

Create Your Own Activist Work

Using Woody Guthrie’s activist philosophy as an inspiration, you are going to use your own skills and creativity to talk about an issue that is important to you.

- If you haven’t done so already, be sure to watch our intro video “What’s Your Machine?”, [available on our website](#).



Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie was a folk singer and an activist in the 1930s and 40s who used his guitar and his music (his “machine”) to speak out against fascism (his social issue).

- *Reminder: **fascism** is a form of government rule which prioritizes the nation over individuals (for example: Nazi Germany during World War II).*

Guthrie traveled around the United States and used his music to protest racism, the treatment of migrant workers, and inequality in the working class. He carved his personal **activist statement** into his guitar:

This Machine Kills Fascists.

What he meant by this is that music is the tool, or “**machine**,” he used to fight the injustice he saw in the world.

- **Social Issue:** Fascism and inequality
 - **Activist Statement:** “This Machine Kills Fascists”
 - **“Machine”:** music, songwriting, and his guitar
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Today, you will create your own **activist statement** and think of ways to use *your* “**machine**” to speak out about an issue that is important to you.

- An **activist statement** is a succinct way to state the core values of a social movement.
- A “**machine**” is your own unique skill or talent that will help you advocate for change.

Woody Guthrie spoke out against fascism in the 1930s and 40s, but there are examples of “machines” and activist statements all around us.

Greta Thunberg

Greta Thunberg is a climate activist from Stockholm, Sweden. Her interest in climate change began at age 11 when she first studied it in school. In 2018, she launched the “Fridays for Future” movement (also known as the School Strike for Climate) and organizing a weekly school strike to protest climate injustice.

Greta’s strike gained traction and spread around the world via social media, growing into an international climate strike in just over a year. She still spends every Friday on strike, and millions of people across the world have joined her.



- Watch Greta Thunberg’s speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAJsdgTPJpU>

Let’s look at how Greta Thunberg uses an **activist statement** and her own “**machine**” to speak out about a **social issue**.

- **Social Issue:** Climate change
- **Activist Statement:** “School Strike for Climate”
- “**Machine**”: homemade sign, organizing abilities, social media, and her own voice and knowledge

Greta uses her own “machine” and activist statement to spread the word about the issue of climate change. Using these tools, she leads school strikes, speaks at summits and rallies, and spreads knowledge to a worldwide audience on social media.

Activity:

What's your "machine" and how will you use it?

Woody Guthrie used his guitar and music to protest fascism and inequality. Greta Thunberg started her activist work using just her own knowledge and a homemade sign. **Now it's your turn!**

STEP 1: Find Your "Machine"

Choose a **social issue** that speaks to you, create an **activist statement** about that issue, and identify your own "machine".

STEP 2: Brainstorm Your Activist Project

Use your "machine" and your activist statement to brainstorm an **activist project**. You'll collect ideas that you can use to develop your own project that supports your social issue.

STEP 3: Share Your Ideas!

Put it all together. Use your ideas to take action on your social issue!

STEP 1: Find Your "Machine"

Are you interested in climate change like Greta Thunberg? Would you like to address racism and inequality like Woody Guthrie? What other challenges face your community? Answer the questions below to begin formulating your plan.

Choose an issue that is important to you. If you are interested in an issue but don't know much about it, take a few minutes to research it.

*You can list **existing movements** like Black Lives Matter, March for Our Lives, Coalición de Derechos Humanos, or **general issues** facing the world like deforestation, xenophobia, or gender inequality.*

➤ **My social issue is:**

- Why are you passionate about this issue?

- What would you like people to do or change in response to this issue?

What words or phrases come to mind when you think about this issue? You'll use these words to create your activist statement.

You can list simple words or phrases such as "equality, safety, clean water, etc."

Use these words to create your own one-sentence activist statement.

For example:

- *The Coalición de Derechos Humanos uses the activist statement is "No Human is Illegal" to advocate for immigrant rights. [Learn more about their efforts](#) on their website.*
- *The Standing Rock Sioux and Water Protectors use the activist statement is "Water is Life" to advocate for the protection of sacred sites and access to clean water. [Learn more about their efforts in this 2017 National Geographic article](#) or by researching online.*

What talents, interests, or skills can you use to spread the word about your social issue? Woody Guthrie used his music, and Greta uses a sign and her knowledge. Your "machine" can be anything you use to express yourself from fashion design or jewelry-making to public speaking or organizational skills.

- **My "machine" is:**

What's Next?

Now that you have identified your activist statement and your own "machine", you can use these tools to create your own activist project.

An **activist project** uses your "machine" to express your activist statement. It's how you'll share your point of view about your issue with other people.

Examples of Activist Projects

Before you start thinking about your own project, let's look at some examples of modern activist projects. Think about how they use activist statements and different “machines” to support their social issues.

If you aren't familiar with these projects, you can use the provided links to learn more.



Black Lives Matter Protest, Seattle, WA, 2018

Black Lives Matter is a global network of activists who protest against police brutality and systemic racism.

- **Social Issue:** Racism and police brutality
- **Activist Statement:** “Black Lives Matter”
- **“Machine”:** Signs, flags, clothing, protest marches
- **Activist Project:** Protest march

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

“Create Less Waste” by Maddie and the Moon Illustration

Artist Madison Bright uses her artistic skill to create illustrated guides like this one on reducing waste. Many environmentalists advocate for people to use less single-use plastics and disposable items to encourage a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle.

- **Social Issue:** Reducing waste
- **Activist Statement:** “Create Less Waste”
- **“Machine”:** Watercolor illustrations
- **Activist Project:** Online sketchbook

<https://www.maddieandthemoon.com/>





“Born This Way” by Lady Gaga

Written by Lady Gaga and Jeppe Laursen, “Born this Way” is a self-love anthem that encourages everyone to accept themselves as they are.

An excerpt of lyrics:

*Whether life's disabilities
Left you outcast, bullied, or teased
Rejoice and love yourself today
'Cause baby you were born this way*

*No matter gay, straight, or bi
Lesbian, transgendered life
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to survive*

- **Social Issue:** Self-acceptance
- **Activist Statement:** “Born This Way”
- **“Machine”:** Music, songwriting, singing
- **Activist Project:** Song and music video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x10N7JM3wZk>

Boots by designer Jamie Okuma

Featured at Indigenous Fashion Week and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, designer Jamie Okuma made a statement about cultural appropriation by embroidering Christian Louboutin boots with traditional beadwork (Louboutin is a high-end fashion designer).

- **Social Issue:** Cultural appropriation
- **Activist Statement:** “Nobody can do indigenous design better than we can.” (Jamie Okuma)
- **“Machine”:** Beading, Luiseño and Shoshone-Bannock Native art, fashion design
- **Activist Project:** Beaded boots



<https://www.jokuma.com/>

In all of these examples, people use activist statements and “machines” to speak out about social issues that are important to them.

- **How will you use your “machine” to speak out about your social issue?**

STEP 2: Brainstorm Your Activist Project

Now that you have identified an **activist statement** and your **“machine”** and have seen some examples of modern activist projects, you can start brainstorming your own.

As you saw in the examples, your activist project can be anything from a protest sign you make in your house to a chart-topping song released around the world.

Your project will rely on your own skills and point of view to support your social issue.

➤ **Remember:** an **activist project** uses your “machine” to express your activist statement. This project is how you share your point of view about your issue with others.

What kind of activist project do you want to develop? You will use your skills (your “machine”) to develop your project. For example, you might write a song, draw a picture, design a t-shirt, or create a sign to take to a protest.

What tools or supplies do you need to create this project? If you’re writing a song, do you need instruments or a way to record it? Do you need art supplies or access to a computer?

Get creative! There are a lot of ways you can start brainstorming ideas and collecting inspiration for your activist project. We’ve included some ideas that you can use to start brainstorming your idea, but you can use whatever method works for you!

➤ **Look at the examples we’ve provided and then spend some time brainstorming your own activist project.**



Create a mood board

Mood boards are visual presentations using images, text, patterns, or other inspirations that can convey a general idea or feeling about a topic. You can use online resources such as Pinterest or create one out of magazine clippings or fabric.

An inspiration board like this one can help you think about colors, images, or words that can help you convey your ideas.

Draw or sketch your ideas

If you communicate well using art, you could create an image that represents your cause or a visual version of your activist statement. You could write a comic book or paint a mural.



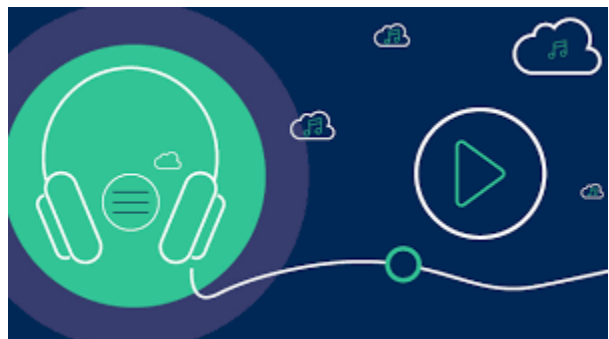
Describe your plan in words

Do you express yourself best in words or thrive on organization? Write down your ideas or create a list of actions you could take with your statement.



Create a playlist

Does music inspire you or help you feel a particular emotion? Create an activist project playlist that evokes the sound or spirit of your activist statement.



STEP 3: Share your ideas and take action!

You have now created your own activist statement, identified your “machine”, and started brainstorming an activist project that will help you share your point of view with others. It’s up to you to keep developing your ideas and getting your message out!

Woody Guthrie started with a phrase scratched onto his guitar. Greta Thunberg started her strike with a simple protest sign. They used an activist statement, their “machines”, and activist projects to get their voices heard around the world.

➤ **How will YOU be heard?**

Take action! It takes time to develop an activist project, but these first steps are just as important as the final project. Every song Woody Guthrie wrote and every speech Greta Thunberg has given started with an idea. YOUR ideas are valuable, too, so share them with the world!

- **What part of your idea or project are you most excited about?**

- **What part of your activist project could you do TODAY?**

- **If you had unlimited resources and access to everything you need, what’s the biggest or most-ambitious version of your project you can imagine?**

- **Who could help you?** Think about who you could share your ideas with to get new perspectives, who has skills that could help you, and who could help you get your message out to more people.

Make an impact! One person can make a difference. Woody Guthrie used his music to give a voice to countless Americans who felt invisible and unheard. His music gave them a platform and brought their concerns into the public eye. Greta Thunberg has inspired millions of people to march and take action on climate change, and she has used her influence to bring the issue to political leaders around the world.

- **Research one of the examples we shared (or choose one of your own). What has their activism accomplished? What changes have they been able to make?**

- **What could you do to help their cause or spread the word about their social issue?**

➤ **Positive change can start with YOU!**

Are you ready to take the next steps? Use the resources below to help you continue your activist work. From codes of conduct for safe protests to online libraries of activist films, these organizations offer practical tips and inspiration to help you turn your ideas into real actions.

- Youth Activism Project: <https://youthactivismproject.org/resources/>
- Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/topics/rights-activism>
- Youth in Front: <https://www.youthinfront.org/>
- American Civil Liberties Union, National Advocacy Institute: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/aclu-advocacy-institute>
- Films for Action: <https://www.filmsforaction.org/>
- Read Brightly, 10 Nonfiction Books on Activism for Teens: <https://www.readbrightly.com/books-activism-teens/>

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