

# Rosa Parks Lived a Long and Active Life, So Why Is This Timeline So Boring and Short?

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ANY ATTEMPT TO DISTILL A LIFE — whether in a biography, encyclopedia entry, or biopic — is necessarily partial. This activity is one way educators can have students engage with the different choices historians and others make about what to include and exclude when attempting to sum up Rosa Parks’ life. The lesson draws upon the 2022 film, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (based on the book of the same name by Jeanne Theoharis) to build students’ critical reading skills of timelines, a mainstay of K–12 history curricula and textbooks. Too often, timelines are presented as “simply the facts ma’am,” rather than as human curated collections of information that can shape our understanding of “the facts” through choices about what is and is not included.

The activity begins with students reviewing the Library of Congress’s [Timeline covering the life of Rosa Parks, 1913–2005](#), which has only about 20 entries, and offers minimal context for the events it includes. Next students watch the film, keeping track of important moments in Mrs. Parks’s life that are not included or adequately contextualized on the Library of Congress timeline, as well as the choices the filmmakers make about how to tell Parks’ story. Finally, students collaborate and talk with each other to build a case for which events from Mrs. Parks’ life should be included on an “Rosa Parks timeline” worth its salt.

## Materials needed

- Copies of *Library of Congress’s Timeline covering the life of Rosa Parks, 1913–2005*, or access to the digital version.
- *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* film
- [Sentence strips](#) or other paper for student timelines
- 4" x 4" sticky notes
- Two or three class periods

## Suggested procedure

1. Ask students to review the Library of Congress’ Rosa Parks timeline, respond to the following questions, and discuss, either in small groups or as a whole class:
  - What is the most interesting thing you learned from this timeline?
  - What questions did you have about the events included on this timeline?

After students discuss the content of the timeline a bit, ask them, “Does this timeline make it seem like Mrs. Parks would be interesting enough to make a full-length movie about?” Students will likely have a variety of responses, ranging from “No!” to “Well, it depends.” Use this conversation to introduce the film. “Some filmmakers did think Mrs. Parks’ life was fascinating

and important enough to make a movie about and we're going to begin watching it together today."

2. Tell students that you'd like them to take notes as they watch the film. Yes, there will be groaning. Explain that their task is to keep track of key moments in *Mrs. Parks' life described in the film that should be considered for addition to any timeline purporting to reflect her life*. These can be events that are already on the Library of Congress timeline, but perhaps not described with sufficient detail or context, or they can be completely new. Ask students to aim for at least 10 moments or events. Assure students that they do not need to correctly record all the details of the events they note down — they can look up exact dates and correct spelling of individuals' names later.

Tell students that the most important thing is that they feel that the event or moment has real significance. Does it help us understand who Rosa Parks was? Or what motivated her actions and choices? Does it tell us something important about the Black freedom movements of which Parks was a part? Something about the United States?

A final note to share with students: This film does not portray Parks' life in chronological order. Tell students to beware that it will jump around in time. Encourage them to think about why the filmmakers made that choice.

3. After the film, sit students in groups of four and ask them to debrief the film. What did they love? What moments stick with them? What was confusing? After students have had some time to share general reactions, ask them to transition to a conversation about their notes. What are the key events that should absolutely be on a Rosa Parks timeline? Ask the group to agree on five events to share with the rest of the class.

Tell students that by selecting these five, they are not saying that there are no other events that matter. They are, rather, arguing that any timeline about Rosa Parks should include these moments.

4. Hand out a sentence strip and pad of sticky notes to each group. Tell students that they are going to contribute entries to a class-created timeline. Guidelines:
  - A. Five entries
  - B. Each entry must fit on a sticky note and should include
    - a. Date (or date range)
    - b. Short description of the event or moment
    - c. One of the following:
      - i. A **reaction** your group has to the event or moment
      - ii. A **conclusion** your group has drawn based on the event or moment
  - C. Organize the sticky notes in chronological order on the sentence strip
5. Once all the groups have created their mini-timelines, post them around the room for a gallery walk. Ask students to walk around and look at each other's timelines and sticky note analysis. What patterns do they notice? Which events show up a lot? Seldom? How did different groups talk about the same events differently? Give students enough time to wander and take in each other's work. You might have a quick full group debrief or ask students to share a few take-aways in a turn-and-talk with a partner.
6. Now for a tiny bit of creative chaos. Ask the students to create one big timeline out of everyone's entries — hence the sticky notes! If you have a low tolerance for chaos, you might recruit just a handful of students for the job, but it can be fun to let students figure out a collaborative task like this as a group. If there is more than one sticky note for the same event, tell students to post the stickies

vertically, one beneath the other — this becomes a visually powerful way of communicating the importance of this event or moment, at least according to the class.

7. Now ask students to return to the Library of Congress timeline and compare it with the one created by the class. Have a discussion. Some possible questions.
  - How are the two timelines different?
  - What themes and patterns did you notice on our timeline that did not show up on the Library of Congress timeline?
  - Are there any events your group thought were vital to include that did not make it into anyone else's top five? What were they? Why did you think they were important?
  - What is the purpose of a timeline? How does the purpose of a timeline affect what goes in it?
  - Why is it useful — or is it? — to put events into chronological order? Are there any downsides to looking at someone's life that way? Why do you think the filmmakers chose not to tell the story of Mrs. Parks chronologically?

8. (*Optional*) Now that students have a sense of the process by which a timeline is created, and how many choices are involved, ask them to consult their history textbook. Tell them to page through from the beginning and look for timelines. As they skim, ask them to take some notes for a discussion: What do they notice? What questions do they encounter? Are the timelines useful? Educational? Why or why not?

## More Lessons

This lesson is from the [The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks Teaching Guide](#) for classroom use. It is part of a collection of lessons to accompany the book and film of the same name.

## Feedback Requested

Please [share your feedback](#) — what worked, what didn't, student responses, adaptations, and more. We will send you copies of the young readers edition of *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* and other resources in appreciation. We look forward to hearing from you.

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