

A Glossary of the Most Common Forms of Activism

Activist Trainings: Taking an interested body of people and giving them tools with which to organize or protest. Before the anti-choice group the Lambs of Christ invaded Fargo in 1991, for instance, staffers from the Fargo Women's Health Clinic trained volunteer escorts in decoying (that is, pretending to be a woman coming into the clinic while the real patient was brought in through another entrance), nonviolent confrontation, and how to avoid getting arrested. Other activist trainings might be less about skills and more about building knowledge. For example, the School of Unity and Liberation teaches young people the history of the civil rights movement or the state of globalization, to prepare them for activism.

Boycotts: Regular people using consumer power to protest the practices of a large corporation, which would typically ignore individual comments. To cite one example, since the early seventies Nestle has coercively distributed baby formula in developing countries with no sensitivity to the fact that the water used to mix the powdered formula is unclean and breast milk has proved to be an infinitely healthier choice. In 1977, activist groups called for a boycott of all Nestle products, which has continued (with a short hiatus) until today and which led the World Health Organization to promote the benefits of breast feeding and to draft "The International Code on the Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes."

Canvassing: Literally going door-to-door providing information and consciousness-raising. Canvassing might be pamphleting for a local candidate or getting out the vote or fund-raising for United Way by ringing doorbells in your neighborhood.

Petitions: A list of signatures in support of a certain issue or person. Some petitions are formally important – part of a structure to get a name on a ballot or a referendum. There are also online petitions, which are employed when there is a broad call for people to send their names individually to a central address, or to put the petition up at a site that hosts petitions, like petitionsonline.com.

Protests: Usually a gathering of people to disrupt the status quo or to erode support for an issue or institution. Protests can be walking out of meetings, organizing a buy-nothing day, National Smoke-out, National Meat-Free Day, etc. In 1903 Mary Harris (Mother) Jones rallied together children working in factories and marched with them for nearly 200 miles, from city hall in Kensington, Pennsylvania, to President Theodore Roosevelt's house on Long Island, with their maimed fingers high in the air to protest child exploitation.

Sit-ins: Activists take over spaces that need to be changed and just stay there – sitting tight – until demands are met, consciousness is raised, or the media catch on. In Alabama in the early sixties, the lunch counters at Woolworths were integrated by black people who had the guts to sit in white-only spaces. Similarly, the male-run Ladies' Home Journal was invaded by New York Women in Media in 1971. Before the

activists left his office, John Mack Carter, then editor in chief, agreed to give the feminists a special section in a future issue to report on women's liberation.

Speak-outs: A public meeting or protest that features personal testimonials, such as often happens at a Take Back the Night march. Speak-outs are generally used to break silence about a taboo subject and to demonstrate the urgency of a particular issue. Thus, the abortion speak-outs of the late sixties were daring, making the point that women were getting illegal procedures and in huge numbers, challenging the idea that something so necessary to many was criminalized.

Street Theater: Using guerilla art and acting to protest publicly. This might be performing The Vagina Monologues in the middle of Britain's House of Commons or throwing cherry pies at people who represent abuses of power, as pioneered by the Biotic Baking Brigade. This trio has pied former San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, Bill Gates, Pacific Lumber boss Charles Horowitz, and Keith Campbell, the geneticist who cloned Dolly the sheep. This form of activism tends to gather plenty of media coverage and makes a splash.

Tabling: Public education (pamphlets, handouts, or a person fielding questions at a table), usually taking place at some established event or space like a county fair, rock concert, or student union. Music for America has made a deal with many musicians to provide public education postcards at their concerts. The cards focus on the drug war, health care, and media consolidation – issues that are likely to get concert-goers to vote.

Teach-ins: Usually an informal crash course in a current and complicated political issue, making up for gaps or bias in the media coverage or one's education. After September 11, there were hundreds of teach-ins on college campuses that reflected how little most Americans knew about the Taliban until it directly affected us.

All of these traditional tools work in concert with one another. For instance, Rosa Parks attended activist trainings at the Highlander Folk School. In 1955, her refusal to give up her seat – a protest – spawned the Birmingham bus boycotts, and marked the moment when the civil rights movement became visible to the world.

Adapted from: *Grassroots – A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* by Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards (2005)