**What Is Activism?**

“A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” - Merriam Webster Dictionary



At its core, activism is taking action to enact change in the world. This can be done by individuals, groups, organizations, and movements. The key features are that it is collective, challenges some status quo, and is directed against institutions and practices that the activist seek to change. But there is an important emphasis on action: it is not about who you are, where you are from, or what your goals are, but **WHAT YOU DO**. There are many actions that may be considered “activism” and many people that may be considered “activists”, but ***you*** ***do not need to consider yourself an “activist” to make a positive change***. These terms are often thrown around loosely or defined differently by different people, as the term “activism” is actually quite broad. Activism isn’t just for those who have committed their lives solely to creating change, and productive actions can range from the mundane to the extraordinary. Understand that there are a ton of different ways to get involved, but you don’t have all the time and resources in the world.

**What does activism look like?**



As a young student in a big world, it can be daunting to even think about trying to create positive change in the world. But while it may not be easy, making change is undeniably possible. Whether your cause is to radically change a core pillar of society or just to make a positive change in your community, there is always something you can do. There are many assumptions of what activism or activists look like, and many who engage in activism might not even consider themselves “activists”. Not everyone can risk getting arrested, pay fines, or go on a hunger strike—but there are plenty of ways to get involved and start making a difference. We’ll get more into specific tactics and strategies later on, but activism can range anywhere from writing a letter to your congressperson to organizing a boycott of a company or service. No amount of action is necessarily too small—if you care about a cause and are willing to invest the time, energy, and resources, you can create meaningful change. The most important step is always the next one forward, regardless of whether it’s your first step or your millionth.

**The first thing you need to do is care**.Pick an issue. It is unlikely that any meaningful change will come about without someone first caring about it. The extent to which you care about your issues will dictate how you engage with each one. So find something you care about, something that you think is wrong in the world and ought to be changed, and begin thinking about what you want to change about it.

**Educate yourself.** Now that you’ve got an issue that you care about, learn about it! There are resources everywhere, you just have to go and see for yourself. Knowing about your issue is very important—you can’t adequately determine what the root of the problem is or what can be done about it without understanding it. This can be a tricky thing, because in a world where displays of the Dunning-Kruger effect are rampant, it is essential that you know enough about your issue that you can actively contribute to the general discussion. Remember, however, that while the amount of information available may be infinite, your time and the timeline of your issue is inevitably limited—be judicious in how much time you spend to get educated, and keep in mind that you should always be trying to learn throughout the process. Be open to always learning more, but don’t let not feeling like an “expert” on a topic prevent you from working to change something you care about.

**Prioritize*.*** You don’t have all the time in the world, and it takes time and effort to create change. You’re going to have to prioritize what you think is most important to you and what you think you can change, and to be both ambitious and realistic in setting out your goals. Everyone weighs the importance and urgency of issues differently, and everyone has their own idea of what tactics would be the most effective in creating the change they wish to see. You must decide what you want to change and how you want to change it, in the most effective manner possible. Choosing effective tactics is crucial—we are not interested in wasting your time, nor anyone else’s.

**Plan**. We’ll get more into what specific tactics and strategies you can use later on, but having a plan to act on is a great way to organize what you are going to do. Try to be clear with yourself and those around you about what you want your own activism to be. Don’t forget that there are a multitude of tactics and strategies at your disposal, as well as many ways of viewing the world and the world we should be working towards.

**Act***.* Get to work on putting your plan into action! Just do it! Use your knowledge, resources, and passion to get the ball rolling. Even if what you do is small, if you act with care and authenticity, you can absolutely make a real difference in the world—and inspire others to join you along the way.

**Assess**. One area where activists have long fallen short is learning from past successes and failures of other movements, and taking them into account for the next go around. Be clear in your goals and your measures of success—and don’t get discouraged when things don’t go as planned or don’t produce substantial change immediately. Learn from mistakes, always look for ways to be more effective than the last time, and don’t forget that lessons you can learn from others are mistakes that you don’t have to make yourself.

**Repeat***.* Improvise, adapt, overcome. After you’ve completed an iteration of your own form of activism, whatever it may be, and reflected on it, take what you’ve learned and put it to use. Plan to act again, and better. If we are trying to change the world, efficacy is essential; to improve our efficacy, we need to act on what we’ve learned from our own experiences and from others’. Always seek to do what you can with what you have.

**What is Activism Not?**



Almost as important as defining what activism *is* is knowing what activism *is not*. There are often misguided perceptions or assumptions of what activism is and looks like, and there are a lot of ways that the systems which activists want to change will try to co-opt activists and their activism. Most centrally, activism is extra-institutional, which means that when you engage in activism you are not working *through* the system. In fact, you are working to *change* the system. This means that things like lobbying, voting, or running for office **are not activism**. You should be trying to shake—or eradicate, depending on your end goals—one or more pillars of society ([Engler & Engler 2016](https://intel-writers.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Mark-Engler-Paul-Engler-This-Is-an-Uprising_-How-Nonviolent-Revolt-Is-Shaping-the-Twenty-First-Century-Nation-Books-2016.pdf), p. 91-92). Be diligent in choosing your actions, and always try to make sure they match your intentions. Avoid shaming other activists in a non-constructive manner, because it is likely that you are more ideologically aligned than you may realize.

Activism should not be solely for the sake of performing your goodness to others or for fun. This is not to say that you can’t have fun while being an activist, just that your primary concern should be focused on what you are trying to accomplish. Nor do you need to always keep your activism to yourself, as spreading the word about ways to get involved is in fact a means of activism. Try to reflect on what it is you are doing, and be honest with yourself about your intentions in order to stay on the right path (see our section on internet activism and virtue signaling for more).

Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect activist. Activism can and does take a toll on our mental, physical, and emotional health, so be sure to take account of the potential effects it may have on you to avoid burnout and stay well.

**So what can you actually do?**

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As we’ll mention many times over, there are many specific ways to engage in activism. There are direct and indirect tactics, active and passive, individual and collective, and other subgenres of activism (find the right methods for you in the “Tactics” section). Actions that can help effect change can include anything from participating in a protest to helping recruit members for an activist organization. How you get involved is up to you, but be clear with yourself about what you care about, what you can do, and how you want to do it. Change is possible, but not without the people to make it happen. And remember—the most important step is always the next one forward.