

How To Organize a Demonstration

The people’s right to peaceably assemble and to “petition the government for a redress of grievances” is one of the most important freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution’s Bill of Rights. The right to freedom of association is a bedrock requirement of a functioning democracy. Without this right, the people lose one of the best tools for making their views known to those who hold power. Marching in the streets, holding demonstrations, staging protests—these are some of the most effective ways of at once showing support for a cause, drawing new people to that cause, and attracting the attention of those in positions of power.

The street march and the corner demonstration have a proud place in US history and in the history of social movements around the world. The abolitionist movement, the women’s suffrage movement, the labor movement, Gandhi’s anti-imperialist movement, the civil rights movement, and the movement against the Vietnam War all made good use of marches and demonstrations. Today, that tradition is alive and well, from the streets of Seattle to the boulevards of Washington, DC.

Organizing a demonstration may sound like hard work, but it doesn’t have to be. Gather together two dozen of your friends, make some signs and come up with some chants, and you’re ready to protest the unsavory voting record of a local politician or the unaccountable misdeeds of a local corporate executive.

All you have to do is hit the streets!

Some Types of Demonstrations:

- **Vigil.** Candelight vigils are a well-known way to remember lost lives or commemorate other kinds of victims. They are generally solemn and reflective, and intended as a way to honor a person or a group of persons. A good example is the “Take Back the Night” vigils or the events held in the wake of September 11.
- **Picket Line.** This type of demonstration consists largely of a group of people holding signs and chanting and marching outside a building or office. If you have ever seen workers on strike, you have probably witnessed a picket line. Pickets are also a popular tactic with the anti-sweatshop movement and other groups who have used protests in front of corporate retail chains as a way to hold corporations accountable for their actions.
- **March.** A march is much like a picket line—people hold signs and shout chants—except that the crowd is walking from one designated point to an agreed upon destination. Marches are usually a good idea when you are expecting a particularly large crowd, or when you want to convey a message in the selection of your route or your destination. An example of a march is any of those that occur on the National Mall in Washington, DC such as the Million Man March.
- **Sit-ins and Other Types of Civil Disobedience.** When an injustice becomes so great that people of conscience can no longer tolerate it, non-violent civil disobedience can be a crucial tactic. Pioneered

by American author Henry David Thoreau and made popular by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., non-violent civil disobedience offers a way of taking direct action without resorting to force.

Probably the most well-known type of civil disobedience is the sit-in. Typically, protesters occupy the space of a decision maker—whether a corporate executive, a university president, or an elected official—make a demand, and refuse to leave until the demand is met or negotiated. Sit-ins have also taken place in front of the retail stores of corporations.

In recent years, civil disobedience has become more creative. Sometimes protesters chain themselves together to block an intersection or lock themselves to a building's entrance. Sometimes protesters scale down buildings to unfurl giant banners.

Important note: Civil disobedience is by definition unlawful. If you plan to organize a sit-in or similar demonstration, we encourage you to obtain legal advice in advance. We suggest the American Civil Liberties Union or the National Lawyers Guild.

Steps for Organizing a Demonstration:

- **Identify and reach out to supporters/Create a coalition:** As with organizing any event—whether a house party, teach-in or protest—it is essential to bring together a key group of people who are committed to the project. It is also useful to reach out to other groups to see if they would want to contribute to the demonstration. Campaigns work best when they are anchored by a *coalition* of groups and individuals. Who else might be interested in helping to plan the demonstration? What natural allies do you have in the community? Try to find coalition partners sooner rather than later. Coalitions work best when everyone is involved in the process from the beginning.

Building coalitions among different constituencies is not only key to organizing a big demonstration—it is also essential to forming an energetic and broad-based social movement.

- **Assign tasks and determine roles.** It is useful to make sure everyone knows their assigned tasks. When organizing a demonstration, you probably want one person responsible emceeding the protest itself; one person in charge with getting the required permits, and if necessary, being in contact with the police; one person responsible for working with the media; and one responsible for signs, art, and chants. *Everyone* should be responsible for spreading the word to the general public.

- **Location-location-location/Permits and officials:** You want to hold your demonstration where there is a lot of traffic—either auto traffic or pedestrians or both. Because you want to connect with as many people as possible, visibility is key. A lousy location can undermine even the best organized demonstration.

It is important that you know your rights regarding the use of space, whether you are organizing a demonstration on a college campus or along a public street. Many towns require permits for demonstrations, especially if you will be using amplified sound such as bullhorns. Permits are almost always required for marches since they may disrupt traffic. Talk to the campus or community police about your demonstration and determine what permits you need.

If you are planning to risk arrest, you should make extra arrangements. It is a wise idea to have trained legal observers on hand to take notes and document the event. The National Lawyers Guild can provide suggestions on finding legal observers: www.nlg.org or 212-679-5100.

We also recommend that before engaging in non-violent civil disobedience, some members of your group should take part in non-violence training. The Ruckus Society offers regular direct action camps, and can suggest other trainers in your area: www.ruckus.org or 510-763-7080.

- **Get the word out:** Turnout is crucial. A large number of people at your protest demonstrates broad public support for your cause. Both the media and the decision makers you are trying to influence will be looking closely at the number of people at your protest to see if you have real community backing. Develop a specific strategy for outreach and publicity, and set a goal for the number of people you want at the demonstration. Then create a plan for reaching out to *10 to 100 times* as many people as you hope will be there. Assume that only a fraction of the people you contact will actually show up.

Key to a successful outreach strategy is the production of materials like event fliers, direct mail invitations, email invitations, and public service announcements. Distribute the fliers as much as possible among friends and colleagues to be disseminated publicly at coffee shops, community centers, bulletin boards, cultural centers, other events, churches, schools, universities, etc.

You can also use the press as a tool to get the word out. Write a press release and send it to campus and local media to get the media to cover the event. Send a flier or public service announcement to radio stations and community newspapers to get the event announced on the air or in the events section of the newspaper. The sooner you have materials ready, the better, especially in regards to media.

- **Speakers and Schedule:** Whether you're holding a solemn vigil or a loud march, you will want speakers at your event. Gather a group of people representing a wide range of constituencies— young people, old people, people of color, working class people, professionals. Just as a large number of people illustrates support for your cause, so does a diverse range of speakers. Decide on the order in which you want your speakers to address the crowd. Give speaker about two or three minutes and ask them to keep it short. Remember: this is a demonstration, not a teach-in.

Also, always make sure you have an emcee who is in charge of the speakers' order. It's this person's responsibility to bring a bullhorn or amplifier and to keep the program moving smoothly.

- **Slogans and Chanting:** Don't assume that you will suddenly think up chants in the heat of the protest. This won't happen, so you need to prepare chants beforehand.

A few days before the demonstration, set aside some time to brainstorm catchy slogans that can be learned quickly by a crowd. Be as creative as you can. Even if you're working on a very serious issue, it's always a good idea to come up with a chant that might make people smile. Keep in mind that the passersby are people you want to educate, not alienate.

Make copies of the chants to give out to fellow demonstrators. Have someone in charge of leading people in the chants.

- **Signs and other materials:** Colorful signs are *essential* for capturing people’s attention. Make signs that have bold letters and clear messages—the fewer words, the better. You can paint your signs by hand or enlarge photos that illustrate your issue. Make sure your signs are readable from far away and make for good photo-ops. As with chants, the use of sarcasm or a play on words can be an effective way of communicating.

- **Literature and handouts.** A bright, colorful sign may catch someone’s attention, but then what? Most people won’t have the time to stop and chat about your cause. That’s why it’s important that you bring educational materials to hand out—some sort postcard, fact sheet or flier that discusses your issue. The average person on their lunch break may not be able to hang out and learn about the issue, but if you give them something to stick in their back pocket, chances are that they will read it later.

- **Puppets and other props.** Life-size puppets offer a fantastic way to dramatize your issue, and they make a great visual for television cameras. Other kinds of props like giant banners will also enliven your demonstration. Making art a central part of your protest will help you attract more attention. Art will also make your demonstration more fun for those involved.

- **Creative actions, skits and songs:** It’s always a good idea to think of new ways to express your point of view. Maybe you don’t want to have another protest with people changing and shouting. Perhaps you want something more original.

Skits and other kinds performance provide an excellent way to grab people’s interest. Write and perform a short play that explores your issue. For example, anti-sweatshop activists have organized “sweatshop fashion shows” to show people who the real fashion victims are. A song and dance performance is another fun way to attract attention and get your point across.

- **Invite the media/prepare press packets:** A well-organized demonstration on a busy street corner can communicate with hundreds of people. But if the media covers your demonstration, you can reach 1,000 times as many people. Make sure you designate someone to be responsible for doing outreach to the media. For details on how to do effective media outreach, see the Media How To in this guide.

On the day of the demonstration, make sure you have plenty of press packets prepared. A press packet should have all the background material a reporter would need to cover your story. Include your original press release about the event (which should explain why you are protesting) and also any fact sheets or other campaign materials you may have. At least one person should be responsible for handing out press packets to reporters and also getting the reporters’ names so you can contact them about future events.