

FEBRUARY ONE Lesson Plan

pbs.org/independentlens/februaryone

Breaking the Code: Actions and Songs of Protest

Grade Levels: 7-12

Estimated time: Three class periods, not including optional performance of songs

Introduction:

The Greensboro Four staged their lunch counter protest in reaction to the frustrations and injustices of life for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Before detailing the actual protest, FEBRUARY ONE depicts some of the conditions against which the students demonstrated.

One method of protest not mentioned in the video is the variety of songs that were written to publicize the cruelties of Jim Crow laws and to speak out against the treatment of African Americans. An example is Bob Dylan's "The Murder of Emmett Till," which decries the horrendous murder of a Chicago teenager visiting Mississippi.

Students will examine a few of the many ways in which African Americans were treated unfairly under Jim Crow, and they will watch the FEBRUARY ONE video to learn about life in Greensboro and the Greensboro sit-ins. They will also read the lyrics to Dylan's song and discuss the purposes of protest music. They will conclude by writing their own songs lyrics, set to modern tunes with which they are familiar, describing the sit-ins.

It would be ideal if students had a basic knowledge of Civil Rights Movement before doing this lesson. To expand upon the Jim Crow topic, you might want to do some of the lessons from the PBS Web site for *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow>.

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Breaking the Code: Actions and Songs of Protest**Lesson Objectives:**

Students will:

- Read the lyrics to and analyze the Bob Dylan Song “The Death of Emmett Till,” and discuss the purpose of protest music.
- Analyze an editorial cartoon related to the Jim Crow South.
- Read questions from the Alabama Literacy Test, and discuss the implications of this test for African American voters.
- Watch and discuss excerpts from FEBRUARY ONE regarding Greensboro in the mid-20th century, life for African Americans in the Jim Crow South, and the actions of the Greensboro Four.
- Watch the rest of the program, paying attention to how the sit-ins were conducted and how they succeeded.
- Compile a list of words and phrases describing the Greensboro sit-ins.
- Work in groups to write songs about the Greensboro sit-ins.

Materials Needed:

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR
- FEBRUARY ONE video

Standards (from <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>):

National Language Arts Standards:

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

Standard 3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions

National Civics Standards:

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

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Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

National United States History Standards:

Standard 29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

Teaching Strategy:

1. Have students read the lyrics to the Bob Dylan song "The Death of Emmett Till" (<http://bobdylan.com/songs/emmettill.html>). It might be helpful to have them take turns reading verses out loud to the class. If you can obtain a recording of the song, ask them to listen to it once without reading the lyrics and a second time while reading along with the lyrics.
2. Ask students to describe what this song is about, based on the lyrics alone (as they may have no prior knowledge of the Emmett Till murder). What happened to Emmett Till? Why did this happen? Tell the class that, like many of Bob Dylan's other songs, this one can be considered a "protest song." What is this song protesting? Why do students think someone would write a song as a means of protest? Explain that later in the lesson they'll write their own protest songs regarding another event of the Civil Rights Movement. (For more information about protest songs, see the PBS Web site for the *Independent Lens* film STRANGE FRUIT: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html>; for more information about Emmett Till, see FEBRUARY ONE: Emmett Till: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/februaryone/till.html>.)
3. Read the class this definition of Jim Crow, as taken from PBS Web site for the film *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow>): "Jim Crow was not a person, yet affected the lives of millions of people. Named after a popular 19th-century minstrel song that stereotyped African Americans, 'Jim Crow' came to personify the system of government-sanctioned racial oppression and segregation in the United States." Ask students if they can name any examples of Jim Crow that they've learned about in previous lessons or elsewhere.

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4. Have students look at the editorial cartoon "First Segregationist Church." (**See [Transparencies.PDF](#).**) Ask them to describe what this cartoon shows and how it represents the segregation that southern African Americans faced.
5. Have students skim through the Alabama Literacy Questions. (**See [Transparencies.PDF](#).**) Explain that African Americans were required to answer these questions in order to vote. Since most southern African Americans were undereducated and many could not read, it was highly unlikely that they would pass the literacy test. Even if they passed, other obstacles would likely prevent them from voting. (For more information about Jim Crow voting restrictions, see PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: Voting Then, Voting Now: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/tools_voting.html.)
6. Pose the question "How did these examples of segregation and discrimination prevent African Americans from living free lives?" and discuss students' responses.
7. Show the following segments from the FEBRUARY ONE video, pausing after each segment to discuss the questions. As they watch, ask students to take notes on the ways in which African Americans were discriminated against.
 - beginning to 4:27:
 - What did the four Greensboro students do as an act of protest?
 - What do you think the speaker means when he says "The four sit-ins walked right across that track in the wrong direction; they crossed that track, they went to the other side?" (3:12)
 - 7:00 – 10:00:
 - What was Greensboro like in the 1950s?
 - Did African American kids growing up in Greensboro feel completely oppressed by their situation? What does G. Jean Howard (Jibreel's sister) mean when she says "Segregation had ills and some advantages?" (7:28)
 - What were African American kids in Greensboro taught about how to behave around white people?
 - What examples of discrimination existed?

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- What threats did African Americans receive?
- 10:00 – 14:24:
 - What does Franklin McCain mean when he says “I didn’t hate anybody, but I just felt that a system had betrayed me?” (11:11)
 - How did the Greensboro students’ behavior change after they saw Martin Luther King, Jr. speak?
 - How did the murder of Emmett Till influence them and make them feel? What does Jibreel Khazan mean when he says “Emmett Till showed us what could happen if we broke the code... If we spoke out of turn, we could die?”
8. Students now know about some of the experiences that African Americans endured in the Jim Crow South, including difficulties voting, segregation in a variety of public and private establishments and facilities, and even the threat of murder. Explain that, for the purposes of this lesson, they have only learned about some of the many difficulties African Americans faced under Jim Crow.
 9. Show the rest of FEBRUARY ONE, asking students to take notes to answer the questions below. If students have already watched the program, discuss the answers to the questions as students remember them:
 - What problems did the Greensboro Four face?
 - What were they debating and discussing in their dorm room?
 - What did they decide to do, and why?
 - How successful was their protest?
 10. Ask students to take another look at the Emmett Till song they read at the beginning of this lesson (<http://bobdylan.com/songs/emmettill.html>). Inform them that they will be writing their own song lyrics to describe the Greensboro sit-ins.
 11. As a class, compile a list of words and phrases that apply to the racial situation in Greensboro and to the sit-ins. List on the board as many as students can come up with, and keep this list posted while students do the Assessment activity.

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Breaking the Code: Actions and Songs of Protest**Assessment:**

Divide the class into small groups of three or four students each.

Ask each group to think of a song that students already know and enjoy.

Ask groups to write their own lyrics to the same tune and rhythm of the song they have selected. Their new lyrics should be about the Greensboro sit-ins and should include the following themes:

- The aspects of life in the Jim Crow South that helped lead the four students to protest
- The actual protest activities
- The outcome of the protest

Students may use the words and phrases on the board in their song lyrics. They should be sure to use a variety of adjectives, verbs, and nouns to describe the sit-ins.

As an option, have groups perform their songs in front of the class.

Extension Ideas:

- Have students browse the PBS Web site for the *Independent Lens* film STRANGE FRUIT (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html>) to find other examples of protest songs from different eras of American history. Ask each student to choose two or three song verses, including one from the Civil Rights era, to analyze. Have them copy the lyrics and explain in a paragraph why the song was written and what the lyrics call for. Then ask them to do the same for a song from the past five years that they feel is a protest song.
- Have students learn more about the Emmett Till murder at these Web sites:
 - PBS: The American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till>
 - The Death of Emmett Till (Historical Background)
<http://www.bobdylanroots.com/till.html>

Ask them to write paragraphs explaining what happened, describing the event from

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one or two other people's viewpoints (particularly as provided on the second Web site), and explaining what went wrong with the justice system.

- Have students go through the activities at PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: Unwritten Rules...Unwritten Legacy (http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/tools_unwritten.html). Discuss their responses to the questions posed in each activity, and talk about whether any of these experiences might still be relevant or common today. In what ways do your students think racism and discriminatory behaviors still exist in this country?

Online Resources:

FEBRUARY ONE: The Story of the Greensboro Four documentary
<http://www.pbs.org/februaryone>

PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow>

PBS: American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till>

The History of Jim Crow
<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org>

CNN: Civil Rights Timeline
<http://www.cnn.com/EVENTS/1997/mlk/links.html>

The Death of Emmett Till (Historical Background)
<http://www.bobdylanroots.com/till.html>

PBS: Independent Lens: STRANGE FRUIT
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html>

About the Author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her Secondary Teaching Credential in social studies from Loyola Marymount University and her Master of Arts in geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.