

Activating Justice:
Responding to Systemic Racism Through Art and Images
Unit plan by Tracy Johnson

Day 1

Class discussion: Is there a difference between prejudice, racism, and systemic racism?

- Teacher uses a word chart to show the results of students' understanding of prejudice, racism, and systemic racism. (Recommended to use a [web based word cloud application](#).)
- Each student will add words that they associate with prejudice and then add their terms associated with racism and systemic racism.
- Students will list areas of systemic racism as they see it around their lives.

Homework: Define the following terms and provide an image for each term; students may take photos themselves, or can find them on the Internet.

- Justice
- Prejudice
- Racism
- Systemic racism
- Victim
- Criminal
- Privilege
- Citizen
- Disenfranchisement

For an example of a written response paired with images by a student at Orr Academy High School, [click here](#).

Day 2

Class discussion: Students share their definitions and images of prejudice, racism, and systemic racism, and discuss:

- How are your definitions similar to those of your classmates? How are they different?
- What do prejudice, racism, and systemic racism have in common? What distinguishes them?
- Looking at the images your classmates selected to illustrate these terms, which ones resonate with you, and why? Do any of them surprise you?
- Do you think images are an effective way to communicate your understanding of prejudice, racism, and systemic racism? Why or why not? (Try to use examples from your own images, or those of your classmates.)

- How can images perpetuate stereotypes and injustice? How can images combat them?

Written response: Students write responses to the question: How do you relate to prejudice, racism, and systemic racism in your life?

For an example of a written response paired with images by a student at Orr Academy High School, [click here](#).

Day 3

Resource exploration: Students explore the following data:

- [World population data](#)
- [World prison population data](#)
- [World imprisonment rate based on population](#)

After exploring this data, students answer:

- What stands out to you from this data?
- What does the data tell us about incarceration in the U.S.?
- Does the data surprise you? Why or why not?

Class discussion: Students discuss:

- Why do you think the U.S. is criminalizing its citizens at the highest rate in the world?
- Do you think that the U.S. incarceration rate is just? Why or why not?
- What does justice look like to you?

Preparing for next week: Students look at the lead image from a news story they will read for homework, and guess what they think the story will be about.



Homework: Read [“Police Violence Against Dominicans in Puerto Rico Suggests Systemic Problem”](#) by Natasha S. Alford for *The Guardian*

Day 4

Class discussion: After reading the article by Natasha S. Alford, students discuss:

- Who are the criminals in this article? (person, group, and/or government agency)
- What are the crimes being committed?
- Where events or instances of prejudice, racism, and/or systemic racism can you see in this article?
- Who is impacted by this prejudice, racism, and/or systemic racism?
- How did the impacted people respond?
- Was the response a good or bad way to handle the situation? Explain.

Homework: Read the following court case summaries:

- [Dred Scott v. Sandford](#)
- [Plessy v. Ferguson](#)
- [Brown v. Board of Education](#)

Day 5

Class discussion:

- What was the question/crime being considered for each case?
- What reasons were supplied for the verdict?
- How did Mr. Scott and Mr. Plessy’s cases lay the groundwork for recognition of systemic racism?
 - Educator note: Look at the Missouri Compromise in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, and look at the Jim Crow, separate but equal, laws set by the states and upheld by the courts using the 14th Amendment.
- Why is systemic racism in place and being upheld by the government?
- What do these court cases reveal about activating justice?

Day 6

Resource exploration: Students choose or are assigned one of the following articles from the Pulitzer Center.

- [“Mass Incarceration”](#) by Bryan Stevenson for *The 1619 Project*, a special issue of *The New*

York Times Magazine

- [“Milwaukee Evictions Spurred by COVID-19, Longstanding Racism and Poverty”](#) by Mary Hinnigan and Abigail Zimmardi for *The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism*
- [“They Believe We’re Criminals’: Black Puerto Ricans Say They’re a Police Target”](#) by Natasha S. Alford for *The Guardian*

While reading, students should respond to the following questions:

- Who are the criminals in this article? (person, group, and/or government agency)
- What are the crimes being committed?
- Where events or instances of prejudice, racism, and/or systemic racism can you see in this article?
- Who is impacted by this prejudice, racism, and/or systemic racism?
- How did the impacted people respond?
- Was the response a good or bad way to handle the situation? Explain.
- How do the photographs add to the article and help increase understanding?

Day 7

Small group discussion: In groups of 3-4, students discuss:

- What does justice look like?
- Review the photos from the article you read during Day 5. How do they help show what happened and add meaning?

Studio project: Knowing what something looks like is important to learning and knowing. Make a poster design/image of what a Mr. Dred Scott or Mr. Homer Plessy’s experience would have looked like as they were activating justice. (The product should be left up to the student with choices within these areas: photography, digital graphic design, poster marking, realistic drawing, or typesetting. Poster making, drawing, and typesetting art should be kept to about legal size paper for size. Larger works can be produced with longer studio time. Color can be added with color pencil or markers.) **Use the photos from the Pulitzer Center articles you explored as an inspiration.** Find more inspiration [here](#).

- **Photography:** Use a camera or cell phone, If doing Scott v. Sandford - a minimum of 25 images showing the background information (life as a slave in Missouri and Illinois), life during the trials outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by slaves and freed people, Mr. Scott as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Scott today. If doing Plessy v. Ferguson, 25 images showing background information (life during Jim Crow laws), life during the trails outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by both sides of the population, Mr. Plessy as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Plessy.
- **Digital Graphic:** (Students should have some experience with graphic design prior to choosing this option,) 2 images that represent 2 of the following: If doing Scott v.

Sandford - the background information (life as a slave in Missouri and Illinois), life during the trials outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by slaves and freed people, Mr. Scott as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Scott today. If doing Plessy v. Ferguson, 2 images showing background information (life during Jim Crow laws), life during the trials outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by both sides of the population, Mr. Plessy as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Plessy.

- **Poster Making, Realistic Drawing, or Typesetting:** 1 image that represents 1 of the following: If doing Scott v. Sandford - the background information (life as a slave in Missouri and Illinois), life during the trials outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by slaves and freed people, Mr. Scott as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Scott today. If doing Plessy v. Ferguson, 1 image showing background information (life during Jim Crow laws), life during the trials outside of court, Supreme Court trial, reaction to the verdict by both sides of the population, Mr. Plessy as he is coming out of court, or young students learning about Mr. Plessy.

Here is an excerpt from one studio project by a student at Orr Academy High School:



Days 8-10

Studio project: On days 8 and 9, students will continue working on their studio project (photography, digital graphic, or poster making / realistic drawing / typesetting). These class periods may incorporate peer and teacher feedback on progress.

Presentations: On day 10, students will present their projects to the class. As part of their presentations, students should answer:

- Which case did you choose, and why?
- Which medium did you choose for your project, and why?
- What message do you hope to communicate through your project?

Self-assessment rubric: Students can use [this rubric](#) to evaluate their work in this unit.

Concluding thought: Yes, Mr. Scott and Mr. Plessy both lost their cases in their pursuit to claiming justice, but they won much more: they showed us how to be more active in making our lives better and they placed huge cracks into the country's systemic racism that we are still expanding today.