

DIRECT ACTION TOOLKIT: DESIGN A PROTEST SIGN



What is direct action?

Direct action refers to the political tactics and methods used to raise awareness or force discussion on an issue. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolent direct action “seeks to dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored.” Like voting, direct actions, which include protests and sit-ins, are an essential part of a democracy. Unlike voting, however, direct actions can happen at any time, and anybody in a society can initiate a direct action—not just those of voting age.

Protest Signs

One of the most fundamental forms of direct action is a public march or demonstration, and an important part of public demonstrates is the use of handmade signs. Protestors create and carry signs to express their opinions to observers in short, catchy slogans that attract attention and deliver a short but powerful message. In the age of social media, signs have become a way for a message to reach even beyond a live protest, as photographs of impactful signs can be shared digitally to further spread a message. If you plan to ever participate in a demonstration, then creating an effective sign is an excellent skill to develop.

INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Research the issue

Effective direct actions always start with a solid understanding of the issue you are trying to address and the community you are trying to reach with your message. First, understand both sides of the issue. Then figure out what you are trying to say and, just as importantly, who you are trying to say it to. Are you addressing people who feel differently from you to raise their awareness of your perspective? Or are you addressing people who agree with you to create a feeling of solidarity?

Step 2: Come up with a slogan

The hardest part of creating an effective sign is summarizing a complex issue in just a few words. The text on your sign should be short, clear, and memorable. “Black lives matter” is only three words, but they speak directly to a broad message shared by millions, and their power multiplies when carried by large groups marching in solidarity. Sometimes humor can be an effective way to make your sign memorable.

Step 3: Gather your materials

You don’t need a lot of fancy materials to make an effective protest sign. Cardboard and markers work fine. However, if you’re going to take your sign to an outdoor protest, foam core board is recommended for improved durability. Thick permanent ink markers, in bold colors, work best.

Step 4: Draw your sign

It’s a good idea to sketch your sign in pencil first. Space the words throughout the sign without anything getting cut off or crammed together at the end. Your lettering should be nice and big, with thick lines so you can read it from a distance. Bubble letters work well, especially if you fill them. Go for high contrasts, like dark letters on a light background. And if you decide to include drawings or other graphics, keep them simple, big, and relevant to the text on your sign.

Step 5: Take it to the streets!

The best place for a protest sign is at a public march or demonstration. If there is a protest that you want to participate in, check in with a trusted adult for more help with participating safely. Alternatively, you can use technology to spread your message by sharing a photo of you holding your sign via social media or in a virtual classroom space.

A large crowd of people is shown from behind, holding up white protest signs. The scene is outdoors, and the image has a blue tint. The text is overlaid on the top part of the image.

“The great social justice changes in our country have happened when people came together, organized, and took direct action.”

Dolores Huerta
Civil Rights and Labor Activist