

Unit 1 Activity

Someone Ought to Do Something!

An exploration of different places on the Internet where people can work for change

Introduction

Have you ever heard about a policy or a law that you thought was totally unfair?

Something so unjust, so unreasonable, that you said, “Someone ought to do something!”?

Well, that someone can be you, and you can do it in a variety of ways, either alone or with others in an organized group.

1. You can join an advocacy group—choose an issue, pick a side, and you will find others who agree with you.
2. You can become a plaintiff or join an existing lawsuit by writing an amicus brief.
3. You can get involved in the electoral process by contacting your elected representatives or working to elect new ones.
4. You can choose an issue about which you feel strongly and take action.

1. Advocacy Groups

Many advocacy groups have Web sites that provide education regarding their point of view on a particular issue, as well as information about ways that citizens can actively participate in their mission. In addition, during election cycles more and more candidates are creating Web sites to publicize their positions.

Choose an important public policy issue and gather information about both sides of the debate. Use the Internet to help you with your research. To find Web sites that deal with both sides of your issue, use a search engine such as “Google” or “Yahoo” or visit the list of “[Organizations to Know](#)” at the Street Law organization’s Web site.

Remember to research both sides of the issue, not just the side you support. While you are looking over the Web sites, take notes on the methods they provide for you to get involved with the issue.

2. Lawsuits

Another way people can affect public policy is to become plaintiffs. A person or a group can sue the government or a private organization to try to force change on an issue. Several groups represent “regular people” in lawsuits. Some of the more conservative groups include the [Mountain States Legal Foundation](#) and the [Pacific Legal Foundation](#), while some of the more liberal groups include [People for the American Way](#) and the [American Civil Liberties Union](#). Check out their Web sites to see the kinds of issues in which they are involved and what policies they are trying to change.

A person or group can write an amicus brief, which provides information about the practical results of a decision. For example, in the 2003 University of Michigan affirmative action cases, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, there were over 100 amicus briefs filed. These briefs were filed by interested parties, including schools, groups, and government agencies. Each party intended to inform the court about how the upcoming decision would affect their lives. The links below were created by the University of Michigan to provide both summaries and entire copies of the amicus briefs in the case.

[Briefs in favor of Grutter \(Law School Plaintiff\)](#)

[Briefs in favor of Gratz \(Undergraduate Plaintiff\)](#)

[Briefs in favor of the University of Michigan in Law School Case](#)

[Briefs in favor of the University of Michigan in Undergraduate Case](#)

[Briefs in favor of neither party](#)

Browse through the summaries and try reading the actual legal brief documents, which provide insight as to how each party addresses the consequences of an affirmative action decision. Then, choose at least two briefs from each side and answer the following questions:

1. What is the name of the person or group filing the amicus brief?
2. What does the person or group have in common with either the plaintiffs or the defendants?
3. What argument does the person or group make to the court—what do they want the court to understand about the potential results of a decision?
4. Read a [summary](#) of the decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*. Read a [summary](#) of the decision in *Gratz v. Bollinger*. Do you think the person or group will agree with the court's decision?

For more amicus curiae briefs:

If you want to see which cases are upcoming on the Supreme Court's calendar, visit the Web site for the [U.S. Supreme Court](#).

- You can go directly to the Court's calendar for the term by clicking on *Oral Arguments*.
- Choose the date that interests you and click on *Session beginning* . . . This will enable you to download a PDF file with each session's arguments listed.
- Choose a case by its name and write down the docket number.
- Go back and click on *Docket*.
- Enter the docket number in the search box, and then click on the case when it appears. Scan the list of proceedings in the case to find the name of any groups or people who have filed amicus curiae briefs. Then you can do a Web search for that group to find out its views.

**Note: it is possible that no amicus curiae briefs have been filed in the case you chose.*

3. Contacting Elected Officials

Another way individuals can get involved in changing policy is to advocate and work to elect candidates who support the policies they want to change.

First, you can find out who your representatives are in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives. The House and Senate Web sites provide the addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of every House and Senate member. They also include information about what issues are being addressed and debated on Capitol Hill each day. Go to the Web sites for the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) and find out who your Representative (1 name) and Senators (2 names) are. Make note of the names and contact information for your representatives.

Each individual state legislative branch also has several ways for voters to find and contact their representatives. Go to your state's Web site and find out who your representatives are in both the House and the Senate. Navigate the Web sites to find the bills that are the current "hot topics" under consideration. Then summarize one of these "hot topics" as presented by the Web site.

Alabama	Georgia	Massachusetts	New York	Texas
Alaska	Hawaii	Michigan	North Carolina	Utah
Arizona	Idaho	Minnesota	North Dakota	Vermont
Arkansas	Illinois	Mississippi	Ohio	Virginia
California	Indiana	Missouri	Oklahoma	Washington
Colorado	Iowa	Montana	Oregon	West Virginia
Connecticut	Kansas	Nebraska	Pennsylvania	Wisconsin
Delaware	Kentucky	Nevada	Rhode Island	Wyoming
District of Columbia	Louisiana	New Hampshire	South Carolina	
	Maine	New Jersey	South Dakota	
Florida	Maryland	New Mexico	Tennessee	

4. Take Action

Now that you know several ways people can take action when they think, "Someone ought to do something!", choose an issue about which you feel strongly and take a stand. Your teacher will direct you, or may give you the choice. Remember—with any kind of advocacy—unless you speak up, your voice will never be heard!

A. Select an advocacy group with which you agree. If you choose this option, write a letter to your teacher explaining the views of this group. Explain why this group represents your opinions on the subject. In addition, explain the views of a contrasting group and explain why you do NOT agree with its views.

B. Find out what groups are submitting amicus briefs in a court case and write to express your support for their stance. The letter, which you will turn in to your teacher before mailing, will explain your opinion on the issue and why you agree with the stance the group has taken in the case.

C. If you would like to advocate for an issue that has not come up in this lesson, write to your U.S. or state legislators and express your opinion. In your letter, which you will turn in to your teacher before mailing, express your opinion on your issue and recommend to your legislator how you think he or she should take action. For example, do you want the legislator to propose a new bill, or vote a certain way on an existing one? Do you want the legislature to hold hearings to investigate a problem? Explain your opinion clearly and respectfully. (You might even get an answer!)