



ANNENBERG  
CLASSROOM

## Documenting the Civil Rights Movement: How the Free Press changed America

Grade 9-12 Lesson Plan by Ryan Werenka

**Overview:** *New York Times v. Sullivan* is a landmark Supreme Court case where freedom of the press and the Civil Rights Movement intersect. Montgomery, AL police commissioner L.B. Sullivan sued the New York Times and 4 Alabama civil rights leaders for libel and was awarded \$500,000 based on a factually inaccurate advertisement published in the New York Times. Elected officials and public figures throughout the South developed a strategy using libel lawsuits as a way to intimidate the press and influence coverage of the Civil Rights Movement. The case was eventually heard by the United States Supreme Court where the Civil Rights Movement and the freedom of the press prevailed.

This lesson provides students with opportunities to learn about the Civil Rights Movement through the prism of the freedom of the press using actual events and hypotheticals. Students will examine the role of the press in creating an informed citizenry and their contribution towards the health of democracy.

**Subject(s):** AP US Government and Politics, Government/Civics, US History

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Lesson Duration:** 1-2 Class Periods

### Essential Questions:

1. Why were the people opposed to the Civil Rights Movement so intent on limiting media coverage of non-violent protests, violence directed at civil rights protestors, and the message of civil rights leaders?
2. How do you weigh the importance of accurately reporting the events of the Civil Rights Movement against the harm that the accurate reporting might do to the reputation of public officials?
3. What kind of speech does the First Amendment actually protect?

**Annenberg Classroom Lesson Plan**  
**New York Times v. Sullivan**

**Lesson Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to summarize the free press issues and libel laws involved in New York Times v. Sullivan and the Civil Rights Movement.
2. Students will be able to distinguish when libel laws are applicable and how libel laws apply to public figures.
3. Students (individually or with a partner) will be able to assess media coverage of events from the Civil Rights Movement and construct a narrative of how the media coverage led to government action and the advancement of civil rights.

**Materials:**

[Heed Their Rising Voices Ad](#) - New York Times, published March 29, 1960

See-Think-Wonder [Activity Handout](#)

Free Press Situations [Activity Handout](#)

New York Times v. Sullivan [Frayer Model](#)

New York Times v. Sullivan [Video Graphic Organizer](#) , [Graphic Organizer Answer Key](#)

Civil Rights Movement Events and Response - [Photographs](#) and [Frayer Model Handout](#)

AP US Government and Politics [SCOTUS Free Response Question](#)

**Procedures:**

1. Provide students with the advertisement [Heed Their Rising Voices Ad](#) - New York Times, published March 29, 1960 and have students identify 3-5 examples of mistreatment of civil rights demonstrators central to the fundraising appeal.
2. Have students examine the images from the Civil Rights Movement and participate in a See-Think-Wonder ([Activity Handout](#)). All three images involve media as a way to lead into media coverage for New York Times v. Sullivan. All images are Creative Common.
3. Provide students with the Free Press Situations ([Activity Handout](#)) and have them consider if the publication should be protected under freedom of the press or whether the federal government would be within its right to censor publication.
4. Show the Annenberg Classroom video [First Amendment: New York Times v. Sullivan](#). Provide students with the [Video Graphic Organizer](#) ([Video Graphic Organizer Answer Key](#)) and have them record notes and answer questions as they watch. You can also provide students with the New York Times v. Sullivan [Frayer Model](#) as a quicker version of a video notes handout. The answer key for the Frayer Model is on the second page of the Frayer Model file.
5. At the conclusion of the video, provide students with the Civil Rights Movement Events and Response - [Photographs](#) and [Frayer Model Handout](#). Students will examine the media coverage of several events from the civil rights movement to evaluate how the coverage of the event led to governmental action and the advancement of civil rights.

**Extension Activity:**

AP US Government and Politics [SCOTUS Free Response Question](#) (scoring rubric included)

**Relevant Standards:**

**C-3 Framework Standards:**

**D2.Civ.7.9-12.** Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

**D2.Civ.9.9-12.** Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

**D2.Civ.10.9-12.** Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

**D2.Civ.11.9-12.** Evaluate multiple procedures for making governmental decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels in terms of the civic purposes achieved.

**D2.Civ.12.9-12.** Analyze how people use and challenge local, state, national, and international laws to address a variety of public issues.

**D2.Civ.13.9-12.** Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.

**D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

**D4.1.9-12.** Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

**D4.2.9-12.** Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical).

**D4.3.9-12.** Present adaptations of arguments and explanations that feature evocative ideas and perspectives on issues and topics to reach a range of audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, reports, and maps) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).

**D4.4.9-12.** Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.

**D4.5.9-12.** Critique the use of the reasoning, sequencing, and supporting details of explanations.