate” was ever “equal”? Give examples.

Read the fourth paragraph of “Teaching with Documents.” Emphasize to students that Mrs. Parks was very active in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Tell them she is often portrayed as someone who was “just tired,” but in reality she was someone who had struggled against segregation for a long time.

Look at page one of the police report from Rosa Parks’s arrest.

- What did the bus driver say was the problem? (Answer: A black woman was sitting in the white section of the bus and would not move to the back.)
 - Ask: Is that a true statement? Was Rosa Parks seated in the white section of the bus?
- Which city code was Rosa Parks charged with violating? (Answer: Section 11: Powers of persons in charge of vehicle; passengers to obey directions.)
- What date was this report written? (Answer: December 1, 1955)

Ask the following questions:

- Is it always wrong to disobey laws and rules?
- What are some consequences of disobeying laws and rules?

Explain that Rosa Parks and others in the civil rights movement disobeyed rules and laws and accepted the consequences as a way to demonstrate that the laws were unjust and wrong. By responding nonviolently to mistreatment, they were powerful in their efforts to bring about change.

Look at page two of the police report from Rosa Parks’s arrest.

- What does it list as the charges against Rosa Parks? (Answer: Refusing to obey orders of a bus driver.)
- What is listed as Rosa Parks’ nationality? (Answer: Negro)
- *Nationality* refers to the country in which one is born or of which one has become a citizen. Rosa Parks was born in America. Why do you think the police did not list her nationality as “American”? (Answers will vary.)

Ask the following questions:

- Does it seem from this report that African Americans in Montgomery were viewed as full-fledged American citizens? What would have been listed under “Nationality” if the police officer had viewed Rosa Parks as an American citizen?
- How might being considered noncitizens affect the way African Americans were treated by police officers and other officials?
- The Montgomery City Code says that equal but separate accommodations must be provided for whites and “negroes.” Thinking about Rosa Parks’s experience, were equal accommodations provided?
- What is the danger in saying things are equal when they are not?

4. *What we have learned.* Look back at the list the students developed at the beginning of the class, and ask them the following:

- How much of their list was accurate?
- What was inaccurate or perhaps a misconception?
- What have they learned about Rosa Parks or the events of that day?
- What is the value of working with primary source documents?

Help students understand how Rosa Parks’s arrest began the Montgomery Bus Boycott and led to Parks being known as the “mother of the modern civil rights movement.” Remind students that the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) declared that separate but equal educational facilities are unconstitutional—the decision pertained only to schools—and that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally ended segregation in public places.

Correlations to SVPDP Curricula

Foundations of Democracy, Elementary School Level

Authority: Unit 1, Lessons 1 and 3
Unit 2, Lessons 7 and 9
Unit 4, Lesson 11

Justice: Unit 1, Lesson 1
Unit 2, Lessons 2 and 3
Unit 3, Lessons 5 and 6
Unit 4, Lessons 9 & 10

Responsibility: Unit 1, Lesson 1
Unit 2, Lessons 3 and 4
Unit 3, Lessons 6 and 7

Foundations of Democracy, Middle School Level

Authority: Unit 1, Lessons 1 and 3
Unit 3, Lesson 6
Unit 4, Lessons 8 and 9
Unit 5, Lessons 12 and 14

Responsibility: Unit 1 Lessons 1 and 2
Unit 2, Lesson 4
Unit 3, Lesson 5

Justice: Unit 1, Lesson 1
Unit 2, Lesson 3
Unit 3, Lessons 7 and 8
Unit 4, Lessons 10, 11, and 12

We the People: The Citizen & the Constitution

Level 1 (Elementary) Lesson 19

Level 2 (Middle School) Lesson 26

Project Citizen, Level 1

“What is Public Policy and Who Makes It?”

This lesson was developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents of this lesson do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

©2011. Center for Civic Education. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to freely reproduce and use this lesson for nonprofit, classroom use only. Copyright must be acknowledged on all copies.