

## EXCERPTS TO WRITE ABOUT

***“Students Lead the Way” and  
“Retaliation and Intimidation”***From *The Split History of the Civil Rights Movement*

by Nadia Higgins

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- From this excerpt, see whether you can determine who the activists were and what their purpose was. How would you define *activist*?

Highlight words/phrases in the text that help you identify the activists and their purpose, and jot down notes about your thinking.

**The Activists’ Perspective: Students Lead the Way**

Four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, opened a new chapter in the civil rights movement February 1, 1960. They began with a simple but profound action—sitting where they weren’t allowed. That afternoon the young men arrived downtown at the Woolworth’s department store. They purchased a few small items to show they were paying customers. Then, with pounding hearts, the neatly dressed teenagers took four stools at the store’s whites-only lunch counter.

The waitress refused to serve them. Still the Greensboro Four, as they came to be called, stayed put. They remained seated for an hour, until the manager closed the place down.

In the following days, hundreds of others followed the lead of the Greensboro Four. Soon the sit-ins, as the protests were called, spread like wildfire to cities across the South. Black students brushed past “Whites Only” signs at lunch counters, pools, libraries, and more. Unlike the Montgomery boycotters or the Little Rock Nine, these protesters were breaking the law.

At workshops in Nashville, Tennessee, students trained in this form of protest, called civil disobedience. Activists learned how to protect their heads during a beating or throw their bodies in front of a comrade who was being attacked. They were given a list of dos and don’ts: Do be courteous, sit straight, and face the counter. Don’t laugh, strike back, or curse.

Sit-ins often turned dangerous. The students were beaten, spat on, or burned with cigarettes or hot coffee. Police dragged them off their stools and shoved them into paddy wagons. As one group got carted off, another group took its place.

“Jail, no bail,” was the students’ motto. They refused to pay a fee to escape imprisonment. Filling up jails was part of the strategy to cause as much inconvenience and expense to a city or county as possible. The activists also considered time in jail an honorable duty.

- Now that you finished reading about the activists’ perspective, what do you think their point of view was? Why do you think this?

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- ▶ In the next excerpt, see if you can determine who the segregationists were and what their purpose was. How would you define *segregationist*?

Highlight words/phrases in the text that help you identify the segregationists and their purpose, and jot down notes about your thinking.

### The Segregationists' Perspective: Retaliation and Intimidation

Business owners in Nashville, Tennessee, were starting to get desperate in the spring of 1960. The "sit-in" movement that had spread across the South was especially strong in their city. The trouble had begun the previous winter. About 200 black students had refused to budge from whites-only lunch counters in downtown department stores on February 18.

At first segregationists claimed that sit-ins were just the latest college fad. The black students were looking for publicity—and were getting plenty of it. Business owners responded mostly by ignoring the protests. Some managers roped off their lunch counters entirely, while others pressured local colleges to expel the activists.

But as the sit-ins continued, angry whites began attacking the black students. Crowded paddy wagons rolled down Nashville's streets as police arrested the students on charges such as trespassing or disturbing the peace. Soon white customers were afraid to shop downtown, while black customers refused to spend their money at segregated stores.

In desperation, business owners proposed opening black sections at the lunch counters, but the activists refused the offer. They wanted nothing less than full integration. Then, on April 19, angry whites bombed the home of one of the city's prominent black lawyers. The same day Nashville's citizens looked on in astonishment as a crowd of 2,500 activists silently marched to Nashville's City Hall.

Mayor Ben West was waiting for them on the building's steps. One protester asked him about his personal beliefs on the sit-ins. West looked into the thousands of expectant faces. "I found that I had to answer it frankly and honestly," he later recalled. "I did not agree that it was morally right for someone to sell them merchandise and refuse them service."

Privately Nashville business owners breathed a sigh of relief. Less than a month later, lunch counters were opened up to black customers. The struggling stores could get back to business, while Mayor West shouldered the blame.

- ▶ Now that you finished reading about the segregationists' perspective, what do you think their point of view was? Why do you think this?

Were there similarities between the two accounts?

What were the major differences in perspectives between the two sides?

**Note:** Nadia Higgins has chosen to organize her book, and this excerpt, in a manner that makes it easier for readers to understand this period in American history—especially those born several decades after the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Quite simply, she "splits" the story in half, clearly demarcating the black and activist perspective from the white segregationists' point of view. First, we get the activist point of view, and we can use our background knowledge and the information in the text to understand what was driving the sit-ins. We can grasp it without, in a sense, being distracted by another point of view. Then, Higgins shifts to another section of text that describes the white business owners' perspective on the sit-ins. As you read this section, you can feel the entrenched beliefs, economic systems, prejudice, and fear of change. You can also infer that social and political change often doesn't come about purely as a result of a change of heart or a more enlightened view. Businesses were suffering as a result of the civil unrest, and this compelled white business owners to acquiesce and allow blacks to sit with whites at lunch counters.