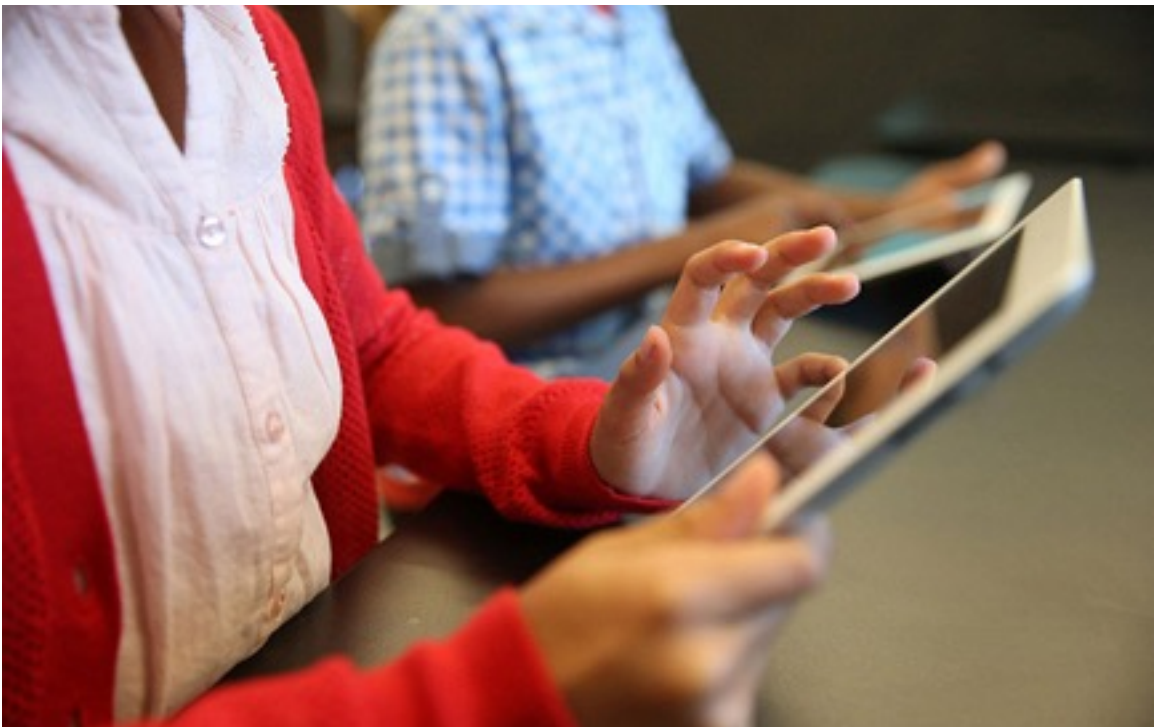


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# Protest Poetry for the Writer/ Activist

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The language We Desire. The Action We Need.



Feminine Pronoun Consultants, LLC

*1st Edition*

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# Why Does it Matter What We Call It?

I am often asked, “why can we not call American black people racist?” My answer has always been of course there is *personal* racism among black Americans. (Emphasis on the personal.) But I insist that we always clarify, and insert that term. *Personal*. Why is that? Well the answer lies in the question of power. Racism is bias plus power that is systemized. Racism is structural bias located in the institutions of society. It is in the educational system, the criminal justice system, the healthcare system, and the political system. In order to eradicate structural bias, one must target the correct places. Structural bias relies on making every fight feel individual. People often think that if we were all just nicer to each other, we could eliminate racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, classism, and ableism. But the truth is many of our institutions are structurally biased *and* they are populated by very nice people. So, although the personal is political and quite important, the structural is what this course will focus on.

## Getting Started

In the following pages we will look at the foundational definitions that will help all of us move toward targeting the areas that most speak to our passions and gifts, and help us create a personal activist mission statement.

one

# Defining Bias

## *prejudice, discrimination, and structural bias*

---

- ▶ **PREJUDICE:** “It’s all in the mind.”
  - ▶ **DISCRIMINATION:** “It’s in the mind and the body.”
  - ▶ **STRUCTURAL BIAS:** “It’s in the system.”
- 

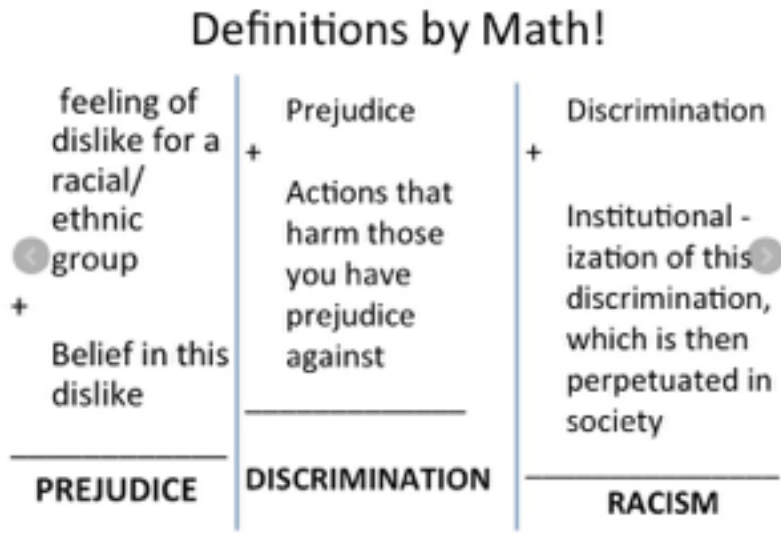
### The Difference

**Prejudice** is all in the mind. You may see someone of a certain ethnic or racial group, and you maybe believe some stereotype about them. This could be a “positive” stereotype or a negative one. For instance, in the US there is a stereotype that black Jamaican immigrants work many jobs and that they don’t feel fatigue from constant work in the same way as other ethnic groups.

**Discrimination** is when you have those prejudiced thoughts, and then you make a move to change your environment because of those prejudiced thoughts. So, if I decided no black Jamaican immigrants would be allowed in my neighborhood because I believe they were of a lower class than me, that would be discrimination. However, I have not organized my entire real estate system to deny Jamaicans entry. This is more of a personal discrimination where my friends and I have an enclave and one of our spoken or unspoken discriminatory practices is to not allow Jamaicans

**Structural bias** (racism) is evident when black Jamaicans are unable to purchase property in desirable neighborhoods regardless of income. When real estate agents do not show them certain neighborhoods, and when lenders (the financial system) finds them a “risk,” even with credit scores comparable to other ethnicities, especially white men.

Check out the following visual:



Now it's YOUR TURN!

In small groups, come up with examples of prejudice, discrimination, and structural bias.

The first example is done for you.

TYPE	EXAMPLE
Prejudice	My mother thought _____ were "sneaky"

two

# Defining White Supremacy

## *the supreme body, isms, and intersectionality*

---

- ▶ THE SUPREME BODY: “It fits all or most of the societal criteria.”
  - ▶ ISMS: “these are criteria based biases.”
  - ▶ INTERSECTIONALITY: “All oppression is connected.”
- 

### How they work together

In the western hemisphere, and in many ways globally, the various biases can be summed up in major categories. They have to do with Race, Gender, Class, Ability, and Age,. One might also add the physical beauty of the body as determined by western beauty standards. When I look at these big categories I see that under them fall the prejudices that (when added with power) become the various **isms**. Race discrimination and prejudice, plus power becomes racism. Gender discrimination and prejudice, plus power become sexism. In regard to sexual orientation it becomes homophobia or heterosexism. And in the same way we find classism, ableism, ageism, and others.

We can determine who has the privilege by examining the ISM. For instance, in the west racism privileges whiteness. The privileged in the issue of sexism are men. The privileged in the issue of ableism are the able bodied. But this is complex, because sometime one can be a member of an oppressed group, but still inhabit spaces of privilege. For instance, Oprah Winfrey is a billionaire. She does not face the same institutional racism that working class black Americans face. Her extreme class privilege has superseded gender and race for her. Let's say that Oprah Winfrey decided to make feminism her main social justice fight. She would have to pay attention to the INTERSECTIONS. The privilege her wealth has afforded could make her less sensitive to how hard it is for many women, poor women, and other women of color. Oprah Winfrey might find it difficult to rally women as they may see her as

someone who does not share their struggle. So it would be up to Ms. Winfrey to be sensitive to class distinctions and how they drive sexist behavior in society.

*Check out the following visual:*

There are blank spaces in the chart. In small groups fill those in with possible intersections.

CRITERIA	The ISM it CREATES	Possible intersections
race	racism	someone might be part of a minority racial or ethnic group, but wealthy
gender	sexism	someone may be able experience a more privileged life because they are "beautiful"
sexuality	homophobia/heterosexism	
class	classism	
ability	ablism	
age	agism	

Here is a blank one for you to use later.

CRITERIA	The ISM it CREATES	Possible intersections
race	racism	
gender	sexism	
sexuality	homophobia/heterosexism	
class	classism	
ability	ablism	
age	agism	

three

# Moving Toward Activism

*my criteria, my passion, and my gift*

---

- ▶ MY CRITERIA: Where is my battleground?
  - ▶ MY PASSION: What is my weapon?
  - ▶ MY GIFT: How will I wield my weapon?
- 



## I believe that we will win

When I taught high school for nearly a decade I also instructed a unit on how to find a good career match. I encouraged my students to figure out where their passions and their gifts met. For instance if a student's passion was the issue of early childhood education, and their gift was being a great listener., I might encourage them to look into child psychology, or social work, or counseling. In another example, if a student's passion is questions about the universe, space travel. and how celestial bodies were created, and their gift is math, I might encourage them to go into astronomy or particle physics.

In the same way, as activists, you must figure out what your gifts are, what your passion is, and the area of bias where you most want to deploy your gifts and passions. I have a passion for issues of race and gender, and my gifts are writing, coaching, and presenting. So this means that if I combined it all I would be combating racism and sexism specifically in global communities of women by using my writing coaching and presenting. Now it's your turn to put together your passion, your gift, and the what social justice battlefield you'll be deploying those on:

*Check out following visual:*

The chart is filled in based on my life. You should take a moment to fill it in based on yours.

Passion	Gift	battleground
race 	writing, coaching, presenting	empowering young women, improving education, facilitating dialogues about race with employers, writing about race and gender
gender 		
sexuality		
class		
ability		
age		

Here is a blank one you can fill out later.

Passion	Gift	battleground
race		
gender		
sexuality		
class		
ability		
age		

four

# Creating an Activist Mission Statement

*putting it all together*

---

- ▶ Gift: What I am good at
  - ▶ Passion: What I care about
  - ▶ Statement: What I will use them to do
- 

## Composing the Mission statement

Here is how I put together my GIFTS and my PASSIONS, and add how I will use them to create my activist mission statement:

I create poems, stories and pedagogy to empower black women and create a world free of racism and sexism.

Now it's your turn:

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five

# Protest Poetry

*the meaning and the history*

---

Now that we have created our activist mission statement, let's look at some poets who used their social justice passion and their gift, (writing), to fight for justice, equality and freedom.

---

It's only poetry

Middle East

**Saudi court shifts sentence on jailed poet:  
800 lashes instead of death**

**Iran: Free Two Poets Jailed for Exercising Right to  
Expression**

Poetry has long played a political role in Myanmar, and many poets there before Saungkha have been sent to prison. In the early part of the twentieth century, nationalists used verse to rouse those who struggled for independence from Great Britain. Many of the activists who participated in the country's widespread pro-democracy protests in 1988 were also writers and poets.

# #BlackPoetsSpeakOut

"I am a black poet who will not remain silent while this nation murders black people.

I have a right to be angry."

Official Twitter: @blackpoetspeak

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## 'No poison found' in Chile poet Pablo Neruda's remains

Many people have the impression that a poet is an 18th century Frenchman retiring to a garrett to compose verse in silence. Some people see poetry as a benign art that is more for self than anything else. But as you can tell by the following survey of headlines, poets and poetry have been challenging power since the first verse was ever written. Presently they are poets serving lengthy sentences simply because their verse talks back to power.

*Check out following visual:*

*“The Revolution Will Not be Televised” by Gil Scott Heron<sup>1</sup>*



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS3QOtbW4mo>

---

With the searing entry point line, “:You will not be able to stay home, brother,” “The Revolution will not be Televised” begins with a clear call to action.

The poem is clearly anti-consumption and anti-capitalist. It is a wake-up call to everyone who has been lulled into the western pattern that says “consume until you die.”

Take a moment to look at the poem closely on the next page. Do the following:

- ▶ Count the number of brands you can find.
- ▶ Find the places where the sarcasm and irony are most apparent.
- ▶ Find the places where Heron specifically attacks falseness among fellow black Americans

---

<sup>1</sup>Photo found on google at: <http://cstpdx.com/sites/clinton/files/images/Gil-Scott-Heron-001.jpg>

▶ "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"<sup>2</sup>

You will not be able to stay home, brother.  
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.  
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and  
skip out for beer during commercials,  
Because the revolution will not be televised.

The revolution will not be televised.  
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox  
In 4 parts without commercial interruptions.  
The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon  
blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John  
Mitchell, General Abrams and Mendel Rivers to eat  
hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary.

The revolution will not be televised.  
The revolution will not be brought to you by the  
Schaefer Award Theatre and will not star Natalie  
Woods and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia.  
The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal.  
The revolution will not get rid of the nubs.  
The revolution will not make you look five pounds  
thinner, the revolution will not be televised, Brother.

There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mays  
pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run,  
or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance.  
NBC will not be able predict the winner at 8:32  
on reports from 29 districts.  
The revolution will not be televised.

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down  
brothers in the instant replay.  
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being  
run out of Harlem on a rail with a brand new process.  
There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy  
Wilkins strolling through Watts in a Red, Black and  
Green liberation jumpsuit that he had been saving  
For just the right occasion.

Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville  
Junction will no longer be so god damned relevant, and  
women will not care if Dick finally screwed  
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people  
will be in the street looking for a

---

<sup>2</sup> lyrics found on A-Z Lyrics

brighter day.  
The revolution will not be televised.

There will be no highlights on the eleven o'clock  
news and no pictures of hairy armed women  
liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose.  
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb or  
Francis Scott Key, nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom  
Jones, Johnny Cash or Englebert Humperdink.  
The revolution will not be televised.

The revolution will not be right back  
after a message about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.  
You will not have to worry about a dove in your  
bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.  
The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.  
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.

The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised,  
will not be televised, will not be televised.  
The revolution will be no re-run brothers;  
The revolution will be live.

six

# Writing Your Own Protest Poem

*modeling, guided practice, and independent practice*

---

- ▶ MODELING: “Read and watch it.”
  - ▶ GUIDED PRACTICE: “Let’s do it together.”
  - ▶ INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: “Now, it’s your turn.”
- 

## Moving from idea to language

Every poem doesn't have the fire and brimstone almost sermonic quality that “The Revolution will not be Televised” has. Here is another example:

### **caveat**

the celluloid vision of jackie o  
reflexively reaching for kennedy's brains;  
too fast for even her  
aristocratic hands.

did she think  
she could put it all back together?

her archival papers  
(now cool to the touch)  
reveal she knew of his philandering --  
indiscriminate, blatant, and numerous.  
her mother counseled her to stay . . .

so maybe that reflexive jump  
on the back of a motorcade  
was not as mothers flinch,  
watching deathless sons

in football games.  
but more as a runner,  
anticipating the crisp gun shot.

---

One of the amazing things about poetry is it is heavily reliant on emotional connection. Ostensibly the subject of this poem is Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Mrs. Onassis was a figure who continues to ring resonant in American culture. I hadn't thought a lot about her until after I had been married and had to become a mother. It was in the moments of intense realization regarding the damaged nature of my partnership and the responsibility of parenthood that I began to recall everything I'd read and heard about her.

I thought of what it must have been like to be a young woman of her race and status and the incredible freedom that gave her while, (owing to the time in which she lived) an incredible cage was being built around her as well. I thought about what it must have been like to know that your sexual fidelity must never be in question while your husband's must never be questioned. And I thought of her early widowhood. And the secrets women keep in their hearts because they would fly in the face of the dominant narrative. All of these thoughts, feelings, and experiences served to create "caveat."

Now, notice that I did not mention scads of research. If I were writing a historical novel or a biography of Mrs. Onassis I would have had to spend years, combing through archives and diaries and journals and newspaper accounts. Not to mention I would be responsible for reading everything that had been written about her before me. But the beauty of poetry is that because Mrs. Onassis and I were both women and both mothers and both married, then I could imagine a space of parity even though she was born nearly 70 years before me.



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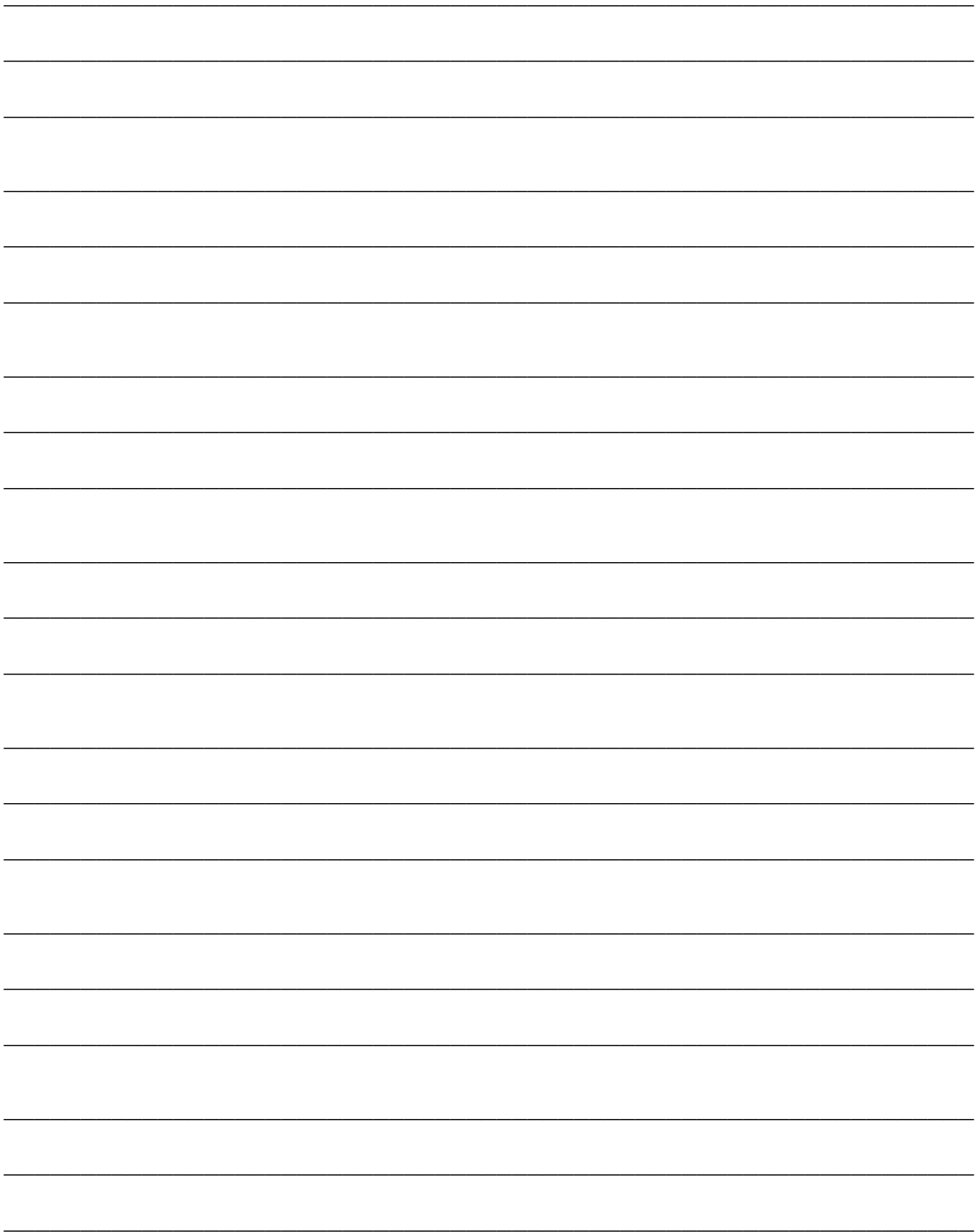
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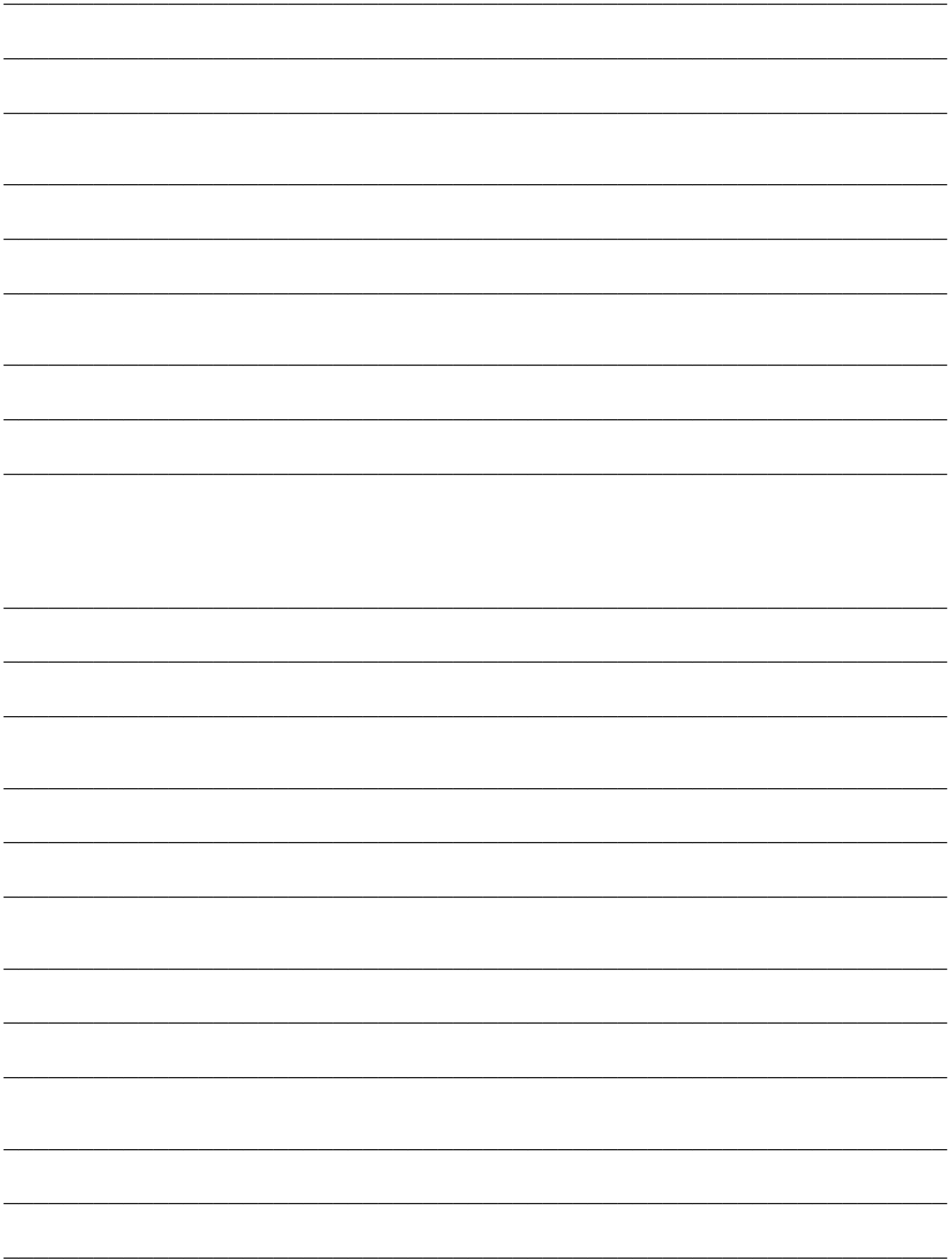
Now that you've looked at two very different examples of protest poetry, let's begin on writing your own.

---

To find a topic, in mind what we have learned so far:

- ▶ What are your passions?
- ▶ What are your gifts?
- ▶ What do you most want to work against/  
toward and why?







# **Rules for the Read Aloud**

1. Introduce yourself
2. Share without fear
3. Listen respectfully
4. Critique without malice
5. Applaud loudly!!!

seven

# Creating a group Protest Poem

*modeling, guided practice, and independent practice*

---

- ▶ MODELING: “Read and watch it.”
  - ▶ GUIDED PRACTICE: “Let’s do it together.”
  - ▶ INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: “Now, it’s your turn.”
- 

Now let’s look at a group poetry performance

There are ways to combine poems and turn them into a group performance. Let’s look at an example:



“Counting Graves” by the Steinmenauts: [https://youtu.be/](https://youtu.be/VGGmJBEiCoQ)

[VGGmJBEiCoQ](https://youtu.be/VGGmJBEiCoQ)

"Counting Graves" by The Steinmenauts<sup>3</sup>

COUNTING GRAVES

By The Steinmenauts

10...9...8...

7-year-old boy put  
6 feet deep in a  
5-foot coffin, wonderin' what  
4 while  
3 grown men have to  
2 to drive by and he dodged a couple of bullets but  
1

JÉSUS:

Room as bright as a the box little brother sleeps in (sleeps in)  
Big brother, feeling like a magician,  
cut it up in the corner with mary jane cause like mom and little brother  
he already made Jack Daniels disappear

and as

tears trickle down face, veins and eyes bloodshot red,  
heart pounds like beating drums in Africa.  
Being a provider was his only mistake.

BIG C:

Just counting graves to go to sleep because  
counting sheep stopped working since he  
decided to not breathe.  
Keep telling myself it's not my fault  
but as my conscience decides to talk I really don't know anymore.  
You see my pain bursts through my soul like an open sore  
and I can't escape my thoughts because there's no more open doors.

KEVIN:

This pitch-black chamber  
as dark as a vexed soul  
only vivid images pop in and out of existence like quantum physics.  
Big brother, where are you, I can't see, I can't (breath).  
I'm hot.  
My bed is now a five-foot box and I'm not comfortable in it.

---

<sup>3</sup> words found on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/own-oprah-winfrey-network/counting-graves-by-the-steinmenauts/354818921211106/>

Mama said you shouldn't leave me alone for more than five minutes.

BIG C:

But I only left you alone for about six minutes.  
Maybe if I came right back you would be still living.

KIRA:

Boy, all you had to do was look after my second progeny.  
Honestly, how hard is it to be my eyes for me?

BIG C:

Quit doubting me!  
It's not my fault.  
They thought it was me. You see...

KEVIN:

You see that Makaveli Fitch you didn't want me to wear?  
I took it, along with your Chicago Bulls jacket.  
You had it that night when you were selling sugar packets.

JÉSUS:

Hustling a sugar-like substance in the form of pot and rocks  
on a block run by three hustlers who didn't like him  
decided that  
the only way to get their commission was to put him out of his.  
So they drove by and saw one guy sitting on the steps  
wearing big brothers' clothes  
gun out, pulled the trigger six times  
[Kevin: boom boom boom boom boom boom]  
and then the sound of tires turned like mama in her grave.

KIRA:

So you telling me in my dreams I can hardly conceive  
nightmares haunt me when I'm the deceased?  
A mother's worst fear  
and you made it come true.  
I said watch out for little brother  
not be a damn fool.  
My baby was only in the second grade  
gunned down 'cause you wanted to be a street slave.  
You should've been there to keep little brother safe!

JÉSUS:

Haunted by the voices of the deceased  
he can't

ALL:

Speak!

KEVIN:

Big brother can I wear your shirt  
I promise to take good care of it, man.  
(Big C: No...)

KIRA:

Baby I'm off to work, keep an eye on little brother, you understand  
(Big C: No...)\_

KEVIN: Why'd you take that shirt off for me to wear it, huh?

KIRA: That should've been you in front of that gun.

All: 10!

JÉSUS: Picks up the gun

All : 9!

JÉSUS: Contemplates.

All: 8!

JÉSUS:

The number of weeks his little brother was buried.  
After all  
he was only

7-year-old boy put  
6 feet deep in a  
5-foot coffin, wonderin' what  
4 while  
3 grown men have to  
2 to drive by and he dodged a couple of bullets but  
1

BIG C:

I'm sick and tired of these three things haunting me.

KEVIN:

Mama's voice

KIRA:

His grave

BIG C:  
My gun

ALL:  
Click click  
BOOM!

---

**Directions:** In groups, answer the following questions about the poem:

1. How were the numbers used to tie the poems together?
  2. In what areas did you see “voices” or “characters” talking to one another?
  3. What parts of the poem could best be described as a narrator voice?
- 

Now, using the poems your group members have written, work together to turn them into a conversation. Write a brief explanation of what the “speakers of the poems” would say to each other if the poems had a conversation.

Think about “The Revolution will not be Televised,” “Caveat,” and “Counting Graves.” Which poem would SPEAK first?

How would the first poem INTRODUCE THE NEXT one?

Let’s work on it as a class on the next page.



Here is how the second poem would introduce the third

one: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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